

# THE RUSSIAN POSTS IN THE XIX CENTURY

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translated by David M. Skipton

"Rossica Translation No. 2"

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Library of Congress Card No. 87-61829

БИБЛИОТЕКА ЖУРНАЛА „ЖИЗНЬ И ТЕХНИКА СВЯЗИ“

К. БАЗИЛЕВИЧ

# ПОЧТА В РОССИИ

## В XIX ВЕКЕ

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО НКПТ  
МОСКВА—1927

***This translation is dedicated to  
my parents, Shirley and Larry.***

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Konstantin Vasil'evich Basilevich (1892-1950) was a noted Soviet historian on the Muscovite State up to the XVII century. In the 1920's he worked in the Moscow State Historical Museum, and it was during that period that this book was published. The next decade saw him contributing heavily to the understanding of early Muscovite politics and economics through use of many original sources. He was the senior historian at the Institute of History of the USSR Academy of Sciences from 1936 to 1950, during which time he was embroiled in "...intensive and acrimonious debate" over his reinterpretation of the XVI and XVII century monarchy, and attacked for "bourgeois cosmopolitanism" in 1948-49. Nevertheless he received the Lomonosov Prize posthumously, and is today considered to be an example of "the best characteristics of Soviet scholarship". (Source - J.L. Wieczynski, *"The Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History"*, Vol. 3, pp. 179-181, Academic International Press, 1977.)

## FROM THE AUTHOR

This essay on the historical development of the Russian Post in the XIX century was written for a broad range of readers. The author has, therefore, confined himself to a popular account and included in it a number of scenes reflecting not only the daily life of the Post, but also its overall condition at one point or another in time. The task of this essay is to portray the development of postal relations over a period of 100 years, during which time life changed greatly from the economic and social conditions found in the country at the threshold of the XIX century. In this process of historical development the Post was one of the elements of the nation's economy and culture. In attempting a popular account, the author also had in mind a more serious intent: to show that from the standpoint of research the history of the Russian Post cannot be considered fully written. While there is no pretense of a scholarly study (an impossibility within the confines of this essay), even so the author could not abandon the desire to dwell at some length and in somewhat greater detail on certain special questions, and to present some statistical data which, perhaps, will be wearisome for the non-specialist reader.

Research conducted by the author on material from the former archives of the Postal Department and the Main Post-and-Telegraph Administration serves as the basis for this essay. The author could acquaint himself with only a very small part of these valuable archival materials, the greater portion of which still awaits research.

This essay could not have been written had not the author received the full cooperation and assistance of the NKPT and the Editorial Board of *"Zhian' i Tekhnika Svyazi"*. Published as part of a [monographic] series of the periodical *"Zhizn' i Tekhnika Svyazi"*, this essay is a natural extension of the work by M. Shedling, previously published [in 1926] in the same series under the title "Outline of World Postal History", inasmuch as his coverage of Russian postal history ends at the beginning of the XIX century.

**K. Bazilevich**

## TRANSLATOR'S FORWARD

Rossica's second book-length English translation, "THE RUSSIAN POSTS IN THE XIX CENTURY", is intended as a companion piece to the translation of S.V. Prigara's "THE RUSSIAN POST IN THE EMPIRE, TURKEY, CHINA, AND THE POST IN THE KINGDOM OF POLAND". Bazilevich provides a reasonably detailed overview of the postal history which Prigara, due to the scope and angle of his work, could only touch upon. For the philatelic student who wants to know what was behind the stamps, stationery and cancellations, Bazilevich's essay is must reading. This book does not address long lists of stamp issues, nor does it give much of any information on the things philatelists collect. It is sheer postal history and background information, the bones and muscle behind the "paper flesh" that goes in our albums.

Even though K. Bazilevich completed this work in 1927, none of it has become outdated, and the rarity of this book in Russian (550 copies printed, and only one has come to light in the U.S.) made it almost inaccessible to the great majority of philatelists on this continent. With both the Bazilevich and the Prigara, the beginning student can start with a greater knowledge and appreciation of what is being collected, and the "old hand" can add to his arsenal.

