

Air Mail from Bulgaria in 1928

By Richard Saundry.

The number of articles dealing with Bulgarian air mails that have been published in English or any other Western European language is exceedingly small. The present writer has hitherto had access to only a single significant article dealing with Bulgarian air mails, written by the Belgian collector, R. van Rompay in 1979. ^(Ref. 1) Van Rompay provided much information about the early pioneer flights within Bulgaria conducted by the very short lived airline BUNAVAD during 1926 and 1927. Subsequently the present writer presented a more general article on Bulgarian air mails ^(Ref. 2) using information gleaned mostly through analysis of covers in his own collection.

Recently I have become aware of a very informative article about Bulgarian air mails, this time written by Ivan Kostov, a Bulgarian collector and which appeared in English, we assume, in 2004. ^(Ref. 3) Kostov's article was translated from Bulgarian for publication in OPAL, the journal of the Oriental Philatelic Association of London by Earl Galitz, then re-edited for that journal by Robert Smith. Ivan Kostov, is an FIP-accredited juror for aerophilately, so I think we would be on relatively safe ground in concluding what he wrote as recently as 2004 will be highly accurate. It is pleasing that much of which I earlier concluded about Bulgarian air mails through inspection of covers in my own collection is now confirmed by Kostov, but this is not the reason for the current presentation.

There is one aspect of Kostov's article, however, that I feel does require great consideration. The first international air mail service to and from Bulgaria was provided by the French airline CIDNA, (Compagnie Internationale de Navigation Aerienne). We have always assumed regular service began in 1928. Kostov now asks the intriguing question "**When did the first CIDNA regular air mail service to (and from) Bulgaria begin?**" I think we have the answer, but there still remains an element of uncertainty which I now propose to explore further. Ultimate proof when mail was regularly flown to Bulgaria by CIDNA will depend upon collectors searching through their collections and hopefully reporting early air mail covers sent to Bulgaria either before or during 1928.

The standard catalogue sources are not very helpful in that first flight covers by CIDNA to and from Bulgaria receive barely a mention. Even the Muller catalogue ^(Ref. 4) omitted all references to CIDNA flights to Sofia in 1928. To be fair to Muller, this most useful, though not necessarily most accurate of catalogues primarily deals with first flight covers, and we note that Muller, (Bulgaria catalogue numbers 4, 5 and 6) tells us that mail was flown by CIDNA October 1, 1927 from Sofia to Istanbul, and via Belgrade to Paris. These CIDNA flights would almost certainly have been experimental in nature. I believe there could never have been any regular airmail services either to or from Bulgaria before 1928. I have never been fortunate enough to have encountered one of these putative 1927 first flight covers. If our readers could confirm the existence of any Bulgarian airmail covers flown in 1927 I would be most interested. Such covers must be extremely rare.

Muller does, however, list some Polish first flight covers to Bulgaria in 1928. In the Poland section of Muller we find mention (catalogue numbers 41-44) of 85 first flight covers that were sent over the route Warsaw-Prague-Vienna-Budapest-Sofia on January 27, 1928. I show (Figure 1) one such Polish first flight cover addressed to an individual at the French Legation in Sofia. Postmarked in Sofia at 16.00 hrs. January 30, it is likely this cover was properly flown, though I suspect a 3-day journey time Warsaw to Sofia might equally have been accomplished by rail. We must also remember that by 1928 the air mail route Warsaw to Vienna and Budapest was already regularly being flown by CIDNA.



Figure 1. First flight cover Warsaw January 27, 1928 to Sofia (postmarked 16.00 hrs. January 30).

As early as 1922 the French airline had implemented service over the route Paris via Prague and Vienna as far as Bucharest and Constantinople, and a further service was started in 1925 linking Prague via Wroclaw (Breslau) with Warsaw. The airline flying the January 1928 covers from Poland to Bulgaria was not cited in Muller. It is, of course, possible the flight was operated by an airline other than CIDNA such as one of the forerunners of the Polish national carrier LOT, but I have more than a gut feeling this had to have been a CIDNA flight. In fact, the Roland Kohl catalogue of Austrian airmails, ^(Ref. 5) listing possible despatches this flight from Vienna (cat. number 28.1) on January 27, 1928, states that this was a CIDNA flight. We should bear in mind, however, that in the 1920s CIDNA did not possess aircraft that were capable of operating services during the harsh winter weather encountered in central and eastern Europe. They operated a scheduled summer seasonal service only, usually only from early April until the end of November. We know, for instance, that during 1928 CIDNA service through Bucharest was only operated between April 10 and November 30. If a flight was made by CIDNA between Warsaw and Sofia in January, it most certainly had to have been something of the nature of an experimental flight, and not the inauguration of regular airmail service to Bulgaria. Perhaps one of our readers specialising in Polish air mails might be able to enlighten us on this point?

