VIA THE RED SKIES
The Development of Soviet Air Mail 1922–1945

G. Adolph Ackerman
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A potpourri of early Soviet air mail covers.
When I became interested in Russian air mail philately nearly twenty years ago, I found that not only were flown covers scarce but little information was available regarding the development of the Soviet air mail network. Since research has always been the cornerstone of my scholastic and professional life, it became a natural extension into my evolving hobby - both in the search of philatelic material and for reliable information about early Soviet air routes and inaugural flights. Speer’s⁵,⁶ and Hofmann’s² work in the Rossica Journal provided what seemed reasonable starting points for my early study and search for Russian air mail covers. Soon I began to exhibit my growing Soviet air mail collection at our national philatelic shows and was surprised that this area was not familiar either to the judges or the viewing philatelic community. Aeroflot became a world leader in civil aviation in the post-WWII era and had had a huge internal air network by the mid-1930s. Secrecy and the restriction of the flow of information isolated Russia and its air activities from the outside world during much of the 20th C. Thus, Russian aerophilately was basically an unknown and was generally considered of minimal importance. The Cold War and the general overall anti-Russian attitude in this country pervaded even the philatelic community. The importance and scarcity of individual exhibited covers was largely unrecognized or understood.

My interest centers on the pioneering period of Soviet air mail and aviation, e.g. 1922 to ~1940. The vast majority of flown covers in philatelic hands outside the Soviet Union have originated from Moscow, Leningrad and the major cities west of the Ural Mountains, e.g., the European or western sector of the Soviet Union. Air mail covers to/from towns/cities in Siberia, the Far East, the south and central Asian sectors and the Far North are seldom found and are highly prized by the specialized collector. Reasons proposed for this paucity of surviving covers for much of the U.S.S.R. include sparse regional and town populations, low literacy of inhabitants in the remote sectors of the U.S.S.R. and the fact that covers/letters were seldom saved until modern times.

In order to determine whether a given cover was flown to/from a given town/city it is necessary to know when the city/town became incorporated into the air network. Until air service became available, postal items marked air mail would have traveled by surface means to/from a town/city within the regional air network for subsequent air dispatch. Obviously, research into the development of the Soviet air network became critical in assessing individual air mail covers. Philatelic sources proved of minimal value in tracing the development of the Soviet air network expansion; non-philatelic sources were sought. The works of MacDonald⁴ and Davies¹ and a series of brief articles in the journal Economic Review of the Soviet Union during the late 1920s and early 1930s proved of immense value. The basic maps of Soviet air routes illustrated by Unshlikht and Eidemann⁷ and by Islentiev³ for the mid- to late 1930s also proved to be of considerable value in visualizing the overall view and extent of the Soviet air network. However, details regarding the opening of a given air route and the regularity of the early commercial flights were vague and often conflicting. Some reports stated that a proposed route would opened on a certain date/year but commonly this did not happen. Unfortunately, most reference sources,
both philatelic and non-philatelic, rarely provided bibliographic sources which would allow the reader to confirm the reliability of a given report or fact.

Information gathered allowed for my search for flown covers carried on each of these routes and from intercity stops along the way and the philatelic documentation of steps in the evolving Soviet air network between WWI and II.


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Worthington, Ohio
September, 2001

**Acknowledgements**

I wish to express my thanks and gratitude to Robert Taylor of Malibu, California for his extensive help during the preparation of this book. Bob has been a long time collector of Soviet air mail and has published a number of articles in this field. We have interacted over the years with the exchange of information and views regarding our collecting interest. Not only did he provide a number of examples of flown covers to augment this work but carefully reviewed each chapter for miscues and critical evaluation. It would have been impossible to have made a rounded presentation without the inclusion of some of his material. In addition, I would like to thank Peter Michalove for his translation of pertinent articles in the Russian philatelic literature and to R.E.G. Davies of the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum for past help and comments. The *Rossica Journal* of the Rossica Society for Russian Philately also is acknowledged since I have published several articles in their journal that formed the basis for portions of this book.
Introduction

*Via the Red Skies* is designed to provide a comprehensive study of the development of the Soviet civil air network and air mail service from its beginning in 1922 to World War II. Flown covers will illustrate routes and stages in the air network expansion from a regional standpoint with accompanying maps of the operative air routes. International air mail covers passing through Moscow (or Leningrad) to western Europe are the most common items found in the hands of collectors in the western world. While an attempt has been made to provide balance, the scarcity of postal material available from regions of the country east of the Ural Mountains, e.g., Siberia, the Far East, Central Asia and Far North, will be apparent. Postal rates, air cachets and etiquettes are discussed and illustrated but assume a secondary position in this historic philatelic presentation. More detailed information regarding rates, cachets and etiquettes can be found in the annotated references.

