From the Munich crisis in the fall of 1938 to V-E Day in May of 1945, the borders of all of the countries in eastern Europe underwent changes. Countries gained territory from or lost territory to their neighbors. Several countries entirely disappeared—occupied, partitioned, or dismembered—and two new ones (Croatia and Slovakia) emerged. The changes had their roots in the peace settlements following World War I, which redrew the map of central and eastern Europe. The old empires—German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman—had collapsed and were replaced by successor states; and the previously existing states in the area either gained or lost territory. Given the multitude of competing territorial claims, no settlement could satisfy everyone; and resentment of the results was widespread.

Starting with Munich and continuing into World War II, countries occupied neighboring territory which they regarded as rightfully theirs at every opportunity. All of these border changes generated a philatelic paper trail. The purpose here is to examine one small part of that paper trail, specifically, stamps issued by countries which had annexed territory which celebrate (and seek to justify) their land grabs. In short, these are stamps with an attitude. Upon close examination, they are revealed to be impressive miniature propaganda posters. Seven stamps or sets of stamps issued by five countries will be analyzed here: stamps from Poland, Hungary (two sets), the Soviet Union, Bulgaria (two sets), and Romania.

For a stamp or set of stamps to work as propaganda, two elements are essential to the design. First, some depiction of the occupying power (the country issuing the stamp) is necessary. Frequently that is the head of state; other representations of state power include the army or individual soldiers, and the state flag. The second required element is some depiction of the occupied territory. Symbols of the territory occupied include happy natives in ethnic costumes (since the justification for annexation was frequently based on ethnic claims), a map of the territory, or culturally significant landmarks.

In addition to these two required elements, there are several optional design elements which reinforce the propaganda message. One is some depiction of the old border between the occupying power and the occupied territory which, due to annexation, has now been rendered null and void. A second is the justification of annexation by citing historical precedent through the portrayal of a historical figure or landmark dating from the period when the annexed territory belonged to the occupying power: “It was ours then, it is ours once again.” A third element is some pictorial reference to the alliance with the Axis, which made the “return” of “lost” territories possible.

Poland is not usually regarded as an occupying power in connection with World War II; rather, it is remembered as the war’s first victim. There was, however, the issue of Teschen (Map 1). Located in Austrian Silesia (known as Eastern Silesia to some philatelists), it was claimed by both Poland and Czechoslovakia following World War I. As with so many of the disputed territories of this period, the issues were complex. Ethnically, it was predominantly Polish; but economic and strategic considerations made it attractive to Czechoslovakia. The territory contained coal mines, and the only rail line that connected the western provinces of the new state of Czechoslovakia with its eastern half ran through Teschen. The territory was
bisected by the River Olza. The victorious Entente Powers (who were drawing the new map of Europe) followed the line of the river and partitioned the territory. Poland received the city of Teschen; and Czechoslovakia received the suburbs, which contained the coal mines and the railroad line.

Twenty years later, when Hitler decided to detach the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia, he wanted to make the annexation look like part of a multi-national movement to rectify the injustices (in his opinion) perpetrated by the peace treaties at the end of World War I. Therefore, he suggested that other countries which had also lost territory to the new state of Czechoslovakia press their claims. Poland did so with alacrity, invaded Czech Teschen (the area on Map 1 labeled with the numeral 2), and issued a stamp celebrating the “return” of the territory. (Fig. 1: Poland, Scott 334)

A personification of the Motherland (the woman in the white robe) represents Poland, the occupying power; lest there be any doubt, she is standing in front of a map of Poland (the Polish Corridor is visible in the upper left-hand corner of the stamp). The three figures in the foreground symbolize the annexed territory: the left-hand figure is carrying a pick-ax, a reference to coal mining. They are stepping over a border post, the low striped wall in the lower foreground. Border posts stood upright and were painted with stripes of red and white, but this border post has been rendered null and void by the Polish occupation of the territory.

