

Mail Service in Rural Russia: Volostnoe Pravlenie Offices, 1845-1928

1. 1. Introduction

Context: Imperial Russia struggled to deliver mail to rural areas. Population & literacy levels were low, and Tsars saw the Imperial Post as a revenue source, not an agent of economic growth. Six types of Auxiliary Offices were used to remedy poor postal service (Section 2). This exhibit focuses on the most numerous type, Volostnoe Pravlenie (VP) offices. Though Volost Administrations existed throughout the 19th century, VP post offices first opened in 1895, and most were upgraded to Pochtovoe Otdelenie (PO) by 1917; their cancels were used until 1928.

Purpose and scope: This exhibit documents “What, Where, How, and When” for VP offices, beginning in 1845, with the oldest known material from Volost Administrations—two letters sent in 1845 and 1846. This is followed by the six earliest VP cancels (1896-1897) from VP Post Offices. The development, types of mail, and services provided are documented up to the closure of VP Offices in 1917. Even after these offices were closed, their cancels were used until 1928, and all known post-1924 uses are shown.

Importance and research: Though there were 2777 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 and upgraded when they became profitable; most offices had VP status for only a few years. This exhibit is based on the largest collection of VP items ever assembled. It presents many unusual uses; e.g., money orders, turned letters, postage due marks, and VP Official letters, plus documentation of usage periods and Volost services, e.g., internal passports and a vaccination certificate.

Political Structure and transliteration: The 101 provinces in Russia were either civilian (“Gubernia”) or military (“Oblastii”). They were organized into 30 Post-Telegraph (P-T) Districts, with geographic areas like Siberia and Ukraine each having several P-T Districts. Provinces contained multiple districts (“Uezdii”), and postal roads connected the province capital hub-and-spoke fashion to its Uezd towns, from which further postal roads spread out to rural Volost (rural administration) locations. Uezdii were roughly equivalent to US counties, and Volost locations to townships, but not all Uezdii had Volost administrations, and an Uezd might be as large as a US state. In the 1890s, most rural mail was sent first to the Uezd town and then the province capital. The railway system streamlined mail movement, but much rural mail was still sent via Uezd towns, and the Uezd location of any VP Office is pertinent to understanding mail routing.

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Original research by exhibitor:



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Rarest items are matted in Platinum
Very significant items are matted in Red
Significant items are matted in Blue
Illustrative items are matted in Black