In a modern state, air transport was essential for the rapid communication with regional branches of governments and local communities in the far reaches of the vast territory of the Soviet Union. Thus, the building of an air network became a high priority for the Soviet government during the 1920s–1930s as it consolidated its power and began to emerge as a modern nation. The framework of the air network was basically formed in the western sector of the U.S.S.R. with Moscow serving as the major air hub. Additionally, regional a air service was established in the south-central Asian sector by the mid-1920s. Routes to the Far East, and Far North soon were in operation and connecting lines joined western Russia with the central Asia by 1930. Air transport was able to provide access not only to remote and isolated regions of the country but shortened mail and freight transport times provided by the rail and other surface means. Russia’s air network continued to expand and the volume of mail, freight and passengers rose rapidly. The territory covered by the Soviet air network soon dwarfed that of the continental United States reaching over 7,000 miles from its border with western Europe to the Pacific Ocean to the east. The air network stretches over 7 time zones between Moscow and Vladivostok. From north of the Arctic Circle, the Soviet air routes extended 2,500 miles to its southern borders with Persia, Afghanistan, Mongolia and China.

*Via the Red Skies* is organized from a regional–chronological standpoint; maps are included in each chapter to illustrate the regional operational air routes for the period. Each chapter is presented as a self-contained unit and a wide variety of flown covers have been included. It is hoped that this book will serve both the collector and postal historian as a basic reference source for their studies and collecting endeavors.
Overview of the main air routes in operation in the Soviet Union during the mid- to late-1930's.
Chapter 1
- Imperial Russia and Its Flying Machines -

In the Beginning: Russia had an early interest in flying. During the latter part of the 19th Century and early 20th Century, hot air and hydrogen-filled balloons and hand-held gliders were tested and flown by air enthusiasts. Crowds would come, watch and hopefully have a chance to participate in balloon and glider events. Reports of early hot air balloon flight date back to 1731 when Sulakadzev filled an animal hide with smoke and tied a rope around it with a loop in which he sat as the balloon drifted over a crowd of observers. Another early documented balloon flight was made in 1804 carrying Zakharov and Robertson aloft to study the upper atmosphere. Lomonosov of the Royal Academy of Science among his formidable studies made a working model of a helicopter in 1754. However, the lack of light-weight powerful engines and inept airplane designs impeded successful flights of heavier-than-air machines worldwide until the success of the Wright brothers in 1903.

The use of balloons as military observation vehicles became a reality for the Russian military during the first years of the 20th Century. A military balloon division was formed during the Russo-Japanese War (1904) using kite balloons of elongated design with attached observation platforms. In fact, the use of balloons by the Russian military had begun as early as 1902 (figure 1.1). Improved models were deployed during World War I to observe enemy battle lines.

Figure 1.1: Picture postcard showing a Russian military air station with a large balloon and soldiers. St. Petersburg to Paris, 1902.

Russia’s first experience with heavier-than-air powered flight occurred in 1884. Mozhaiski, a Russian naval officer, championed the concept and possibility of heavier-than-air flight (figure 1.2). Mozhaiski had a keen interest in aerodynamics and set about designing, financing and building a full-size man-carrying monoplane between 1882 and 1884. The airplane had a forty-foot wing span and was equipped with two lightweight steam engines to power its dual propellers. This large plane weighed nearly one ton (figure 1.2). In its first, and only, flight
attempt, the plane descended a ramp to gain speed and managed to traveled a few feet in the air. Its weight and inefficiency of its power supply prevented any possible success. Hang gliders and manned balloons continued to be the focus of Russia’s air enthusiasts.