The inscription on the left-hand edge of the stamp, “The Return of Trans-Olza to the Motherland,” plus the date in the lower left-hand corner, tie everything together. “Return” implies that the territory had once been Polish. It is identified as Trans-Olza, the territory across the River Olza, not as Teschen (let alone Czech Teschen). Polish is a language of synonyms. The inscription on the stamp could have read “the return… to Poland,” or “to the homeland,” or “to the Fatherland.” These various linguistic options suggest that the reference to Poland as “the Motherland” was deliberate. And there she stands, the Lady in White. She is a benign image. She holds a sword, but it is pointed down, not raised; and she is wrapping her robe around her children as they return home, crossing the old border that had once separated them, and walk into her embrace. This Polish stamp is a masterpiece. Just one stamp contains both required elements, one of the optional elements (the border), and an inscription that reinforces the message conveyed by the design.
Hungary had also lost territory to Czechoslovakia. In fact, Hungary had lost territory to all of its neighbors following World War I (Map 2). Historic Hungary was over a thousand years old (it had celebrated its millennium in 1896). As a result of the Treaty of Trianon, the peace treaty between the Entente Powers and Hungary, it lost two-thirds of its territory (the shaded areas on the map) and over one-half of its population. Those population losses, furthermore, included more than three million ethnic Hungarians who, due to Hungary’s new borders, suddenly became ethnic minorities in foreign countries. The Hungarians were inconsolable. The country’s motto became “No, No, Never!”—never would Hungarians become reconciled to these losses. In Liberty Square, a park in Budapest, four statutes were erected in memory of the lost territories: the territories to the north (lost to Czechoslovakia), the south (to Yugoslavia), the east (to Romania), and the west (to Austria).

These territorial losses were one of the reasons, if not the main reason, for Hungary’s alliance with the Axis in the 1930s and during World War II. Hitler and Hungary, after all, shared a common goal: to destroy the peace settlements at the end of World War I and regain the territory lost. So when Hitler set his sights on Czechoslovakia in 1938, Hungary also participated with alacrity. Precisely how much territory Hungary would regain from Czechoslovakia was determined by German and Italian diplomats in Vienna; the resulting agreement is known as the First Vienna Award (Map 3). Hungary received a strip of southeastern Czechoslovakia (territory from the eastern provinces, Slovakia and Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, labeled on Map 3 with the numeral 3) which had a predominantly Hungarian population. To celebrate the return of the territory Hungary issued a set of five semi-postal stamps, which had the additional purpose of raising money to assist the ethnic brethren who had suffered financially under foreign rule. The inscription on all five stamps reads “Hungarians Help Hungarians.”

The first stamp in the series (Hungary, Scott B98) is of the Budapest statue memorializing the lost northern territory (the Hungarian word for north, Eszak, is inscribed on the base of the statue) plus the date of the Treaty of
Trianon, 1920 (upper right-hand corner). The third (Hungary, Scott B100) depicts Admiral Horthy, Hungary’s head of state, entering southern Slovakia at the head of the army; the white objects on the road in the foreground are flowers strewn in his path by grateful Hungarians. He is crossing into the occupied territory on a bridge over the River Danube at Komaron, where the river formed the border between Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The image on the stamp is a reproduction of a photograph of his triumphal entry.

Figure 2: Hungary, Scott B98-102

The final stamp in the series (Hungary, Scott B102) depicts happy natives (ethnic Hungarians) in ethnic costumes (the details of the girls’ clothing) greeting Hungarian soldiers. The date of the First Vienna Award, 1938, is in the upper right-hand corner, signifying the (partial) return of what was lost in 1920 and stands in contrast to the first stamp in the series. The remaining two stamps (Hungary, Scott B99 and B101) portray culturally significant landmarks in the occupied territories: the fort at Munkacs (Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia), built during the reign of King Bela IV in the 13th century; and the medieval Cathedral of St. Elizabeth of Hungary in Kassa (Slovakia). Both date from the time when the territory was part of Historic Hungary, and, as such, can be seen as a justification of the occupation by historical precedent.

World War II began with the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. The green light for the invasion was the Nazi-Soviet Pact, concluded in late August (Map 4). Essentially, Stalin agreed to let Hitler do whatever he wanted militarily as long as the Soviet Union could annex territory on its western border, territory that either had been part of the old Russian Empire or that the Bolsheviks had tried, but failed, to conquer in the aftermath of World War I. As a result, the Red Army invaded eastern Poland on September 17, 1939 and occupied the eastern half of the interwar Polish state (the area shaded with
horizontal lines on Map 4). The territory was ethnically mixed and contained substantial numbers of Belorussians in the north and Ukrainians in the south.