Because this book was originally written in the Soviet Union, there are places in the text where whiffs of Marxist doctrine can be detected, but for the most part the work is remarkably free of political slant. I have tried to adhere as closely as possible to the original, so readers are free to make their own conclusions.

The transliteration system used is essentially the same as that in the Prigara, with this exception: where the "i " (i kratkoe) was rendered as "j" in the Prigara, here it is the same as for "j " - "i".

Many of the illustrations throughout this translation were not part of the original. They have been culled from a variety of books, pamphlets, official documents and covers to give the reader a better idea of what is being discussed at that point in the text. Each added illustration is so marked in the caption.

A great round of applause is due Bob Trbovich for his painstaking and scholarly proofreading job. Many passages gained a new lease on life and comprehension because of his efforts, and the entire work is an improved production because of him. My thanks to him, to Norman Epstein for the tremendous gift of the 1872 Moscow Polytechnical Exhibition pictures and a lengthy photography session, to Gordon Torrey for hours of photography work and the loan of material from his collection, to Howard Weinert for his loans of outstanding covers, and to the many others whose suggestions and encouragement helped to make this translation possible.

*David M. Skipton*  
Greenbelt, Maryland  
1987

## THE POST AT THE END OF THE XVIII CENTURY

Russia at the threshold of the XIX century was a vast country with a population unevenly scattered over the territory of the world's largest state. On the one hand the central regions, being the oldest foundation of the Great Russian State, were more densely populated than the western areas. On the other hand the western areas, annexed much later, were noticeably different from the rest of the country in their national and economic character. From the upper reaches of the Volga towards the north the population thinned out appreciably, clustering along the banks of rivers and tributaries. To the south stretched the fertile but still unpopulated steppes of New Russia, wrested from the Tatars and Turks but a short time before. In the east the Russian populace mixed with the natives; beyond the Volga began the forests and steppes. There the inhabitants were more nomadic in their lives and activities, although there were fortifications interspersed among them, manned by Cossacks and military personnel. At the Urals, the European territory of Russia gave way to Siberia, a region of thick forests and impenetrable taiga, where the few settlements were separated from one another by hundreds of versts.

Thus, of the whole vast territory of the country, only an insignificant part was comparatively densely settled. The remaining expanses of forest and steppe still awaited colonization – not only the north and Siberia, but the entire southern and eastern parts of European territory were as yet almost uninhabited.

As is generally known, the development of the city and the size of its population are among the best indicators of the level of economic development. At the end of the XVIII century the urban population comprised only 4.1%; that is, for every 4 people living in a city there were 96 rural residents. With the exception of an insignificant number of landowners, the rural population consisted of peasants who were divided into two major categories: State- and privately-owned. The number of the latter somewhat exceeded that of the former (privately-owned peasants comprised 55% of the total).

The expansion of the Post was closely connected with the development of roads. As far as traffic was concerned, the most significant roads were usually those bustling with commercial activity and linking markets with the larger urban populations. Then there were the roads having an administrative or political use, often coinciding with those mentioned above. These, for instance, were roads connecting a political center of the

State with outlying areas, or roads leading to borders. A few roads paved the way for a stream of colonizers to new, uninhabited places. If there were no other primary reason for individual roads, as a whole they reflected the need for communication. Wherever human life was kindled and activities developed, there evolved a network of roads, cutting through forests, mountains, steppes and swamps, covering the newly won regions with their thin web.

Thus, if one accepts the fact that the diffusion of postal communications (seen as both the conveyance of passengers and correspondence) is impossible without a concomitant development of roads, then it follows that the Post comes into contact with all aspects of public and political life. To a certain extent the Post can be seen as a mirror that reflects the overall cultural conditions of a country. Let us see, in a rough outline, what the state of postal communications was at the end of the XVIII century, and how well they met the requirements the Russia of that time could lay upon them.