Figure 1.2: a. A. F. Mozhaiski and his heavier-than-air craft below a supersonic TU-144 aircraft. 
   b. Mozhaiski’s airplane tested in Krasnoe Selo, 1882.

As the twentieth century began, N. Y. Zhukovski (figure 1.3), a professor of mechanics and mathematics at Moscow University, became interested in the theories of aerodynamics and manned flight. In 1902, Zhukovski designed and had built Russia’s first wind tunnel – one of the first in the world, – in the laboratory at the Moscow Higher Technical School (M.V.T.U./ Vysshey Teknicheskye Uchilishche). The wind tunnel construction and operation was supervised in 1909 by A. N. Tupolev, who in later years became an outstanding designer of Russian aircraft. In 1904, Zhukovski founded the first Institute of Aerodynamics in the world on the outskirts of Moscow. He continued to lecture on aerodynamics and the scientific aspects of aircraft design and his students became the first generation of Russian airmen and aircraft designers.

Figure 1.3: a. N. Y. Zhukovski, pioneer of aerodynamics with his wind tunnel. 

When World War I began, Zhukovski directed his attention to military aviation and established a school for training military pilots in the theories of aviation and aerodynamics. By 1915, several military aviation schools were in operation in western Russia. Zhukovski continued his research with his students and colleagues throughout the War and in 1918 founded the Central Institute of Aerodynamics (TsAGI - Tscentral’nyi Aerogidrodinamicheski Institut). Tupolev
headed the aviation section and graduates of the institute included many names that were to become important in Soviet aviation, e.g., Ilyushin, Yakovlev, Mikoyan and others. Zhukovski’s research regarding the basic theories of flight established him as a major figure in aviation and he is regarded as the “father of Russian aviation”.

The success of the Wright brothers flight in 1903 did not have an immediate effect in Russia or in Europe. However, an increased interest in powered flying machines finally emerged in 1907, although heavy, inefficient engines still provided a major stumbling-block for successful aircraft design and manned flight. Awaiting lighter, more efficient engines, many Russian air enthusiasts had concentrated on hand-held duel-wing gliders. By 1910, improved lighter-weight engines began to be developed in Europe and were purchased by Russian designers. Early aircraft of the Bleroit and Farman types were purchased from France, Germany and England and modified by Russian designers. Soon, Russia began making important strides in aircraft design incorporating their own modifications into foreign makes, as well as designing and building their own models.

Individuals interested in the adventure of flying and air-related activities began to form small flying groups or aero-clubs in western Russia and Ukraine. Few facilities were available during the early years. The young pilots were basically self-taught and flattened fields and pastures served as runways. Unlike France, Germany and Britain that had governmental and private financial support and cash prizes for air competitions, early Russian aviation pioneers supported their activities and purchase of aircraft with their own funds. Thus, young men and women attracted to flying tended to be well educated and financially independent. Gradually, the imperial government began to provide funds for aviation projects in isolated cases as the significance of airplanes and flying was gradually recognized.

Figure 1.4: Imperial Aero-Club of Russia of St. Petersburg official cover and enclosed letter dated 23 December 1910 to Paris with arrival postmark 9 January 1911; franking on reverse. Letter signed by Secretary General of the Imperial Aero-Club of Russia. Insert shows members of the 1911 Aero-Club standing before a Farman biplane.
Aero-Clubs, Early Aircraft, and Designers: In early 1908, the Imperial Aero-Club of Russia was formed in St. Petersburg. The tsar permitted the club to seek public funding for their activities because of the costs involved. An outstanding early cover and letter enclosure from the Imperial Aero-Club of Russia are shown (figure 1.4). Club members from 1911, along with a Farman biplane, also are illustrated; both men and women participated. Publicity, new models of planes, air shows and records in air speed, altitude and endurance attracted public attention particularly of the more affluent and educated. New aero-clubs began to spring up across western Russia. Two special photocards featuring low-flying Farman biplanes in 1910 at the All-Russian Air Festival provide examples of early Russian aviation (figure 1.5). Several aircraft models were displayed and flown during the two-week event. The planes were flown by Rudnev, Efimov and others. More than 150,000 spectators attended the festival. Earlier in March 1910, Efimov had made the first documented airplane flight by a Russian aviator in Russia. The All-Russian Aero-Club proposed the establishment of an airmail route for the Spring of 1912 between St. Petersburg, Tsarskoe Selo, Gatchina, Peterhof, and Kronstadt, but this service was never put in operation.