A set of five stamps present the Party line justifying the invasion, in text and images (Fig. 3: Russia, Scott 767-771). The inscription on all five stamps reads “The liberation of the fraternal peoples of Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia,” along with the date. The fraternal Red Army has come to liberate the “fraternal peoples of Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia” from Polish rule. There is no mention of Poland, let alone the fact that it has been invaded. The territory will be annexed to the Soviet Socialist Republics of Ukraine and Belorussia; and the inhabitants will at long last join their ethnic brethren and, by definition, live happily ever after. All five stamps portray the enthusiastic welcome of the Red Army (symbol of occupying power) by the local inhabitants, identified as Ukrainians (Russia, Scott 767) and Belorussians (Russia, Scott 771) by the details of the women’s clothing (happy natives in ethnic costume), specifically the embroidery. These stamps, interestingly but not surprisingly, express the same sentiments as the description of the events in the memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union following the death of Stalin. Khrushchev was a Party operative in western Ukraine at the time, and he recounts the tears of joy shed by Ukrainians and their eagerness to be united with their fellow Ukrainians in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

In June of 1940 the Soviet Union occupied the Romanian province of Bessarabia. Bessarabia had been part of the old Russian Empire but had been annexed by Romania following World War I. Now the Soviet Union, in accordance with the Nazi-Soviet Pact, took it back (the shaded area in the upper right-hand section of Map 5). This Soviet move

Figure 3: Russia, Scott 767-771

Map 5: The Partition of Romania, 1940
inspired other countries that had lost territory to Romania following the war, Hungary and Bulgaria, to do likewise (Map 5).

Hungary demanded the return of Transylvania, the lost territory to the east. Again, precisely how much territory Hungary would gain was determined by German and Italian diplomats in Vienna; hence the decision was known as the Second Vienna Award. Hungary received northern Transylvania, an area with significant concentrations of non-Romanian ethnic minorities (the shaded area on the left-hand side of Map 5 and the areas colored in green on Map 6). They may not have all been Hungarian—they included Germans (known as the Saxons) and numerous Szeklars—but they were certainly not Romanians (Map 6).

To celebrate the return of northern Transylvania and its citizens, Hungary issued a set of three stamps, semi-postals to benefit the Pro-Transylvania Movement (Fig. 4: Hungary, Scott B123-125). The first stamp in the series portrays Hungarian soldiers, past (in the background, on a horse) and present (foreground, with the date of the return of the territory in the upper left-hand corner). The mounted soldier in the background, with helmet and sword, is a reference to a Hungarian legend. If ever the Szeklars of north-eastern Transylvania, a border region (see Map 6) were threatened, so the legend went, Hungarian warriors from centuries past would arise from their graves and gallop to the rescue. The soldier in the background is doing precisely that. The stars in the middle of the stamp represent the Milky Way which, according to the same legend, was the “Road of the Armies,” the path of the galloping warriors. The legendary figure serves two purposes. First, it is one of the optional elements, justification for annexation by citing historical precedent (Transylvania had been part of Historic Hungary for centuries). Second, it represents the theme of aid, appropriate for a stamp designed to raise funds. It appears on subsequent Hungarian semi-postals (Scott B141-142, B170) issued to raise money for the
Horthy National Aviation Fund.

The design of the second stamp (Hungary, Scott B124) is reminiscent of the Pieta. Hungary, the occupying power, is represented by the Virgin Mary, the Patroness of Hungary (lest there be any doubt, *Patrona Hungariae* is inscribed on her halo). The man, a Szeklar from north-eastern Transylvania, represents the occupied territory; his crown of thorns symbolizes the sufferings endured by ethnic minorities at the hands of the Romanians. Szeklars are also portrayed on the third stamp in the series (Hungary, Scott B125). A Szeklar mother is holding her child aloft, facing west (towards Budapest), and offering him to the Fatherland. The sun is rising in the background, suggestive of the bright future that awaits the population, now that it is once again part of Hungary.

Bulgaria, not to be outdone, demanded the return of Southern Dobrudja, a highly developed and productive agricultural region in which Bulgarians were the predominant ethnic group, from Romania (the shaded area in the bottom right-hand part of Map 5). This was accomplished in 1940 by the Treaty of Craiova (Map 5), and Bulgaria issued a series of four stamps celebrating the territory’s return (Fig. 5: *Bulgaria, Scott 360-363*). All four stamps include pictures of Bulgaria’s head of state, Tsar Boris, and the inscription “Dobrudja – 1940.” Maps of Southern Dobrudja, the annexed territory, are on two of the stamps (Bulgaria, Scott 362-363) and happy natives in ethnic costumes are portrayed on a third (Bulgaria, Scott 360). The woman holds a sheaf of wheat, a reference to the agricultural character of the region. The reference is repeated in the second stamp in the series (Bulgaria, Scott 361) which shows the Bulgarian flag (an additional symbol of the occupying power) being carried through a wheat field; the wheat is so tall that the soldiers carrying the flag are barely visible. On this stamp, Tsar Boris is portrayed wearing a German helmet, a reference to the alliance with the Axis which made the recovery of the Southern Dobrudja possible.

