

The Prisoner of War Camp for Ottoman Prisoners in Nowgong (India)

by Robert Gray

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Ottoman prisoners of war were held in eight camps in India. The general locations of these excluding the two small work camps in the Southern Shan area are shown in Fig. 1. The postal history of the camps in Burma has been recently summarized.²

The International Committee of the Red Cross did not inspect Nowgong.³ No record of an inspection by the Swiss consulate could be found in the Swiss or Indian national archives. Switzerland was the diplomatic intermediary for the Ottoman Empire after the US entered the war in April 1917. A Nowgong cover was previously recorded.⁴



Fig. 1:

Sketch map showing general locations of the prisoner of war camps in India holding Ottoman prisoners.

As the camp at Sumerpur began to reach capacity, the camps at Bellary and Nowgong were authorised in April 1916 with the understanding that Bellary would be opened as soon as practical and Nowgong was to be opened when needed.⁵ These two camps were authorised to have a capacity of four to five thousand prisoners, however, there is no data to support such high prisoners of numbers there.

Nowgong was an Army cantonment (permanent military station) of about 7,000 inhabitants in less than 6s square miles. The associated camp likely operated between 1917–1920 holding Ottoman prisoners from Mesopotamia and later about 50 Austrians captured in Turkmenistan. It was a

1 Updated version of an article entitled *Nowgong Prisoners of War Camp in WWI India*, originally published in 2022.

2 Gray, 2025.

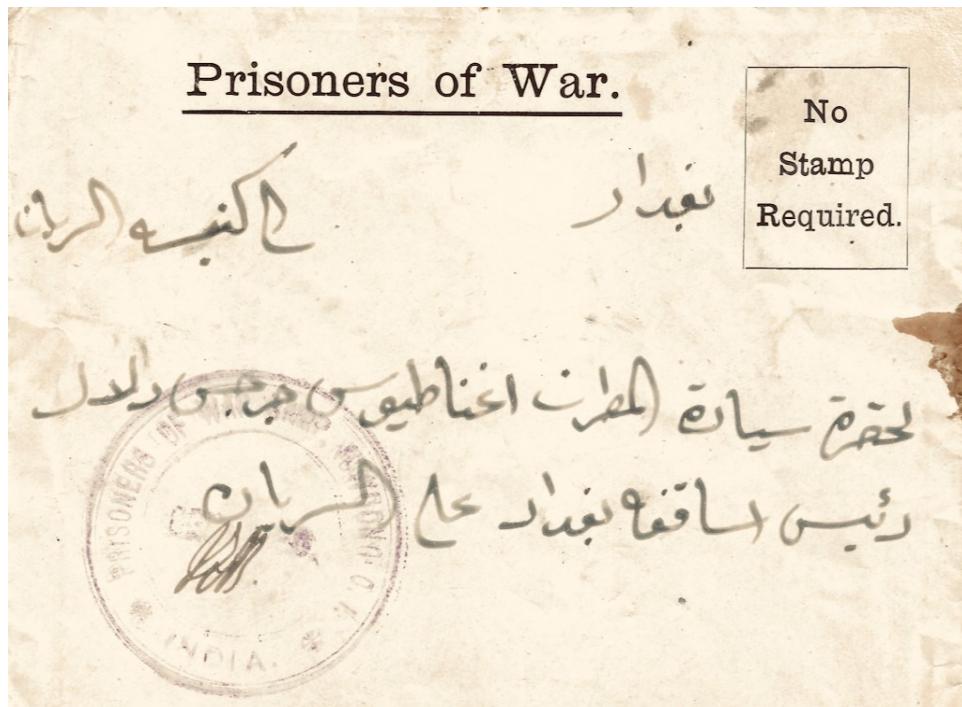
3 *Rapports de MM. F. Thormeyer, ... sur leurs visites aux camps de prisonniers de guerre ottomans ..., 1917*

4 Gray, 2022.

5 *Proposal to open a camp at Bellary and Nowgong for Turkish prisoners of War. 1916-06.*