Figure 1.5: a. Postcard (left - top/bottom) shows a Farman biplane piloted by Rudnev. Card cancel of St. Petersburg - 23 October 1910 to Paris with arrival - 7 November 1910. b. Photocard (right) with two Farman biplanes flown by Rudnev and Efimov is canceled - 5 October 1910 to Paris. Airmen Efimov by his aircraft (top, right).

The basic Farman and Bleroit aircraft designs were used in Russia during the early years, e.g., the Farman machine was modified and named the Rossiya A, the Rossiya B and the Bleroit XI.
These early planes had a speed of ~45 miles per hour, flew well and were used for training of many young pilots. Such modifications were made by designers such as Hackel, a factory owner in 1910 and his first design has been considered the first important Russian airplane. Hackel’s biplane designs went through several changes and his third modification with a newer engine achieved a speed of almost 50 miles per hour. Other designers soon appeared including Sikorsky, Antonov, Grigorovich and Grizodubov and new aircraft evolved (figures 1.6, 1.7).

A few factories and workshops began to appear in Moscow and St. Petersburg, the largest was the Duxs factory which produced modified versions of the Farman biplane, the Dux-Farman. This plane had a crew of two and had a speed of seventy miles per hour. The French Gnöme Rhône factory was soon constructed in Moscow to build airplane engines. All factories were privately owned. Aviation schools, including those of the military at Sevastopol and Gatchina near St. Petersburg, had their own assembly and repair shops.

Sikorsky began to design fixed-wing biplanes in Kiev in 1910 after several unsuccessful attempts with helicopters. Each of Sikorsky’s new airplane models showed improvements in speed and distance. The S.6 model was flown in 1912 achieving a speed of seventy miles per hour. Grizodubov’s biplane of 1911 was based on successful French designs. Seaplanes were of
particular interest to Grizodubov. Sikorsky continued his remarkable aircraft designs directed toward the development of large multipassenger airplanes. His giant Ilya Muromets emerged in 1914–1915 with considerable success. It was unmatched in size for several years and had a marked effect upon aircraft design in Germany. During World War I, this plane proved to be a most successful bomber and changed the rank-and-file military commanders’ opinion regarding the significance of aircraft during war. However, Russia had fewer good aircraft designers and aircraft factories than Germany, France, and Britain. Also, Russia’s knowledge of the practical aspects of aviation was less than that of aviators and designers of western Europe. These differences would prove significant during the conflicts of World War I.

On the eve of World War I, the Russian naval aviator Nagurskiy and his mechanic Kuznetsoy made the first successful airplane flights in the Arctic during the late summer of 1914 (figure 1.8). Nagurskiy was assigned to participate in the naval search mission for the missing Arctic explorers Sedov, Brusilov and Rusanov. Five separate reconnaissance missions were flown over the Barents Sea between Novaya Zemlya and Franz Josef Land in a French-made Farman biplane outfitted with skis. Nagurskiy originally chose a Grigorovich M-5 seaplane for the mission but was overruled by naval authorities who favored the Farman. Although the explorers were not sighted, these pioneer flights proved to the world the feasibility of Arctic aviation. At the same time, as part of the 1910-15 naval expedition charting the Northern Sea Route, a Farman aircraft, a pilot and mechanic were placed aboard ship. Aleksandrov and his mechanic Firdarov assembled their aircraft on the Chukotka beach above the Arctic Circle during the summer of 1914. A short flight was made but structural damage to the aircraft prevented further flights and the airplane was abandoned.

![Figure 1.8: Commemorative cachet honoring Nagurskiy and Kuznetsoy’s pioneering flights in the Arctic in 1914.](image)


**Early Aviation and the Public:** Public interest in aviation and flying increased during the next several years. Aero-clubs expanded and curious and enthusiastic crowds watched local air demonstrations as fliers showed off their aircraft and flying prowess. Aeronautic exhibitions began to be held in Moscow in 1912 featuring new airplanes and flying events. Such events attracted new men and women to join the emerging air revolution as active participants, some
becoming pilots and mechanics others aircraft designers and fund raisers. A postcard requesting public donations for funds for military airplane design for the year 1912 is shown (figure 1.9).