The skeleton of the Post was the “yam” or relay system, the maintenance of which for the most part fell upon a special class of peasants called “yamshchiki” (postriders). The relays ran between postal stations (yamy), around which the yamshchiki lived and kept their horses. These men were exempt from taxation as well as other government obligations, with the exception of conscription. In those areas where there were no yamshchiki, the postal obligation was fulfilled by peasants over and above their normal government taxes. By the decree of 19 January 1797, urban and rural residents (the lower middle and merchant classes) were also held responsible for the postal obligation. With the exception of a few roads where the yamshchiki received travel expenses (progony), the postal relay system was basically a profitless duty for the populace, in spite of the constant complaints of yamshchiki about their arduous service. This system, the beginning of which dated back to the end of the XV century, had great shortcomings. It led to exceptional abuses which completely ruined the system itself, and by the end of the XVIII century it was already an anachronism.

The majority of cities were connected by the postal station system. Catherine II’s ukaz of 1781 proposed a network of post roads connecting not only provincial capitals with district seats, but all district seats among themselves as well. This project wasn’t to see fulfillment in either the XVIII century or the century to follow. Traffic between the majority of district towns (in actuality no more than large villages) was so insignificant

that the maintenance of permanent postal stations would have been an unnecessary burden on the populace, or it would have led to large expenditures from the Treasury. By the beginning of the XIX century, the entire country had but 3,222 postal stations, at which 37,840 horses were kept. (1)

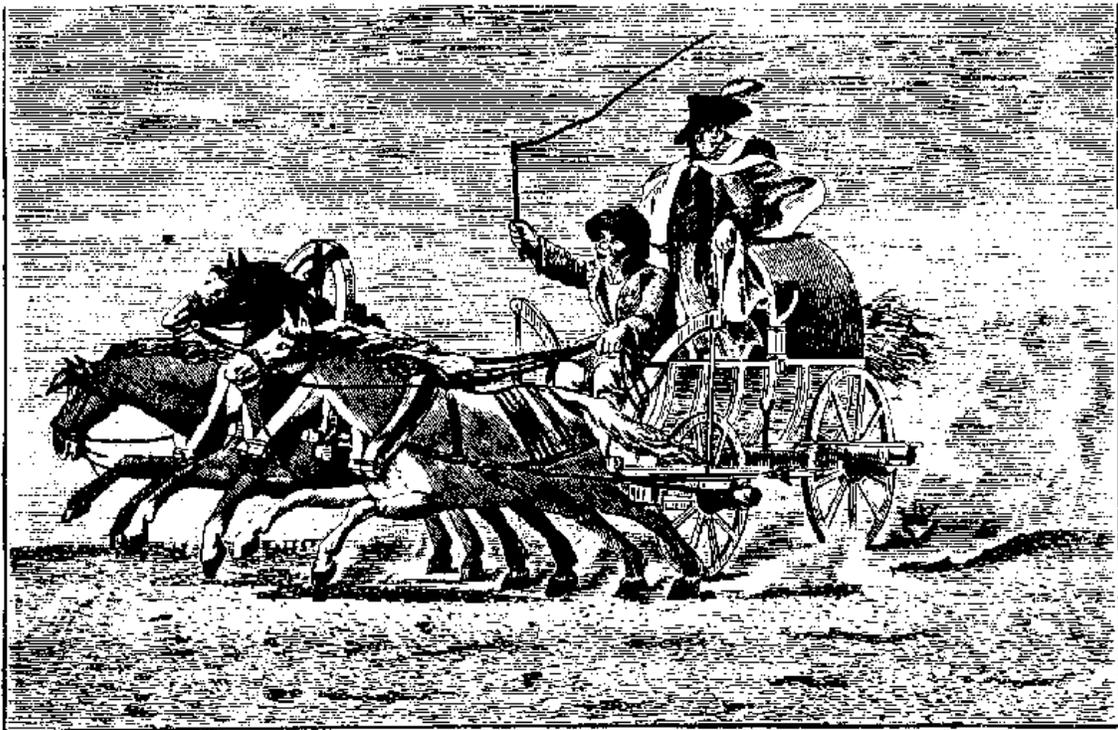


An 18th-century Russian village on a post road during the reign of Catherine the Great (1762-1796). (From an engraving by Leprens, in "Il-lyustrirovannaya Istoriya Ekateriny II", by A.G. Brueckner, vol. 3, p. 627. St. Petersburg, 1885.)

