

St Petersburg Registered Mail with Geometric Postmarks, 1881-1904

1. Introduction:

Scope:

This exhibit deals with rare registered letters sent via offices that did not normally handle registered mail, the Sub-Offices (“Otdel”) of the St Petersburg (SPb) City Post. An Otdel was a small office attached to a larger Branch Office (“Otdelenie”); the confusing similarity of the names of the two office types is part of the story. The covers in question have striking geometric cancels, used 1881-1904, with a number in a shape surrounded by a circle. Each number, 1-9, XI, 13 and 14 represents an Otdel. Some of the relevant letters predate the use of registry labels, starting in 1899. About half have red labels used only in 1899. Of the later letters, most exhibit an apparent mismatch between reg’y label and cancel; i.e., the label was applied at an office other than where the stamps were cancelled. Close to half of all items bear an “Iz Yashchika” (“From the Box”, cachet or ms.); i.e., removed from a letter box by a postillion. This would be applied if the sender marked the letter “Zakaznoe” or registered and applied a correct franking, or left it unfranked/short-paid. The SPb geometric cancels, especially “1” and “4” (at right), are among the most common Russian cancels of their era, with a million or more items receiving such postmarks every year, yet less than 50 registered letters with any geometric cancel are known.

Questions:

These curious facts motivate the questions addressed by this exhibit:

- What was the timing, source, & handling of these items?
- Were all such letters taken “From the Box”? If not, how did they arise?
- Why are the cancel and reg’y label apparently mismatched on some items?
- If Otdel offices had red reg’y labels in 1899, why did they not use labels after 1899? If not, what office(s) applied the labels with Otdel numbers, and how was reg’d mail handled?

Evidence suggests that: these letters arose as a service to selected businesses, there are no mismatched labels, and Otdels never had labels. This glimpse of the workings of Russia’s most innovative postal service provides insight into how Russia managed its postal service generally.

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

Cyrillic:	Transliteration:	Translation:
МОСКВА	Moskva	Moscow
С. ПЕТЕРБУРГЪ	S. Peterburg	St. Petersburg (SPb)
ЭКСПЕДИЦИЯ	Expeditisia	Dispatch office
ГУБЕРНІА	Gubernia	Province
ОБЛАСТЬ	Oblast	Military province
ГОРОДЪ	Gorod	City
ЗАКАЗНОЕ	Zakaznoe	Registered
ЯЩИКА	Yashchika	Post box
КОНТОРА	Kontora	Main office
ОТДЕЛЕНИЕ	Otdelenie	Branch-Office
ОТДЕЛЬ	Otdel	Sub-Office

1. Intro/ Scope	Typical features	2. Pre-1899 uses Office 1	Office 1
Offices 4, 9	Office 9	Offices XI, 14	3. 1899 uses Office 1
Offices 5-6	Office 6	Office 6	Office 13
Office 14	Offices 4, 7, 8	Offices 14, XXXI	5. Conclusions & Epilogue
4. Post- 1899 uses			

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