![Image of postcard](image1.png)

**Figure 1.9:** Postcard with printed insignia of the Imperial Russian Air Club on front with text below reading “Issued by Committee receipt for donations to build Russia’s Air Fleet” (left). Sikorsky biplane with text below “Russian biplane designer I. I. Sikorsky first call-up military competition 1912” (right).

![Image of postcards](image2.png)

**Figure 1.10:** a. Postcard (top) showing a Farman biplane flying above a countryside lake. Kislovodsk - 28 January 1911 to Roslavl.
b. Postcard (bottom) showing a Bleriot monoplane (left) and Farman biplane (right) flying over sea coast. Alupka - 28 November 1912 to Kazan arrival 4 December 1912.
The evolution of air enthusiasm and the potential role of aviation in an evolving, modernizing Russia during the early years of the twentieth century can be traced on a variety of postcards. Pictorial themes were varied from the depiction of airplanes flying over the countryside (figure 1.10), to fantasized illustrations of men and women flying artistically designed airplanes (figure 1.11). Humorous cards with air themes also were printed and as the War began air themes shifted to views of military aircraft and aerial combat (figure 1.11).

Figure 1.11: Postcards with air-related themes issued prior to and during World War I.

a. “Merry Christ Christmas” shows elves dropping presents from Farman biplane (c. 1911) equipped with skis.

b. Lady flying plane. Petrograd - 2 January 1917 with imperial 5 kopeck stamp.

c. Comic air theme postcard printed in Moscow 1916. Text: “Please can an airplane transport a live elephant?

   – Alive? – Maybe, in equal parts”.

d. Red Cross card shows air engagement during World War I. Moscow cancel. Text dated 1 April 1916.

The Clouds of War: With the change in the political climate in Europe, Russia began to prepare for an eventual conflict. Many people thought that aircraft would play an important role for the military functioning in observation and reconnaissance missions. Machine guns were ordered to equip military planes that were produced in Russian factories. The military war machine was soon complimented with the purchase of a variety of military aircraft from foreign sources, a practice that was to continue throughout the upcoming war. Increased numbers of pilots were trained, but their experience in reconnaissance of military actions was inadequate. By the summer of 1914, the military air service still had relatively few aircraft in service and many were inadequately equipped as war began that year. However, the number of Russian military planes was basically equivalent with those of Germany. Approximately 250 aircraft were organized
into thirty-nine squadrons and manned by more than 130 trained pilots and 100 observers.6, 10 Many airplanes proved obsolete or barely adequate for service on the fighting front as became evident during the first months of the conflict.

Military pilot training schools sprouted up during the war in order to keep pace with the increased need for personnel on the front lines. Zhoukovski, as indicated earlier, was involved in establishing several of these schools and teaching aerodynamics to trainees. A postal card from the Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich Sevastopol Higher Aviation School is shown (figure 1.12).

Figure 1.12: a. Violet double circle free frank of the Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich Sevastopol Higher School of Aviation (top).

Card sent from Sevastopol - 9 September 1916 to Moscow.

b. Violet double circle with central imperial eagle free frank of the Command of the Fifth Aviation motor pool (bottom, left).

Card sent to Kvasts-Koosa, Estonia via Yur’ve (Tartu), Liftyand Guberniya, Estonia. Inscription date 31 July 1917 with arrival date 5 August 1917.

c. Picture postcard (bottom, right) shows a military air squadron. Text indicates an aviation detachment from the theater of war; printed in Moscow, no date.