Mail transportation was accomplished in a number of ways. For a long time the mail was carried by the yamshchiki, who passed it from one to another at the stations, and who were the cause of constant complaints about careless and inaccurate delivery of letters and packages. In one incident, a report from Kiev concerning "most pressing matters" finally reached Moscow after 36 days. (2) A general picture of how the yamshchiki carried the mail is given in an official ukaz of 1769: "The postmen, carrying the mail to a station, throw it into huts, delivering it to no one in particular; or, for example, the postman of another station, if he finds mail in a sack or unsealed bag, and it seems that the number of packages is too great, he takes only a few and leaves the rest for another time; couriers often find letters thrown in peasants huts 'without anyone

having been informed of this'; the abandoned mail 'is easily buried in oblivion, and sometimes it is completely lost'." Moreover, rather than properly handle the mail, postmen simply threw sacks of letters onto the carts of passing travelers. This picturesque account remained essentially valid for several decades.

In the second half of the XVIII century it became customary in several places to dispatch mail with specially assigned people responsible for its safekeeping and timely delivery. Thus, the mail on the post road from St. Petersburg to Moscow was accompanied by postillions of the St. Petersburg General Post Office (GPO). On the road to Arkhangel'sk, where the mail was carried by yamshchiki, the St. Petersburg GPO preferred to send it with passengers. On the Narva post road, postillions accompanied the mail over the first part of the route and then, from Narva to Riga, soldiers took over. Later, postillions were assigned to accompany all road mail. (3)



A feldjaeger (messenger) of Catherine's reign, traveling in a postcart. It is unlikely that any feldjaeger could have struck such a nonchalant, upright pose for very long without being thrown out of the jolting cart at the first rut, of which Russian roads had many. (From "Il-lyustrirovannaya Istoriya Ekateriny II", by A.G. Brueckner, vol. 2, p. 487.)

There were several categories of mail at the end of the XVIII century. Heavy official packages and parcels weighing more than 5 pounds were sent with the "heavy post" (yamskaya). The light post encompassed light

parcels, official packets of normal size and private letters. A special kind of post were the relays (ehstafety). At the very end of the century still another kind of post appeared which would later undergo a considerable expansion. In 1799 an ukaz was issued which provided for all letters and parcels with foreign or Muscovite mail to St. Petersburg to be transported directly by special couriers, without stops at intermediate stations. This was called the “extra-post”. A report of the Moscow GPO in 1802 gives us some idea of how this mail was carried – the instructions specified that the extra-mail was to be sent on no more than two horses. In the spring of that year, when one of the extra-mail dispatches was being prepared, two large trunks were filled with correspondence, “which, being placed in the kibitka (a hooded cart - TR), came up to or above the top, leaving the postillion accompanying the mail no place to sit.” The mail had to be sent on two carts, “causing the extra-post to make haste and endangering the postillion’s life over the entire route to St. Petersburg, which at any rut in that evil road threatens one with a dangerous spill.” (4)

As for the kinds of mail sent, a third type was added in 1781 to the already-existing two (letters and packages) – the transfer of money by Post. At first currency bills were accepted, with gold and silver coins coming later.

The number of post offices in provincial and district capitals was subject to rather considerable fluctuations. For instance, in 1786 those offices whose postal collections didn’t cover their operating costs were ordered closed: “to enhance postal revenues and ensure that they don’t diminish, post offices must be established in such a way in the towns and the salaries of postmasters and postal workers calculated so that they may directly correspond only to a need or profit, and in such a way that they may support themselves with income from their own collections, and not burden the Treasury.” On the force of this decree 97 offices were closed and 65 offices were downgraded to postal dispatch offices, consisting of one clerk and a postillion. Among the latter offices, for instance, we find ones in Samara and Syzran’. Several years later it was decided to keep those offices where the postmasters had agreed to serve without pay – “to serve only for honor, to expect rewards with promotions to higher ranks and for the advantage of protecting his house against the burden of any civil obligation.” (5) By the beginning of the XIX century there were 458 postal facilities within the Postal Administration. (6)