The Austria section of Muller (catalogue number 143) tells us, however, that on **April 24, 1928** a total of **216 first flight covers were sent to Bulgaria**. Again no mention of the airline involved. Kohl tells us (catalogue number 28.9) that the airline was CIDNA and that the first flight covers were sent from Vienna via Budapest to Belgrade and to Sofia, the Yugoslav and Bulgarian capitals being new destinations reached from Vienna. The total number of covers despatched was 216 but this was the number sent to Belgrade and Sofia combined, not the number actually sent to Sofia. We also know that of this number, 97 of the 216 first flight covers were posted directly from Aspern airport, Vienna. I have located two of the Austrian first flight 'covers' to Bulgaria, a stationery card (Figure 2) franked 38 groschen with Aspern transit marks, and an envelope (Figure 3), franked 70 groschen, posted at a Viennese city post office 7 o'clock in the morning.



Figure 2. First flight postal stationery card Vienna April 24, 1928 with Aspern Airfield cachets to Sofia (postmarked on back 11.00 hrs. April 25).

Both items were addressed to Franz See, a well-known European aficionado of Bulgarian philatelic items, and were postmarked after arrival in Sofia at 11.00 hrs. the following day. Transit times prove these covers were definitely flown. Furthermore, on page 244 of his catalogue ^(Ref. 5), Kohl gives the flight schedule for a regular CIDNA airmail service in 1928 between Vienna and Sofia – the service was scheduled to operate three times per week leaving Aspern at 07.30 hrs. on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, arriving Belgrade at 13.00 hrs. from where a connecting flight would reach Sofia at 17.30 hrs. the same day. Either the inaugural flight covers arrived late in Sofia, or were postmarked the following morning before delivery. The cover and card confirm the Austrian air surcharge rate was 30 groschen per 20g. I am reasonably sure that April 24, 1928 was the date CIDNA started carrying regular airmail to Bulgaria. The addressee, Franz See, is important – see Figure 3.

I have found no mention in the Muller catalogue of first despatches by CIDNA from France, nor indeed from Czechoslovakia, Hungary or Yugoslavia to Bulgaria which is all very disconcerting. What is significant, however, is that Ivan Kostov states that no items of mail other than the Franz See first flight covers have so far been reported that were despatched by air from anywhere to Bulgaria during the whole of 1928. We therefore currently cannot answer authoritatively the question whether or not CIDNA operate a regular airmail service to Bulgaria in 1928. The answer is 'probably' but until someone confirms the existence of a flown cover we just cannot be 100% sure. Ivan Kostov says that in issue No. 3 (1987/1984) of "*Philatelen Pregled*", a Sofia philatelic journal, Andrei Pentchev, an eminent Bulgarian collector, wrote an article "*The First Airmail to Bulgaria*" in which Pentchev reported he had found three first flight covers sent April 24, 1928 Vienna to Sofia, all addressed by Franz See to himself.



Figure 3. First flight cover April 24, 1928 to Sofia (machine cancel on back 11.00hrs. April 25)

Twenty years later I cannot now be sure that the cover I have was not one of the three reported by Pentchev. What I can tell collectors is, however, that the cover I have located addressed to See, was not sent by himself but by Karl Weidemann. With the Pentchev report and my holdings, we know of the existence of at least three first flight covers and one card. Other examples certainly exist in collections, their true significance probably unrecognised by their owners.

Whatever the status of these Franz See items, Kostov used them as a major piece of evidence in his article when suggesting regular service probably started in 1928. Before we return to consider further evidence for his assertion, we have first to go on a little detour.

On March 1, 1927 the German-backed Bulgarian airline BUNAVAD (founded October 8, 1925) obtained permission to carry mail within Bulgaria. The previous year two experimental flights Sofia-Ruse (Rousse, Rustchuck)-Varna and return were made during November. All the 1926 flown mail, none of which was surcharged for airmail service, was distinguished from other surface mail through circular cachets. Wishing to start revenue-earning service during 1927, BUNAVAD was thwarted through the unavailability of acceptable airmail postage stamps. Airmail stamps were essential for accountancy purposes since 35% of their sale was supposed to go to the government and 65% to the airline. Stamps that BUNAVAD decided to have privately printed were rejected by the Bulgarian authorities. The thorny issue surrounding acceptable postage stamps was only resolved, not very amicably, through the government belatedly overprinting existing 1 Lev and 4 Leva stamps and service first started as late as November 8, 1927. BUNAVAD's internal air service tottered on for a short period of time but was not economically viable and the company ceased operating in June 1931. Kostov tells us the Bulgarian government distrusted BUNAVAD and refused to settle their accounts with the airline.