The number of factories either building or assembling aircraft, engines and propellers increased from ten in 1914 to nineteen by wars end.5 Although productivity increased during the first years of the war, the numbers produced proved grossly inadequate and shoddy workmanship caused problems. The names and locations of these factories are listed by Nowarra and Duval.10 Most planes built within Russia were of foreign design, e.g., Farman biplanes, Nieuports, Spads
and Moranes. However, new Russian models were built and tested throughout the war with variable success. Aircraft design and airmenship while moving forward could not keep pace with those of its Allies or with those of Germany. A continued import of allied aircraft was required to maintain Russia’s air capability.\textsuperscript{10}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.13.png}
\caption{a. Postcard from the Real Army to the Fourth Aeronautical Balloon Company No. 126 - 30 November 1914 (arrow) with Berdichev arrival - 8 December 1914.\newline b. Postcard with blue fieldpost cachet of the Fifth Corps Aviation Detachment to Petrograd with oval railroad (Vokzel) postmark dated 12 September 1915.}
\end{figure}

Various air squadrons were attached to armies along the front lines. A postcard from an airman attached to the Command of the Fifth Aviation stationed in Estonia in 1917 shows the official imperial Fifth Air Command motorpool handstamp (figure 1.12). Postcards to the 4th Aeronautical Balloon Company and from the Fifth Corps Aviation Detachment also are illustrated (figure 1.13). Listing of imperial air squadrons and their aviation handstamp marking has been briefly reported.\textsuperscript{3, 7, 10} Military pilots occasionally carried soldiers’ letters along with military documents from the front lines, but such mail air transport was of an unofficial nature.\textsuperscript{11} In late 1915 and early 1916, on the initiative of pilots Kurtyan and Orlov, Russian emergency air units and divisions were created to maintain communication with the Russian airplane factories in Odessa (“Anatra”), in Petrograd (“Russian Baltic”) and Moscow (“Duks”).\textsuperscript{14} Postal items carried on these flights were stamped with a violet handstamp “FOR PACKETS” (ДЛЯ ПАКЕТОВ).\textsuperscript{14} Only three such items have been reported in the philatelic literature\textsuperscript{14}: 1) the Aviation Unit of the Guard Corp sending from L’vov to Odessa (arrival 27 August 1915; 2) the VIIth Aviation Division (from Seventh Army located west of St. Petersburg) sending to St. Petersburg (arrival 23 July 1916); and 3) the sending from Karks to Slyudanka Station of the Trans-Baikal Station.

French military air personnel were actively involved in the military training of Russian airmen during World War I. Mail from two of these individuals attached to the Imperial VII Aviation Division Regimental in St. Petersburg in 1916 feature the regimental free-frank handstamp (figure
Initially, military leaders had little regard for airplanes in their observational tactical maneuvers. However, the success of *Ilya Muromets* bombers employed in a single formation strike-force under the direction of Shidlovskiy changed their opinions. These aircraft were able to penetrate up to 150 miles behind enemy lines, targeting rail lines, troop concentrations, and other military installations. Grigorovich continued developing his flying-boats and his *M.9* produced in 1916 proved most successful and was flown by naval airmen in the Baltic and Black Sea regions where they destroyed many German aircraft and bombed enemy lines.

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b. Double circle violet Imperial VII Aviation Battalion Regimental Dispatch handstamp on postcard. Squadron based outside Petrograd. Sent by French flier attached to Imperial Air Force - 23 July 1916 to France. Building is the Metropole Hotel in Moscow.


d/e. Handstamps for French Aviation Militarie (top) and Imperial VII Aviation Division.
Russia's air strength slowly increased with ninety-one army and 15 naval air squadrons and over seven hundred planes. But these numbers were inadequate due to high casualties in personnel and inadequate maintenance of the aircraft. By early 1917, the Imperial Air Service had about one thousand aircraft but a large portion of these were obsolete or inoperable. Aerial combat began in 1916 and fighter squadrons emerged and complemented tactical ground actions. The superior capabilities of the German airmen and planes took its toll on the Imperial Air Force. New airplanes imported from France, England and the United States, e.g., Sopwiths, Spads, Nieuports, complemented Russian built planes as the end of the war nearer.

Aerial combat began in 1916 and fighter squadrons emerged and complemented tactical ground actions. The superior capabilities of the German airmen and planes took its toll on the Imperial Air Force. New airplanes imported from France, England and the United States, e.g., Sopwiths, Spads, Nieuports, complemented Russian built planes as the end of the war nearer.

Figure 1.15: Military mail/flight document dated - 1 October 1918 from Kiev Flight Station.


