

The WWI Georgian Legion of the Ottoman Army

German camp currency in Turkey

by Tony James

IT is a very small handwritten chit, almost indecipherable unless one has a reference book to identify it and tell where it was produced and used. That helps to confirm that the chit was written in German. The fact that this item originated in Turkey and was from a conflict that happened 94 years ago would not be apparent. The only two references that I have been able to find have been in "Banknotes of the Ottoman Empire" by M.S. Tezcakin and G Kayral and the catalogue "Papiergeld Spezial Katalog Deutschland" by A. Pick and J-V Rixen.



*Original note for 5 piastres
hand written in red ink.YB-A-1 (461 Rixen)*

The first entry in English in the book by Tezcakin and Kayral states that the chit represents a German camp currency in Samsun in 1916, a town on the north coast of Turkey on the Black Sea.

First World War 1914-1919

Although the Ottoman Empire was the "sick man of the Middle East" at the beginning of the First World War, the Central Powers saw value in helping the Turks organise and train their army.

German officers acted as advisors to the Turkish Army, primarily on its western front that was fighting the Allies in the Dardanelles. However its eastern front was also involved with the German Caucasus expedition against the Tsarist forces in the Russo-Turkish campaign of 1916-1917. This campaign attracted the interest of many Georgian émigrés and students in Western Europe who saw it as a chance to strike a blow against the Tsarist regime.

However the reaction of the Georgians to the outbreak of war was mixed. As Christians, many shared the Armenians' fear and loathing of the Turk and were happy to support the Russian war effort; others, including extremists both on the nationalist wing and among the revolutionary groups, hoped for a Russian defeat at the hands of Germany and Austria, to be followed eventually by a new order for the peoples of the Tsarist empire.

In 1914, a Governing Committee of Independent Georgia was formed under the patronage of the German government,

with branches in Austro-Hungary and in Turkey. At the same time the Caucasus region was becoming a major battleground. By 1915, Russian forces were pushing southwest into eastern Turkey from bases in the Caucasus, although with limited success. As part of the Russian Empire, Georgia officially backed the Allies, although it stood to gain little from victory by either side. As a consequence, a German expedition to the Caucasus was formed in the same year to counter the Russian advance. This expedition incorporated a body of Georgian volunteers, who thus became known as the Georgian Legion.

The Georgian Legion

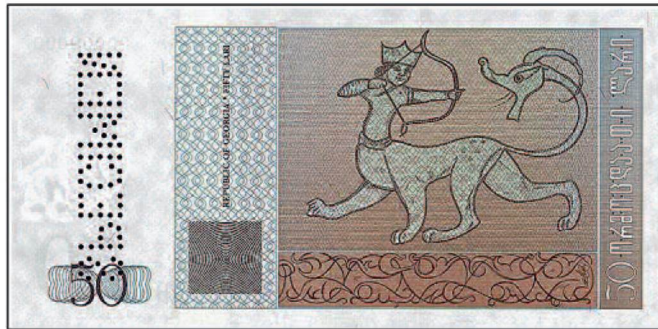
The Georgian Legion was formed in 1915 by Count Friedrich Werner von der Schulenburg, a former German vice-consul in Tiflis, who was then serving as a German liaison officer with the Ottoman 3rd Army. He was supported by the German-based "Committee of Independent Georgia." The reinforcements were raised largely from prisoners of war and from the Muslim Georgian areas and Lazistan. Consisting of about 1,500 soldiers, the Legion was first commanded by a German, Lieutenant Horst Schliephack. The highest-ranking Georgian officer of the Legion was Leo Kereselidze who, after disagreements with the Ottoman government over the independence of Georgia, was later involved in the creation of the national army of Georgia and promoted to major general when the country gained independence.

The Georgian Legion joined the German Caucasus Expedition during the Russo-Turkish campaign of 1916-17 and was stationed in the mountains east of Tirebolu, on the banks of the Harshit River not far from the Black Sea. The headquarters of the Georgian Committee at that time were in Samsun, and later in Kerasunt. The Legion was originally intended to promote a revolt in Russian-held Georgia, and remained under German control, while the Ottomans sought to use it as a normal battalion within their army.

In the end the Legion took very little part in the fighting, and remained stationed on the Black Sea coast at Giresun until disbanded in January 1917, by which time relations between the German-backed Georgian Committee and the Ottoman government had become strained. The former Georgian volunteer officers later joined the National Army of the Democratic Republic of Georgia in 1918.



Order of Queen Tamar (Image courtesy www.conflicts.rem33.com).



