

# Mail Service in Rural Russia: The Volostnoe Pravlenie Offices, 1895-1917

## 1. Introduction

**Context:** Imperial Russia struggled to deliver mail to its rural population. Population density and the literacy levels were low, and the Tsars looked at the Imperial Post as a means to raise funds, rather than as an agent of economic growth. Over time, there were half a dozen different rural office types (Section 2); generically, “Auxiliary Offices”. This exhibit focuses on the most common type, Volostnoe Pravlenie (VP) offices, which accounted for about 2700 of the 15,000 Imperial offices. The first VP offices opened in 1895, and most were converted to Imperial Pochtovoe Otdelenie (P.O.) by 1917, but their cancels were in some cases used for another decade.

**Purpose and scope:** This exhibit documents “What, Where, How, and When” for VP offices. About 70 of the 100 Imperial Provinces (their number varied over time) had VP offices, and items from 65 are presented here.

**Importance and research:** Though there were many VP offices, mail from such offices is scarce by definition, because they were established in locations where mail volume was insufficient to make the office self-supporting. If the office became profitable, its status was upgraded. This exhibit is based on the largest collection of VP items ever assembled; it incorporates intact the three largest previous collections known to the exhibitor, those of Faberge, Maslowski and Casey. It also presents for the first time two metrics for the scarcity of VP items, many unusual uses (e.g., money orders and turned letters), and most of the known postage due items from VP offices. The oldest six covers (from 1896 and 1897) and all post-1925 VP items known to the exhibitor are included.



A typical Volostnoe Pravlenie (VP) registered letter:

A 10k reg’d entire f.w. 3k+ 7k arms, sent 27/7/1917 from Olanskoe VP, Kem Uezd (S. of Murmansk) to Arkangelsk, the provincial capital. The office, opened 1904, lacked registry labels, and the ms. “Zakaznoe N° 3” suggests a small volume of registered mail; the only known item from this office, sent the same month the office transitioned to a P.O.; signed.



original research by author:



Most important items are matted in Red
Very significant items are matted in Blue
Illustrative items are matted in Black

Cyrillic:	Transliteration:	Translation:	Cyrillic:	Transliteration:	Translation:
МОСКВА	Moskva	Moscow	ДОПЛАТИТЬ	Doplatit	Postage due
С.ПЕТЕРБУРГЪ	S. Petersburg	St. Petersburg (SPB)	ПОЧТЫ or ПОЧТ.	Posty, Post.	Post, Postal
ВАРШАВА	Varshava	Warsaw	ПОЧТОВЫЙ ВАГОНЪ	Postal Wagon	TPO
ГОРОДЪ	Gorod	City	ГУБЕРНІА	Gubernia	Province
ЭКСПЕДИЦІА	Expeditisia	Dispatch office	ОБЛАСТЬ	Oblast	Military province
КОНТОРА	Kontora	Main office	УЕЗДЪ	Uezd	District
ОТДЕЛЕНИЕ	Otdelenie	Sub-Office	ВОЛОСТЬ	Volost	Rural admin.

**Political Structure and transliteration:** To understand the VP post, it is necessary to define the Imperial political structure, and provide translations of basic terms. Provinces in Russia were of two types: civilian (“Gubernia”) and military (“Oblast”). The 100 or so provinces were organized into 30 “Post-Telegraph (or P-T) Districts”, with familiar geographic units like Siberia and Ukraine each containing several P-T Districts. Each province contained multiple districts (“Uezdii”), and postal roads connected the province capital to its Uezd towns, in spoke-and-wheel fashion. From the Uezd towns, further postal roads spread out to rural Volost (rural administration) locations. Uezdii were roughly equivalent to US counties, and Volost locations to townships. However, not all Uezdii in Siberia had Volost administrations, and an Uezd might be as large as a US state. Early in the period of interest here, most rural mail was sent first to the Uezd town and then the province capital, even if this was out of the way. As the railway system expanded, it was sometimes possible to bypass the capital, but most rural mail was still sent via Uezd towns.

## 2. How the post served rural Russia — office types:

Imperial Russia was highly bureaucratic, ethnically diverse, and had vast and thinly populated rural areas, leading to a complex postal apparatus that included six primary types of rural auxiliary post offices.

### Auxiliary offices administered by local authorities:

- Wendische Kreisepost:** This post was organized by Baltic Germans in Livonia and served Wenden only, 1862 to 1914. Its only importance here is that it served as a model for the Zemstvo Post; stamps were issued.
- Zemstvo Post:** The most famous of Russia’s rural posts (because some Uezdii issued their own stamps), 1865 to 1919. Though it was present in most provinces west of the Urals, the Zemstvo system did not extend to Siberia , Central Asia or the Caucasus, the fastest growing parts of the empire, ca. 1900.

These post offices were local (not Imperial), so their mail could not travel on Imperial Post roads. Also, the numerous Zemstvo offices were not tabulated in post office listings, so their number is unknown.

### Tambov Gubernia as an example—

Like most provinces, Tambov had multiple Auxiliary Office types; four are shown here.

### An August 1899 Zemstvo 7R (Ruble) money letter:

Sent unfranked from Zemstvo office Umet, Kirsanov Uezd (boxed mark), to an Orthodox church office in SPB via the Uezd town of Kirsanov. The large wax seal was used on all money letters, but the four small seals are for the Zemstvo Post. Zemstvo money letters are rare.



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