Document provides flight date plus amount of post (1 kg.) carried on flight - Kiev/Proskurov (Ukraine)/Lemberg. This signed document accompanied the posted mail and was returned to Kiev Station on the next flight as inscribed (top, right).

As indicated, the transport of official mail by Russian airmen between their command bases and the front line took place but has received little recognition and surviving documents are few. Better known are the foreign military flights carrying mail and official documents of the Austrian military-civil air service that flew over occupied Russian territory during the summer of 1918. This service had connected Vienna to Lemberg and was extended to its most eastern military outpost in Kiev in July 1918. The Kiev connection via Proskurov (Ukraine) to Lemberg was
operational for about 3 months before closing near the end of the War (figure 1.15). This air link into Russia had only limited usage and existing documents carried on the Kiev link are quite scarce. While not Russian mail per se, some philatelists consider this air route and flown documents as part of Russia’s air history.

During World War I, many propaganda picture postcards showed scenes of air combat and aircraft in military action (figure 1.11, 1.12). One can imagine that the Russian people looked excitedly to the skies watching the planes flying overhead to destinations on the front lines.

**Stamps and Labels Related to Aviation and the War Effort:** The first Russian “stamp” depicting an airplane was issued for the 1913 Stryetenskaya Fair in Kiev (figure 1.16). The decorative design features an early automobile with passengers and a biplane overhead. These stamps were issued in several colors and it is assumed they were issued to publicize the fair.¹

As World War I opened, public funds were needed to finance the war effort. In 1914, the St. Petersburg Committee issued a war charity stamp with a 10 kopeck value for “Soldiers and their Families” (figure 1.16). The purchase of the stamps was voluntary and they could be affixed to mailed envelopes as decorations and to further promote the war charity.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 1.16.** a. Kiev’s Stryetenskaya Fair issue (1913) has an automobile, passengers and a Farman biplane above. No denomination. Stamps printed on white paper in light orange, light/dark blue, yellow-pink and purple-brown.

b. War charity stamp issued by St. Petersburg Committee (1914). Inscribed: “Soldiers and their Families” plus initials for St. Petersburg Committee (top) and 10 kopeck denomination.


d. War loan label issued by Ministry of Finance shows monoplane with pilot and gunner flying over land. Inscribed “Invest in 5 1/2% War Loan”. Printed on white paper in multicolors - dark gray-green, blue with red and black lettering. Perforated, clear gum. At least ten paper shade exist - e.g., white, rose, pink and blue-green.

In early 1915, imperial Ministry of Finance aggressively sought the purchase of war bonds by the public.¹,¹³ Using a variety of means, including posters of various scenes from the front lines and activities involving the war effort, the people were cajoled into buying the 5 1/2 percent interest bonds. Part of the publicizing included printing of war charity stamps for the bonds. A great many varieties were issued but only one was related to aviation (figure 1.16).¹³ Copied
from a poster, this stamp showed a two-seat monoplane with a gunner and an inscription “Invest in 5 1/2% War Loan”. These stamps were multicolored and printed on a variety of shades of colored paper.\(^1\) In the latter stages of the war, the Estonia Committee of Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna issued a stamp-label featuring a Bleriot airplane flying above a city for its “War Loan of Fellin” (figure 1.16).

![Figure 1.17: a. War charity label for Samara (1916) shows soldier with rifle and airplane in background. Imperforate, black, gray and olive green on white paper, no denomination or gum. b - d. War charity labels issued as receipts for donation to the fund for wounded Russian aviators during World War I. Inscribed “For Injured Aviators”. Imperforate, no denominations or gum. b. Bleriot aircraft (c. 1911); black on tan paper. c. Farman aircraft (c. 1911); green, red, blue and yellow inscription; d. Anchor and crossed swords, black and gray-blue on tan paper. Two varieties - one with gold swords, the other missing the gold color.]

![Figure 1.18: a. Red Cross postcard, 20 kopeck value, 500,000 printed in Kiev (1916) features nurse and doctor, four outlined soldiers ascending hill and monoplane overhead. Red, black on tan cardboard. Insert stamps: Multicolored stamp - black, blue, red and yellow-brown on white paper (left) of similar design issued as 10 and 20 kopeck values, coarse perforations. Inscribed - “Our Fate” + “Our Hope”. Stamps of similar design (right) and values; imperforate, black/red on tan carton paper, no gum.]