Of all the roads where postal stations existed and where, consequently, relays for conveying travelers were maintained, few actually carried much

mail. New posts were established according to an existing need, both for government institutions and private correspondence. The volume of the latter was quite insignificant, and it was conducted almost exclusively between two or three dozen of the larger cities distinguished by their commerce and number of inhabitants. The following examples will graphically illustrate how seldom mail was sent even from the biggest cities in the Empire. Up to 1793 mail was dispatched but twice weekly on the various routes from Moscow to St. Petersburg, Smolensk, Byelgorod, Voronezh, Astrakhan', Siberia and Arkhangel'sk, and to other cities the frequency was only once weekly. At the beginning of the following century the St. Petersburg GPO dispatched mail on 8 posts: 5 bi-weekly, 2 weekly, and 1 bi-monthly. On the post road to Moscow at the end of the XVIII century, 4 light and 4 heavy posts left each week. (7) The major portion of correspondence was of an official nature, not only in district seats but in many provincial capitals as well. The immense and sparsely populated areas of the outlying districts were completely devoid of postal communications.



A 5-ruble note (assignatsiya) of Catherine the Great's time.

It reads, "The Paper Currency Bank shall pay five rubles in current coinage to the bearer of this State note – 1792" (From "Illyustrirovannaya Istoriya Ekateriny II", by A.G Brueckner, vol. 3, insert between pp. 632 and 633.)

All of this serves as evidence of the country's characteristic features which we noted earlier: the predominance of a rural population, the overwhelming majority of which carried on no correspondence whatsoever; the feeble development of urban life; the concentration of economic life in a small number of commercial centers; the low level of the populace's cultural development, and so on.

Such then was the general role played by the Post on the threshold of the XIX century, as one of the elements of culture.

# **PART 1**

## **The Post in the first half of the XIX century**

### **Administrative structure**

The set-up of the postal administration according to the Organizational Tables of 1799. Changes in the Main Postal Administration at the beginning of the XIX century. Shortcomings of the administrative structure in 1799. A study of postal affairs abroad. The 1830 reforms.

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## **Postal revenues**

The change in weight-rate charges. Establishment of a single postal rate. Introduction of "stamped envelopes". Insurance fees. Increase in weight and insurance-rate collections.

# PART ONE

## THE POST IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE CENTURY

### THE ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE

In the second half of the XVIII century, for the most part in the last quarter thereof, a general administrative organization of postal establishments gradually took shape. The highest administration of these offices, which had formerly fallen upon the Collegium of Foreign Affairs (Kollegiya inostrannykh dyel), shifted to the “Main Postal Affairs Board” (Glavnoe Pochtovykh Dyel Pravlenie) in 1782. Several of the principal GPO’s (St. Petersburg, Moscow, Malorossiisk and the Ol’viopol’ border office), under whose direction the provincial GPO’s and post offices were placed, became the second administrative level. Finally, the smaller postal establishments, district offices, were subordinated to the provincial GPO’s.

This administrative organization got a more systematic character and consistency from the Provisional Regulations of 1799. At that time we find directorates (direktsii) placed under the management of six GPO’s (St. Petersburg, Moscow, Malorossiisk, Lithuanian, Tambov and Kazan’) and in 1800 a seventh, the Siberian. Each directorate administered the postal establishments belonging to several provinces. The distribution of the provinces by GPO directorates was as follows:

St. Petersburg GPO .....	8 provinces
Moscow GPO .....	12 provinces
Malorossiisk GPO .....	5 provinces, later 9
Lithuanian GPO .....	5 provinces, later 8
Tambov GPO .....	6 provinces, later 9
Kazan’ GPO .....	4 provinces
Siberian GPO .....	2 provinces, later 6