What has this got to do with CIDNA, you might well ask? On March 15, 1927 Bulgaria signed an agreement with CIDNA to carry Bulgarian mail over the Dragoman-Sofia-Plovdiv-Svilengrad route, the Bulgarian section of an alternative route between Paris and Istanbul. This agreement authorised the French company to carry mail, freight and passengers to all countries served by the airline, valid initially for three years, to operate two or three flights per week depending upon the weather, during the summer months 1st April to 30th November. Income from the sale of airmail stamps for the service was to be split one third to the government and two thirds for CIDNA. And that is where problems really started. While the Bulgarian Post Office were still selling stamps that could be used on BUNAVAD flight covers, even if alternative airmail stamps became available for use on covers flown by CIDNA how could you prevent post office officials using the wrongly designated stamps? It was the recipe for an accountancy disaster! We now begin to understand why the Bulgarian government delayed settling claims from BUNAVAD for postal reimbursement during 1927, because by 1928 the ailing BUNAVAD service had essentially ceased activity. Postage rates for international airmail services were expected to be much higher than for domestic services requiring higher denomination stamps. On April 15, 1928 two new airmail overprinted stamps became available. The then current 2 Lev stamp overprinted in red (Scott C1, S.G. 282) and the 10 Lev stamp in green (Scott C3, S.G. 284) were intended to satisfy most of the higher postage tariffs. I do note, however, that during the next three years or so (Bulgaria did not issue properly designed airmail stamps until 1933) that the 1 Lev and 4 Leva overprinted airmail stamps, originally intended only to be used on BUNAVAD letters, remained valid for international postage, indicating that by 1928 to all intents and purposes the BUNAVAD service no longer existed. Surely it is not coincidence that the new airmail overprinted stamps became available only a matter of days before the arrival of the CIDNA first flight from Vienna?



Figure 4. Registered first flight cover flown by CIDNA Sofia April 25, 1928 to Paris (07.15hrs. April 29)

Covers flown to Bulgaria during the remainder of 1928 by CIDNA may not exist, but the eagle eyed collector of Bulgarian airmail covers will soon become aware that airmail covers emanating from Bulgaria during 1928 certainly do. Such covers add to the mounting evidence that regular service by CIDNA probably did start in 1928. I have two registered airmail covers, (Figure 4), obviously very philatelic since they are almost identical, that were sent from Sofia to Paris on April 25, 1928, and delivered to a Mme. Alice Kotchanoff in Arrondissement XVII in NW Paris at 07.15 hrs. April 29. Probably arriving the previous evening, these covers were definitely flown.

These covers with registration etiquettes numbered 60 and 62 indicate there will be similar philatelic covers in other collections. Without information to the contrary, I suggest these are first flight covers Bulgaria to Paris, if only because April 25, 1928 was also the date the first flight covers from Vienna arrived in Sofia. It is a given that **regular airmail service from Bulgaria started April 25, 1928**. Both covers were franked 30 Leva using a block of four 50 stotinki (= 0.5 Leva) and a single 10 Leva regular stamps to pay for the 6 Leva per 20g. surface and 6 Leva registration rates, plus a single 10 Leva together with a block of four 2 Leva airmail overprinted stamps amounting to 18 Leva for the air surcharge rate to Paris. I am confident Bulgaria like other European countries used 20g. wt. steps for calculating both surface and air surcharge postage rates, and that air surcharge and surface postage rates were additive. Further, Kosov tells us that the postal officials applied the airmail stamps to the letters, suggesting they were probably not intended to be sold directly to the public. This post office procedure makes analysis of observed postage on flown covers from 1928 relatively easy since after deduction of the known surface rates from the total postage you arrive at the air surcharge rates which can usually be confirmed because this was supposed to be paid for using airmail stamps only.