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Other war charity stamps featuring airplanes appeared during the war. Samara issued a charity label in 1916 featuring a soldier with rifle and an airplane flying overhead in background (figure 1.17). Funds for wounded airmen were also sought by public purchase of charity labels, two depicted aircraft (one a monoplane, the other a biplane). Both incorporated the slogan “For Injured Aviators” (figure 1.17). Another featured a large anchor and identical slogan (figure 1.17). Red Cross stamps and a single postcard were issued in 1916 to obtain financial support for the war wounded. These items featured a military doctor and nurse in the foreground with soldiers climbing a hill and an airplane overhead and the slogan “Our Fate” / “Our Hope” (figure 1.18).

The Fall of the Empire and Aviation in Russia: The deposition of Tsar in February 1917 and establishment of a weak Provisional Government affected the economy and military production resulting in a loss of morale and discipline in the war effort and military. The subsequent take-over of the Bolsheviks a few months later had devastating effects on the military and Russian aviation. Military leaders were removed and over two-thirds of ‘elitist’ military pilots left to return home or join other Allied services. Supply and service work on aircraft ceased and with the advance of the German forces, many aircraft fell into enemy hands. The new government attempted to reorganize military aviation through committee control (People’s Commissariat) from Petrograd and Moscow and formed the All-Russian Collegium for the Administration of the Air Fleet with representatives from military aviation, aircraft factories and trade unions. This group was charged with getting the aircraft factories back in order and functioning. An All-Russian Aviation Board was soon created in December 1917 to take over these responsibilities and form new air squadrons with new unskilled pilots and ground crews.

Spanning the imperial and new Soviet eras was the organization and meeting of a special aviation congress. Originally proposed in early 1917, the Congress was held in February 1918 and resulted in the establishment of a new Aviation Academy in Moscow. The committee organizers used special free-franking handstamps shown on the illustrated postcard sent from Moscow to Petrograd in July 1917 (figure 1.19). The Collegium was replaced in May 1918 by the Main Directorate of Workers and Peasants of the Red Army (Glavvozdykhoflot) which was to unite all air units in defense stance.

The first recognized air mail in Russia took place on 29 March 1918 from Komendantskii Airfield in Petrograd to Moscow (figure 1.20). Permission was granted for sending letters through the Naval Aviation Directorate. Four planes were dispatched each carrying sacks of letters (360 pounds per plane). This event demonstrated the feasibility and expediency of an air mail service. Only one cover known to have been carried on this flight has been reported. It had no real identifying postal marking. The cover was franked with a 35 kopeck stamp canceled with a Moscow postmark; no Petrograd markings were on the cover nor was it marked air mail. In 1920 an effort was made to develop civil aviation. One temporary military air service extended from Smolensk to Moscow via Gzhatsk opened briefly on 16 March 1920 and transported mail and officials. On 13 January 1921 a military air service route was opened between Kharkov and Sevastopol via Kiev and Ekaterinoslav and two weeks later was extended to Moscow. Only 15
Figure 1.19: Postcard with free franking of the “Organizing Committee for the Russian Aviation Congress”.

Violet double circle franking has emblem of the State of Moscovy and Russian Empire with text - “Organizational Committee of the All-Russian Aviation Congress”.

Moscow cancel (faint) - 13 July 1917 to Petrograd - no arrival pmk.

From Leonid Kalinin, member of the Aviation Congress Committee, to his father “Grigori V. Kalinin, Murmansk Railway Administration Warehouse, Petrograd”.

Congress held in February 1918 resulted in establishment of a new Aviation Academy in Moscow.

Figure 1.20: Short term military routes known to have carried mail (1918-21):

1) Petrograd/Moscow (1918).

2) Smolensk/Gzhatsk/Moscow (1920).

3) Kharkov/Kiev/Ekaterinoslav/Sevastopol (1921) and extended to Moscow.

4) Kharkov/Kursk/Orel and Orel/Tula/Moscow (1921).