THE EMPEROR’S MAIL

This exhibit demonstrates how Imperial Russia's postal system handled the mail for the extended Imperial family (and some of its servants), and gradually expanded its service to members of the Imperial Court and Cabinet, a few ministers and foreign diplomats. It also includes examples of mail to and from the private offices of Imperial family members, which mail was handled through normal postal channels due to the large-scale correspondence they conducted (such as petitions and requests for charity from the people).

This extension of service to levels well below the tsars and their extended families was due in part to the rapid industrialization, expanding foreign trade and literacy in 19th-century Russia, which led to dramatic increases in the volume of mail. To keep up, the postal bureaucracy was forced to expand, become less involved with Imperial-family or government correspondence (as a percentage of its total operations) and ever more concerned with moving and delivering the growing piles of private and commercial mail. That part of the Post which dealt with Imperial mail gradually grew less exclusive and more inclusive, especially during WWI, when even Allied military attachés could use it. The evolution of this special service can be seen in its postmarks, going from an office at the top rung of the postal bureaucracy to a mere section within it, one of many.

Throughout its existence, it was referred to generically as the “special office,” regardless of its specific name at the moment. All seven of the known postmark types of the Postal Director's Office / Imperial Mail Delivery Section / Government and Diplomatic Mail Delivery Section from the latter half of the 19th century to 1917 are represented here. Although the Tsar was deposed in the February 1917 Revolution, the new Provisional Government continued to use this special postal service, changing only its name and some of its clientele.

Outline of the exhibit:

I. Imperial Mail in the First Half of the XIX Century.
II. The “Special Office” and Its Postmarks.
   A. The Postal Directors Office.
   B. The Imperial Mail Delivery Section (including Imperial mail it did not handle).
   C. The Government and Diplomatic Mail Delivery Sections (Kerensky’s Provisional Government, Petrograd).

Major postal reforms were introduced in 1830 during the reign of Nicholas I (1825-1856), but correspondence to and handling of imperial mail was handled in the same fashion as mail from him, i.e. through the St. Petersburg Main Post Office Chief, who was also the Postal Department Director. Mail addressed to the Tsar's Own Chancellery was taken directly there from the St. Petersburg Main Post Office, usually by the Director himself. However, no special postmarks for such mail during this early period have been identified.

“To the Third Section of His Imperial Majesty’s Own Chancellery, to St. Petersburg,” posted on 15 September 1845. It probably contained a report to third Section chief Count A.F. Orlov from a police agent or government office. (The Third Section - created by Nicholas I in 1826 - was Russia's political police.)
I. Imperial Mail in the First Half of the XIX Century.

Mail to Other Chancelleries of the Imperial Family.

Some other members of the Imperial Family maintained their own offices and had their own secretaries. As with the Tsar's Own Chancellery, mail addressed to them was still delivered by the St. Petersburg Main Post Office Director.

A registered mourning letter from Frankfurt to Rostislav Rodionovich Rodionov, who served in Empress-Consort Alexandra Feodorovna's (Charlotte of Prussia's) Chancellery (red arrow) in St. Petersburg, posted on 11th September 1852 (N.S.). It transited the border town of Eisenach on the 15th and reached the capital on the 9th/21st. No special arrival mark.

II. The “Special Office” and Its Postmarks.

A. The Postal Director's Office.

(С.-Петербургъ Канцелярія.)

In or before 1864 (the exact year has not been determined), the Postal Director's Office began using a postmark on Imperial mail that clearly identified what it was, but not what it did. Called simply “the Office” on the postmark, it processed all of the Imperial Family's mail, whether incoming or outbound, foreign or domestic. The fact that the postmark identified the Director's office rather than the Director himself suggests that the delivery of Imperial mail had devolved downward, if only slightly. This postmark type lasted longer than any of its successors.

A registered mourning letter from Koenigsberg, it reached the Postal Director's Office on 5 July 1875 (Old Style, the Julian Calendar).

Type 1a double-circle postmark with three-line date, reading * St. Petersburg. / Office. *

Recorded range: 1864-1887.
II. The “Special Office” and Its Postmarks.
(Mail to the Ministry of the Tsar’s Court.)

The Postal Director’s Office also served as a forwarding agent for mail to the Emperor’s family when they traveled abroad. Here, the secretary in St. Petersburg of an Imperial family member sends a registered mourning cover to the Grand Duke Mikhail Mikhailovich in Langenschwalbach, Germany via the Postal Director’s Office on 19 July 1895. (Latest recorded for this type.)

Type 2, “St. Petersburg / Office of the Postal Director.” Recorded range: 1887–1895.

Type 1b double-circle postmark on reverse, 9 February 1880.

Type 1a

Type 1b has a wider spacing in the letters of the word “Kantselyariya” at bottom, there is no period after “Peterburg” and “S.Peterburg” begins and ends closer to the asterisks. (Discovery.)

Obverse.

Posted on 22 February 1880 (N.S.) From Berlin “To His Excellency the Court Minister of His Imperial Majesty’s Suite, Count Adlerberg, to be delivered into His Imperial Majesty’s own hands at St. Peterburg.” The 20 pfennigs in postage was insufficient by one kopeck at the exchange rate, so two kopecks were assessed for the postage due (double the postage due as a penalty).
II. The “Special Office” and Its Postmarks.
(Mail from the Imperial Family.)

Type 3, “St. Petersburg / Office of the Postal Director” cross-date postmark.
Recorded range: 1896-1901.


Type 4 * St. Petersburg * / Office of the Postal Director."
Recorded range: 1902-1907.

The circular postmark with straight-line date was introduced around 1902, but continued in use long after the new bridge-style date stamps were introduced in 1903 for use throughout the Empire. Its style mirrored that of some other St. Petersburg markings of the time, but compared to the date stamps used elsewhere in Russia, it was highly unusual.