SCWPM Georgia No.73 for 50 Lari issued 2004

Awards for Legion members

Late in 1915, the Georgian Order of Queen Tamar was introduced for issue to the soldiers and officers of the Georgian Legion. Queen Tamar had been monarch of the kingdom of Georgia from 1184 to 1213 and ruled the country during what was regarded as "Georgia's golden age."

A star-shaped badge, the order was awarded in two categories - civil and military - to those who distinguished them-

selves fighting for the independence of Georgia. The emblem was designed by Lieutenant Horst Schliephack, and the ribbon was in the national colours of the time, red and black. The order was officially confirmed by the Georgian Democratic Republic in 1918 and recognised as an order of merit. Queen Tamar is recognised today on the current issue of the 50 Lari banknote of Georgia.

Camp chits or notes

German Army Headquarters established the camp at Samsun by gathering the Georgian prisoners of war from the Russian Army Reserves troops, together with Georgian volunteers. While this composition of the unit might have given the appearance that the camp at Samsun was a prisoner of war camp, there are no indications that there was a POW camp in Turkey on the shores of the Black Sea, the closest one being at Diarbekr about 160 miles inland to the south.

The notes were issued in three series, all of which consisted of two denominations, and the details are prefixed by the two catalogue numbers as quoted in the references. The Turkish reference is quoted as being in Para and the German reference is quoted as being in Piastres.



5 Piastres in red and 10 Piastres in blue, both hand written
YB-A-1 (461 Rixen) and YB-A-2 (462 Rixen)

YB-A-1 (461 Rixen) 5 Para written "gut fur 5 P" next line "funf Ps" and below that the authorising signatory.

YB-A-2 (462 Rixen) 10 Para written "Gut fur 10 P, next line zehn Ps and below that the authorising signatory.

Both denominations are hand written without a seal which is seen on the later issues.



Printed first type without place, year and name. Five and Ten
Piastres YB-A-3 (463 Rixen) and YB-A-4 (466 Rixen)

Two printed series were issued, the first has a printed coat of arms and amount and were in two denominations:

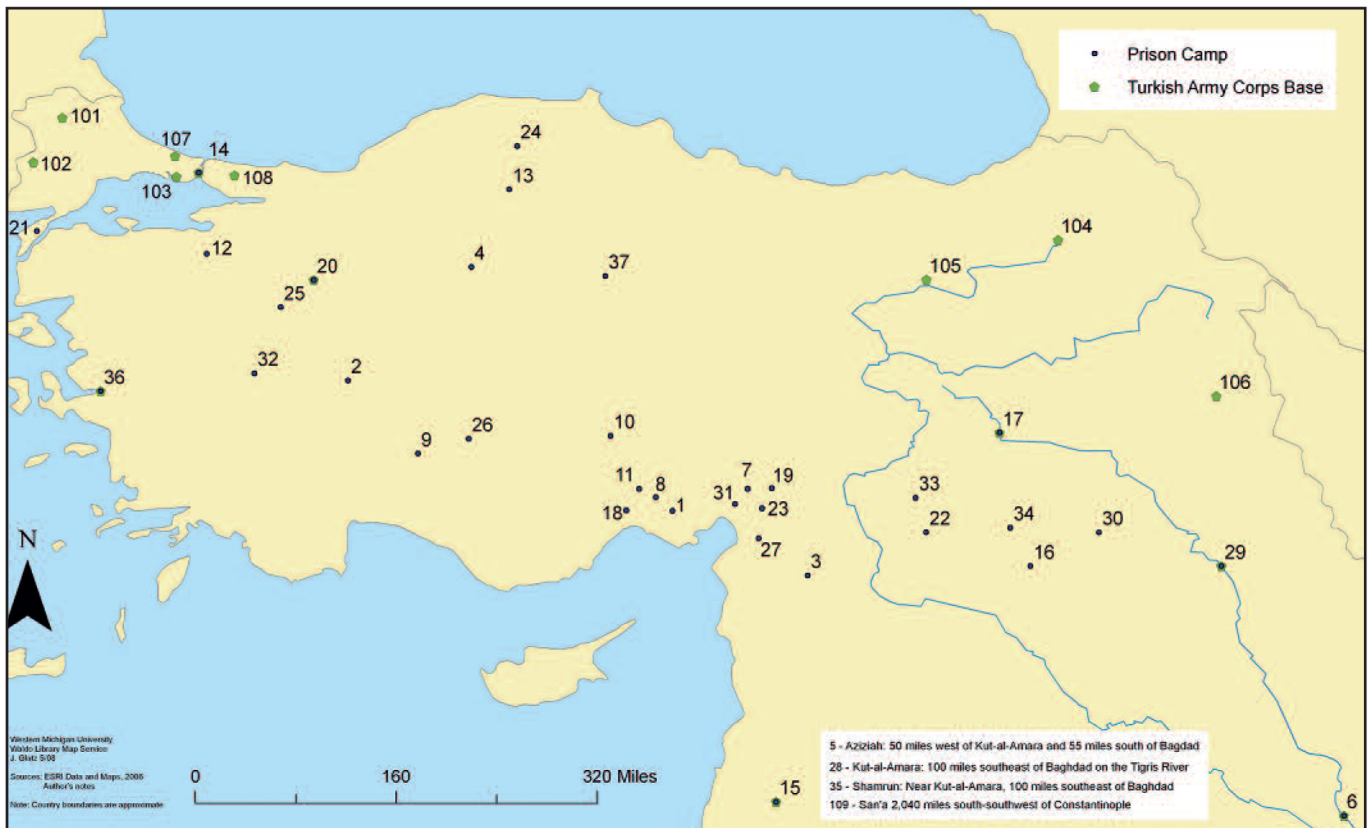
YB-A-3 (464 Rixen) 5 Para printed on an orange background with a printed coat of arms and handwritten signature and serial number.