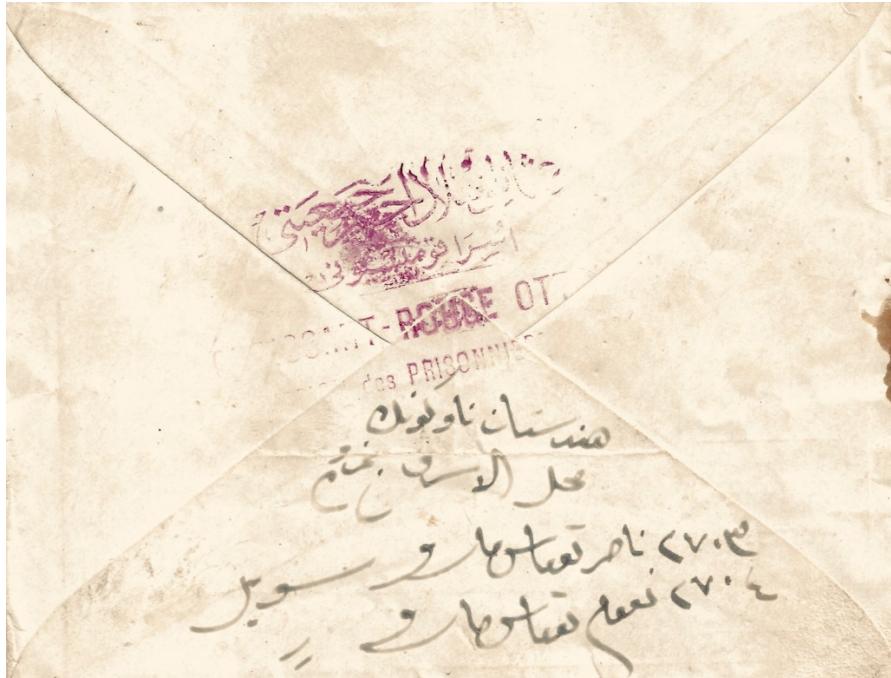
relatively isolated place with the nearest rail station was 18 miles. The location of the camp relative to the village is not known.

The Indian archives and other sources reveal little regarding this camp. There was a Turkish interpreter,⁶ and the guards in 1918 were the Sikh's Garrison Company at Nowgong commanded by Acting Captain (Lt.) R.D. Thompson.⁷ Postal history leaves a small trace with only two known covers. Based on a FIVRR.com translation, the cover shown in *fig. 2* is addressed to "His Excellency Bishop Ignatius George Dallal Archbishop of the Syriac Church Baghdad.⁸ He was ordained in 1912 and left for Mosul in 1926. The address on the verso suggests that the sender was likely a Syriac Christian from Mesopotamia.



The cover itself is a standard British India prisoner of war envelope with a camp's censor hand-stamp and no postal cancellations. The verso bears a Red Crescent hand-stamp suggesting that Baghdad was still in Ottoman hands when the letter was sent. Baghdad fell to the British on 11 March 1917. Presumably after that date mail to Baghdad would have been sent under existing British India mail routes.

Figs. 2 and 2a:
Front and verso of an undated Nowgong cover showing the camp hand-stamp and unidentified initials.
Collection R. Gray.



6 Enquiry regarding the bona fides of Mr. B Dervishian, ...

7 The London Gazette, 7.03.1919, p. 3158.

8 Archbishop Athanase Georges Dallal.

An enlarged and photo-enhanced image of the camp hand-stamp is shown as *fig. 2b*. The hand-stamp is in violet ink and reads “PRISONERS OF WAR CAMP / NOWGONG C.I. / INDIA”. The “C.I.” is perhaps Central India.

The hand-stamp is a double ring design like those found in the camps holding Ottoman prisoners with the text between the two rings. The outer diameter is 40 mm, and the inner diameter is 27 mm. The letters are 3 mm in height. The envelope is 120×95 mm.



Fig. 2b:

Enlarged and enhanced image of the Nowgong hand-stamp from the cover in *fig. 2*.

The second cover (*fig. 3*) was addressed in English to Paris, France. It also bears a Red Crescent hand-stamp, Nowgong camp hand-stamp, with manuscript initials, and postal marks indicating a route from the camp to Istanbul, to the Geneva ICRC.