Bulgarian airmail covers flown during 1928 to all manner of destinations, to Austria and to Germany in particular, are regularly encountered but the manner of their franking has given the impression in the past they might all be philatelic concoctions. The number of stamps needed to pay high total postage rates has led many commentators to suspect such covers were either bogus, or philatelic. Kostov^(Ref. 5) implies that the value of the Bulgarian Lev in 1927 was about 0.72 US cents. Thus total postage on airmail covers of the order of 40 leva to countries such as Germany amounted to c.25-30 US cents., or 6d-7.5d. in British currency.



Figure 5. The “Whittelsey” cover. Sofia July 25, 1928 via London, England (July 27) and New York (August 4) to Hartford, Connecticut, USA (August 5)

This may not seem much to us today, but this would have amounted to the better part of a day's wages for a Bulgarian worker in 1928. Covers with such high postage rates, even if properly flown, would usually be commercial or philatelic in origin. For this reason, Kostov and other collectors suspecting the 1928 covers were all highly philatelic, possibly even bogus, and dismissed them as not providing proof of a regular CIDNA service. What I can now contribute to this debate is a cover I am utterly convinced is unlikely to have been philatelic (Fig. 5).

I had previously relegated this cover, sent from Sofia July 25, 1928 to a Mr. Whittelsey in the United States, to my back-up collection. I now recognise the true significance of this particular cover as it is almost certainly not philatelic. Franked 38 Leva (6 Leva surface + 6 Leva registration + 26 Leva air to Great Britain) this 8g. wt. letter was in London on July 27, New York August 4, and in Hartford on August 5. The 26 Leva air surcharge rate to England has been observed on other covers. In 1928, of course, it was not possible to fly mail across the Atlantic. The exciting thing about this cover, sent from the American Consulate in Sofia, is that I found it still had its original enclosure, a single-page letter from the American vice-Consul. The message is a little ambiguous, but however you view it, the reason for the letter's despatch was commercial and not philatelic. I am convinced that in the summer season of 1928 CIDNA did operate a regular airmail service from Bulgaria.

So where does that leave us? I return to what Ivan Kostov said when summarising the 1928 CIDNA airmail conundrum:

- (a) There were flights. In April 1928 the Bulgarian PTT issued a circular to all post offices informing them that *'over Bulgarian territory are passing airplanes that operate international airmail services on the routes Paris-Istanbul (with a landing in Sofia) and Bucharest-Istanbul (no landing in Bulgaria). In case of an emergency landing the post-bags or packets must be handed without delay to the nearest post office to be delivered in the normal way'*. Kostov inferred this provided proof that airmail flights to Sofia from Western Europe began in 1928.
- (b) The covers. There are the "Franz See" first flight covers from Vienna. Also known to Kostov (and I have a number in my collection) were airmail covers from Bulgaria to destinations in Europe, but from Europe to Bulgaria other than the putative Austrian first flight covers, no covers seem to exist. The outgoing covers were all postmarked for special services (registered, cancelled at money order desks, etc.) Kostov was not convinced these covers provided sufficient proof that a regular airmail service existed in 1928.
- (c) What was the nature of the 1928 covers? Kostov did not dare to classify all of them as forgeries. He suggested the outgoing covers were cancelled "by favour". To date there is no document known which proves the existence of a Bulgarian airmail service in 1928. The reason for the "Whittelsey" cover, however, was probably commercial, not philatelic, and serves to strengthen the argument that an official service was in place.
- (d) The biggest hurdle that has to be overcome is that Kostov tells us that printed in the yearbook of the PTT Department, 1932, under one of the tables, you can read in Bulgarian and in French: "Le service "par avion" eut lieu (is in place in Bulgaria) depuis l'année 1929". This suggests CIDNA started regular service in 1929, not 1928. I just cannot argue against this evidence, though we ponder "what if the year was a misprint, '1929' instead of '1928'?"

In summary, there is still an element of doubt whether or not regular scheduled Bulgarian airmail service really started in 1928. I believe it must have, but proof will ultimately depend upon discovery of the relevant documentary proof (unlikely), or discovery of a *bona fide* cover flown to Bulgaria (possible). The hunt is on!

References.

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- (3) Kostov, I. "*Bulgarian Airmail between the Two World Wars*", *OPAL* (the Journal of the Oriental Philatelic Association of London), Whole No. 209, (pub. c. 2004), pp. 2-14. [it is unfortunate that the year of publication for this issue of OPAL is not given. The references appended to this article in OPAL are sketchy: no page numbers given, etc.].
- (4) Muller, F. (editor), "*Catalogue des Aerogrammes du Monde Entier 1950*", (re-pub. 1970 by FISA)
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