All posts were divided into five classes, or categories: 1) The Dubossary Border Office, 2) Provincial Border Offices and Port Offices, 3) ordinary Provincial Offices, 4) Border and Port Offices, and 5) City Offices. A special staffing was provided to city and district postal dispatch offices in those places where there was an insignificant amount of postal exchange, and also to the Field Pochtamts (main Post Offices). The limited operations permitted a restriction in the number of employees there

(similar to the postal branch offices that came later). The staff of a provincial office consisted of a postmaster, his assistant, an accountant, a non-commissioned officer, 12 postillions and 2 guards. The staff of a city was even smaller: a postmaster and his assistant, 6 postillions and one guard. Official pay scales were set without regard to the profitability of a given office. Thus, a provincial postmaster received 600 rubles annually; a city postmaster – 400 rubles; a postillion – 30 rubles. Postal stations were managed by postal supervisors, the number of which depended upon the importance of the road. On the main and “most notable” roads, each station was supposed to have 1-2 supervisors; on district roads – one supervisor for 2-3 stations. Postmen who transported the mail were located at the stations.

Further changes which occurred in the Main Postal Affairs Board at the beginning of the XIX century were closely connected with the plan to reorganize the main administrative apparatus. When the Ministry of Internal Affairs was formed in 1802, the Main Postal Affairs Board was “placed under the direct supervision of the Minister.” Actually it was not attached to the Ministry until 1806. In 1811, it became the Postal Department of that Ministry, and the President of the Main Postal Affairs Board was made the Department Director. In 1819, the Postal Department was again taken from the Ministry, and placed under the authority of the Minister of Spiritual Affairs and Public Education, Prince A. Golitsin, to whom was given the title “Chief Commander of the Postal Department”. (9)

All of the above changes affected only the top echelons of the administrative apparatus. Neither the staffs nor the general character of the administrative structure of the postal establishments, created by the reform of 1799 and continuing unchanged over the course of 30 years, were disturbed. In the meantime, practice showed that this system failed to meet the demands confronting it. Its weakest link was the combination of two different tasks in the *pochtamts* – that of conducting [day-to-day] postal operations and that of serving as administrative overseer for the management boards. Owing to the spirit of strict centralization which reigned in all spheres of government, the *pochtamts* would undertake nothing without notification and approval from a higher level. Thus they formed an unnecessary and completely useless administrative level. At the same time, there was no management board supervision over the postal establishments. Postal directors could not be removed without special authorization, and they would send officials “in the lesser ranks” on inspections. No special funds were allocated to reimburse them for travel

expenses, and the postal directors had to appropriate money for these officials from their own pockets, on a wretched salary. In the majority of cases the post office chiefs were of higher rank than those inspecting them. The latter had not only no authority, but were often tempted by the opportunity to ease their financial difficulties. (10)

The new Postal Department reform was very broadly conceived and applied not only to the administrative apparatus but to the technical aspect of postal operations as well. Special officials were sent to England and Prussia to gather information on the state of postal affairs abroad. In 1827 the postmaster Giezerud, assigned to the Kingdom of Bavaria, presented a report on the postal situation in the German Possessions, France, Italy and other countries. The postal organizations in Russia's newly acquired areas were also scrutinized, especially in Poland. A special committee was formed to analyze and study all of the information gathered. (11)

In 1830 an administrative reform was carried out and new regulations established, with other innovations in postal operations and economy following in the next few years – the introduction of a city post patterned after those of London and Berlin, organizing communications using special carriages and carts (briki – half-covered conveyances for heavy mail – TR) and the organizing of a so-called “unrestricted” system of postal station maintenance.

Putting aside for the time being a discussion about these innovations that were influenced by western European postal organizations, we will limit ourselves here to an examination of the new administrative apparatus. The foundation of the reform was based upon the English postal system, which by its speed, economic results, organization and level of service to the populace was considered the best among the European states. The organization of the English Post was very simple and it operated on a bare minimum of the number of administrative elements needed to function. The highest organ of postal management was the London Post Office, the Director of which was also the manager of the country's entire postal apparatus. Directly subordinate to him were the postal inspectors, who headed the postal districts. Besides that, the various postal establishments subordinated to the districts also had [the privilege of] direct communication with the London Post Office. A salient feature of the English Post was that postmaster duties in small towns were carried out by private citizens who usually were shopkeepers or booksellers. In Prussia the administrative set-up was similar to that of the

English, and postal establishments there also belonged to districts under the supervision of postal inspectors.