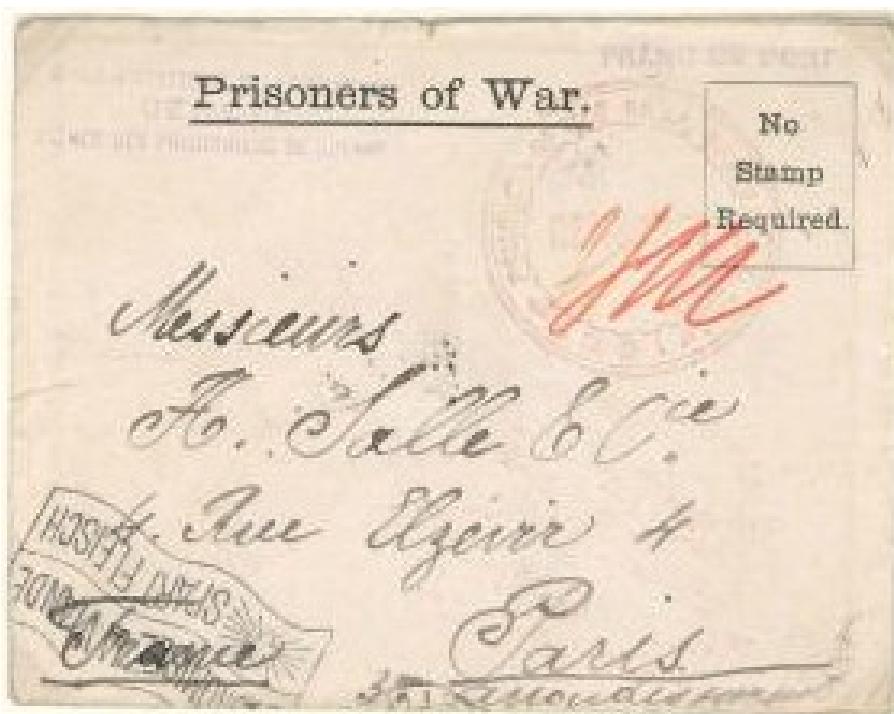


Fig. 3:

Front of Nowgong Prisoners of War cover to Paris.

Original caption: “World war I Prisoner of War in Nowgong, Central India. Large camp cachet on face. Postmark Istanbul and Turkish Red Crescent cachet on back. On face Geneva Int. Red Cross cachet.

Route: Camp to Istanbul to Geneva to Lisbon to Paris.”

Source: FPHS (scan J. Thiessen)

Fig. 4 was posted by John Thiessen on the Forces Postal History Society web site but no longer appears. The sender is “J. Tsiminides Medical Officer 2718 Prisoners of War Camp, Nowgong, Central India.” It is not known if prisoner numbers were assigned consecutively as in Ahmednagar or whether this prisoner was transferred from Sumerpur and kept his previous camp number.

It should not be interpreted as the camp holding 2700 plus prisoners. The “Stambul” cancellation on the verso appears as “29. JAN 19” suggesting the delivery of the letter was delayed.

The paucity of all Ottoman prisoners of war mail from India is best understood from the perspective of the Red Crescent Archives in Ankara. Most of Ottoman P.O.W. mail was never delivered because of the chaos from the war in Turkey.

The Red Crescent Archives in Ankara have stated that they have 30,000 Ottoman P.O.W. letters in their possession.⁹ There was no mention if the covers were there as well. The author has tried a couple of times unsuccessfully to contact them to determine what if anything they might have on Nowgong.

The archives will only work with individuals who come to the archive and can speak Turkish. Furthermore, a survey of Middle East archives in Turkey recorded that a large project to translate Ottoman documents into modern Turkish will likely keep the archives in flux for the next 10-20 years. The Red Crescent archives are not included in that report.¹⁰

To pursue this subject further, the author would appreciate scans of any Nowgong prisoners of war related cover or other information. Anyone able to access the Ankara archives should request information on Nowgong and the other Indian camps and lastly, if any of the readers are competent translators of the cover, would they please advise as to the script being used and its meaning in English. Please forward any information in this regard to the editor at mep-bulletin@zobbel.de.

Sources and Literature

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9 Turkish Red Crescent to deliver letters written 100 years ago by prisoners of war.

10 Byrne, 2020.

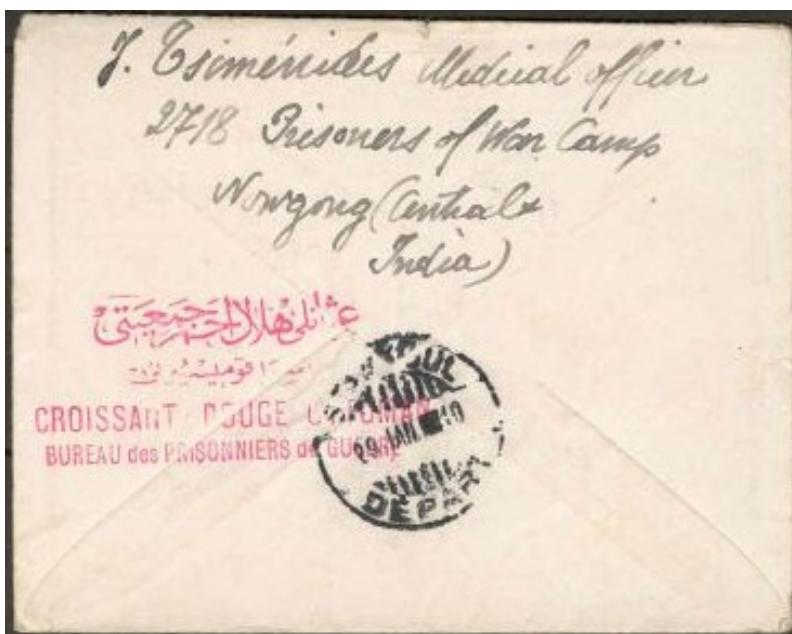


Fig. 3a: The reverse side.