Mailed from Struer-Thisted, Denmark on 15 February 1904 (N.S.) to Her Imperial Majesty Dagmar in St. Petersburg. Danish Princess Dagmar was the Empress Consort of Russia, married to Alexander III. She was the mother of Nicholas II.

A double-weight letter from Grand Duke Mikhail Aleksandrovich (the brother of Nicholas II) at Krasnoye Selo, St. Petersburg Province to Ferdinand Thormeyer in Carouge, Switzerland, posted on 12 May 1901. It went first to the Postal Director's Office (same day) and then to the Main Post Office's 5th Dispatch Office, which handled outbound foreign mail. (Latest recorded Type 3.)

Thormeyer had been the French tutor for Alexander III's children.

Ferdinand Thormeyer

On reverse.


On reverse.

Obverse.
II. The “Special Office” and Its Postmarks.

B. The Imperial Mail Delivery Section.

(Отделение доставки Высочайшей корреспонденции).

In 1908 the ‘Special’ Office was renamed and its postmark changed from simply stating what it was (“Postal Director’s Office”) to what it did: deliver Imperial mail. It was also downgraded from a director’s office to a mere section, showing that it was becoming less exclusive. Its function did not change, although from the philatelic record it would appear that foreign diplomats began using it in considerable numbers.

A PPC mailed at the printed matter rate of 2¢ from Grand Canyon, Arizona to Herbert S. Stewart in a suburb of London, arriving in early August 1909 (N.S.). The card was thereupon franked with a British one-penny stamp and forwarded to Grand Duke Aleksandr Mikhailovich in Peterhof, whom Stewart was apparently visiting. Since it was now addressed in care of royalty, the card was processed at the IMDS on 25 July 1909 (O.S.) and sent on to Peterhof, where it arrived the same day.

This is a report sent by registered mail from Kharbin, Manchuria on 25 May 1914 to the Minister of Internal Affairs in St. Petersburg. The Imperial Mail Delivery Section processed it on 4 June and delivered it to the Ministry the same day. 

(N. A. Maklakov (1871-1918), the recipient of this letter, was the Minister of Internal Affairs and Chief of Gendarmes under Nicholas II from February 1913 to June 1915. The Bolsheviks executed him in 1918.)
II. The “Special Office” and Its Postmarks. Mail to the Imperial Family Not Handled by the Special Office. (The Marinskiy Palace Petition Office.)

Not all mail addressed to the Emperor ever reached him. The tsars had a special office in the Marinskiy Palace to handle the hundreds of petitions that poured in every day, asking for financial help or favors. Mail such as this was not routed through the Postal Director’s Office. If the petitions were granted, the money was sent out through regular postal channels.

An Imperial Petition Office stationery envelope sent to a petty bourgeois woman in Moscow dated 23 February 1903, returned to St. Petersburg when the addressee could not be found.

II. Mail to the Imperial Family Not Handled By the Special Office. (Postal Form for Mail to the Emperor.)

Private mail to the Emperor poured in from all corners of the Empire, the great majority of it petition mail. It necessitated a postal waybill form specific to that kind of correspondence. This is a “Register of private mail addressed to HIS IMPERIAL MAJESTY,” produced by the S.P. Yakovlev printing office. No mention of the Postal Director’s Office. Only recorded example.
II. The “Special Office” and Its Postmarks.

(Foreign Diplomatic Representations.)

St. Petersburg had already been re-named Petrograd by September 1914, but the special office was slow to replace its postmark. However, the pressures of war and Russia’s need to provide its allies’ diplomats and military attaches with increased postal support resulted in a considerable expansion of the special office’s “clientele.”

The battleship H.M.S. Superb, 1910. (Photo accessed at www.battleships-cruisers.co.uk/bellerophon_class.htm.)

Anti-German sentiment at the beginning of WWI prompted the authorities to change the name of the capital from St. Petersburg to Petrograd. The IMDS postmark was eventually changed to reflect this, and was the last one used under the tsars. It disappeared by March 1917.

Type 6, “Petrograd / Imperial Mail / Delivery Section.”
Recorded range: 1914-1917.

“E.N. Bonetin, Esq, R.N., H.M.S. Superb, 1st Battle Squadron, c/o G.P.O. London, England.” This cover is highly unusual in that the IMDS date stamp was used once as a cancellation and once on the reverse as a dispatch marking.

Type 5, St. Petersburg hatch-marked “bridge” postmark on reverse. Late usage during the Petrograd period.

A registered letter from Moscow to the Minister of Internal Affairs in Petrograd, who at the time was A.D. Protopopov, another in a series of musical-chairs appointments to that post.

Minister of Internal Affairs A.D. Protopopov (1916-1917).
(Picture from Izmozik, Khzardamn Rossii, Moscow, 2002.)
II. The “Special Office” and Its Postmarks.

C. The Government and Diplomatic Mail Delivery Section.
(Kerensky’s Provisional Government, Petrograd.)
(Отделение доставки правительственной и дипломатической корреспонденции.)

With Nicholas II deposed in February 1917 (O.S.), the name of the institution that delivered mail at that level necessarily had to change. Gone was the “Imperial” and added was “Government and Diplomatic.” However, its essential functions, while expanded, remained the same.

Diplomatic mail delivery to embassies, consulates and military missions continued under the Kerensky regime. By this time, mere colonels and lieutenant colonels from foreign countries were enjoying this once-exclusive service. The British Embassy at Dvortsovaya Naberezhnaya in Petrograd received this envelope on 18 September 1917 from the GDMDS.

The Government and Diplomatic Mail Delivery Section was abolished when the Bolsheviks seized power in the October 1917 coup. No Soviet follow-on postmarks from the RSFSR period have been recorded.