The YB-A-4 (465 Rixen) 10 Para is printed on a blue background with printed coat of arms and handwritten signature and serial number.

These say "good for 5 or good for 10 Pstr" and then the amount in words below: five or ten piastre. This type has also



Printed Second type with place, year and name.
Five and Ten Piastres YB-A-5 (467 Rixen) and YB-A-6 (468 Rixen)



Map of Turkey showing location of prison camps and Turkish Army Corps Bases

been recorded with private, sub-officer and officer types for both denominations. (465 Rixen) 5 Pts and (466 Rixen) 10 Pts.

The second printed series include the place "Samsun" and the year "1916" at the lower left, as well as the words "Georgisch Legion" in the lower right corner. The YB-A-5 (467 Rixen) denomination 5 Para is printed on a pink background and says that it is good for 5Pstr (five piastre) with a hand-written serial number and signed with title/rank or the detail of the private, sub-officer and officer types.

The YB-A-6 (468 Rixen) 10 Para is printed on a light blue underprint and states that it is good for 10 Pstr (ten piastres) also with hand written serial number and signature. Both denominations again record the title/rank or the details of the private, sub-officer or officer types. (468A Rixen) 10 piastre with Unteroffz d., R.3 Bay J Rgt) as well as (469 (Rixen) 5 Pts and (470 Rixen) 10 Pts. If this appears to be confusing then it should be noted that the Turkish catalogue numbering does not take the private, sub-officer and officer types into account as does the Pick-Rixen system. All notes are signed by a Hans Kulzer.

The other indication that these chits were internal camp currency within the Legion and not POW currency was that the Turks did not establish many large concentration-style prison camps. Instead they housed their prisoners in houses and buildings in Turkish towns, often in buildings left vacant in the Armenian quarters, because the civilian population had been driven out. This was observed and recorded not only by the neutral American observers, but also by the Germans, exemplified by a letter written on December 13 1916, by the German Ambassador to Turkey, named Kuhlman, to Chancellor Hollweg in Berlin advising that the consuls Bergfeld in Samsun and Schele in Kerasun had both reported displacement of the local population and murders. There is much written about the terrible inhuman conditions in which the Turks held the Allied

POWs. These POWs were obliged to use national currency to purchase food from outside the camps and often only survived due to the intervention of Henry Morgenthau, the American Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. It was Morgenthau who arranged for the supply of clothing and food parcels to the British, French and Australian POWs and inspections by consular and religious delegations.

Georgian history after the Legion

The revolution of 1917 in Russia intensified the struggle between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks in Georgia and in May 1918, Georgia declared its independence under the protection of Germany. Georgia turned toward Germany to prevent opportunistic invasion by the Turks and because it perceived Germany as the center of European culture. The major European powers recognized Georgia's independence, and in May 1920, Russian leader Vladimir I. Lenin officially followed suit. To gain peasant support, the moderate new Menshevik-dominated government under Noe Zhordania redistributed much of Georgia's remaining aristocratic landholdings to the peasants, eliminating the long-held privileged status of the nobility. The few years of postwar independence were economically disastrous, however, because Georgia did not establish commercial relations with the West, Russia, or its smaller neighbors.

Now I have some insight into why there is a German text on an obscure currency from Turkey!

References

- Banknotes of the Ottoman Empire* M.S. Tezcakin & G Kayral, Toprak Izmir 2005
Papiergeld Spezial Katalog Deutschland by A. Pick & J-V. Rixen Battemberg Veulag Augsburg 2nd edition 1991
www.gutenberg-e.org/steuer *Pursuit of an Unparalleled Opportunity*
history of the YMCA by Kenneth Steuer

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