By 1941 Hitler was planning to invade the Soviet Union (the Nazi-Soviet Pact notwithstanding). In preparation, he invaded Greece and Yugoslavia in April, to ensure that the entire Balkan Peninsula was firmly under Axis control. The philatelic paper trail generated by the dismemberment of Yugoslavia and the fate of its various component parts from 1941 to 1945 is a long and complicated one. Suffice it to say that Bulgaria, as an Axis ally, received coveted territory from both Yugoslavia (most of Macedonia plus some of Serbia) and Greece (territory in Western Thrace, which included access to the Aegean sea) (Map 7). These acquisitions are depicted in a series of five stamps (Fig. 6: *Bulgaria, Scott 392-396*).
Tsar Boris and a map of the territory obtained from Yugoslavia are on the second stamp in the series (Bulgaria, Scott 393). The remaining four stamps are depictions of the occupied territories. A Macedonian woman (happy native in ethnic costume), plus the date of the occupation, is on the first stamp (Bulgaria, Scott 392). The city of Okhrid, a culturally significant landmark in Macedonia (shown on the map on Bulgaria, Scott 393)) is on the final stamp (Bulgaria, Scott 396). Macedonia had been part of the medieval Bulgarian state, and the city of Okhrid was a center of learning and the seat of the Patriarch of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Since Okhrid was a culturally significant landmark, its portrayal serves as a justification for annexation by citing historical precedent. The third stamp in the series (Bulgaria, Scott 394) celebrates Bulgaria’s acquisition of Thracian territory from Greece with a view of the Aegean Sea.
Romania participated in Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union and sent troops into Bessarabia (Map 8) to reclaim the territory that Stalin had annexed the previous year (the shaded area in the upper right-hand portion of Map 8). On the first anniversary of its reconquest of Bessarabia, Romania issued a series of three semi-postal stamps (Fig. 7: Romania, Scott B195-197). All three portray General Antonescu, Romania’s de facto head of state, and two of the three (Romania, Scott B195-196) also portray the King of Romania, King Michael; King Michael’s father, King Carol II, had been forced to abdicate in 1940 due to national outrage over the country’s territorial losses. The third stamp (Romania, Scott B197) depicts the Romanian army crossing the Pruth River to retake Bessarabia; the Pruth was the western border of Bessarabia. The bridge is in the foreground, and the soldiers are viewed from the back as they march from Romania into Bessarabia. In addition to two symbols of the occupying power (General Antonescu plus the army), the design contains one of the optional elements, the crossing of a border. Both King Michael and General Antonescu appear on the second stamp in the series (Romania, Scott B196) plus Stephen of Moldavia (the crowned head in the inset in the upper right-hand corner), a 15th century Romanian ruler during whose reign Bessarabia was part of Romania (justification of occupation by citing historical precedent). The initial stamp (Romania, Scott B195) is a map of Bessarabia plus four portraits. In addition to those of King Michael and General Antonescu, homage is paid to Hitler and Mussolini: a tip of the hat to the Axis, since Romania’s alliance with the Axis made the return of Bessarabia possible. Or, to quote the Beatles, “I get by with some help from my friends.”
Image Credits


Stamp Images: Private Collection, Robin Gates Elliott

Bibliography


Stiles, Kent B. “Of Topical Interest.”
   *Scott’s Monthly Journal*, vol. XX, nr 1 (March 1939), pp. 18-19, 24, 26.

Wall, Frederick. “The Designs of the Month.”
   *Gibbons Stamp Monthly*, vol. XII, nr 6 (March 1939), pp. 105-7.

____, _____. “The Designs of the Month.”

____, _____. “The Designs of the Month.”
   *Gibbons Stamp Monthly*, vol. XIV, nr 6 (February 1941), p. 47.

____, _____. “The Designs of the Month.”

Zinsmeister, Marian Carne. *Hungarian Stamps and their Background, 1871-1940*.
   Albany, OR: The Western Stamp Collector, 1948.