The postal arrangement adopted in Russia was an exact copy of the English system, and a partial copy of the Prussian. All the post offices, with the exception of the St. Petersburg and Moscow GPO's, were stripped of their former administrative rights and turned into provincial post offices (gubernskiya pochtovyya kontory). The duty of Postal Department Director was combined with that of the St. Petersburg Post Office Director into one job. As before, the highest personage in management was the Postmaster General (glavnonachal'stvuyushchii), for whom a council (soviet) was formed. All postal establishments, with the exception of Moscow and St. Petersburg provinces, were divided up among 11 districts, at the head of each of which stood a Postal Inspector. The district postal units (uyezdnyya pochtovyya kontory) were placed under the supervision of provincial and territorial (oblast') PO's. These latter PO's, and also Border PO's plus those located in Moldavia, Wallachia and Constantinople, enjoyed direct communication with the Postal Department. This direct access of the provincial and territorial PO's to central postal management reduced the amount of [bureaucratic] correspondence and expedited administrative dealings.

In spite of the introduction of several new positions and an increase in the staffing of large offices, thanks to this curtailment in the number of administrative levels the overall reduction in the number of employees in the Department came to 3,1 73 officials and workers.

Abolishing the provincial pochtamts yielded a yearly savings of 235,000 rubles. The reform of 1830 introduced precise regulations for postal service and a uniform method of postal operation. New positions appeared – controllers, inspectors, sorters, receivers, mail carriers, mail clerks and bonded clerks – while at the same time others, old office titles which no longer applied to the methods of postal operations, disappeared – recorders, registering clerks and office clerks.

Subsequent changes in postal establishment administration took place in the second half of the century.

## PERSONNEL

The personnel structure of the postal establishments had several gradations, gradually descending from the highest levels of the Service. (12) At the topmost rung of this rank-and-position ladder stood the “Postmaster General of the Postal Department”, Prince A.N. Golitsyn from 1819 to 1842, and after him, Count V.F. Adlerberg from 1842-1857. The status of these high officials who reported personally to the Tsar was of course much greater than that of any of the other executives in the Postal Department. Until the 1830 reform, the next level down was the seven *pochtamt* Postal Directors, who each had, as we have seen, several provinces within the administrative purview [of their directorates]. After the 1830 reform their place was taken by the 11 District Postal Inspectors. The next two levels below were occupied by the provincial and municipal [district] postmasters. The forwarding agents of GPO’s came close to the postmasters in salary and position. Below them came the intermediate levels of postal ranks, gradually dropping down to the “lower office workers”. These were the recorders, translators, archivists, registering clerks and filing clerks. The reform of 1830 wiped out a number of positions and introduced new titles which more accurately reflected the administrative system change and a different method of postal operation. The staff of the central establishment (the Postal Department, which was divided into 5 sections) grew considerably.

The capital GPO’s were restructured on a somewhat different basis, but the ladder of rank and status underwent no abrupt changes. At its lowest rungs stood officials of the 12th to 14th classes, with salaries of 300-400 rubles per year. The lowest rank, the 14th, also encompassed stationmasters, to guard against their being physically abused.

Below these officials came non-commissioned officers, disabled veterans, guards, soldiers and postillions. They provided protection for postal facilities, accompanied the posts and relays, and served as unskilled labor around the various offices. Finally, there were the *yamshchiki*, who due to the nature of their work were closely connected with this postal army but not formally a part of it. Who made up this mass of officials [classified so elaborately] according to rank, salary and position? As far back as the 18th century the custom of naming retired officers as postmasters had taken root. Military ranks appear constantly in the decrees of that period—ensigns, lieutenants, cornets, second-majors and bayonet-cadets. The post office, which had no need of special titles, was a