

Soviet Clandestine Mail Surveillance, 1917-1941

Synopsis

"It is no accident that very shortly after the Bolshevik Party illegally seized power in a coup (not a revolution), it created an extralegal secret police to secure, expand, and perpetuate that power. The two were illicitly joined in what could properly be called a counterintelligence state, an enterprise perpetually in search of enemies, foreign and domestic."¹

Purposes of the postal history exhibit: As censorship – be it overt or covert – of correspondence is a form of counterintelligence, it was an integral part of the Soviet counterintelligence state. Based on material from official and semi-official Soviet sources, secret-police defector accounts, empirical evidence, comparative analysis and deductive reasoning, **this postal history exhibit seeks to accomplish four main tasks:**

1) Trace the evolution of clandestine mail surveillance (CMS) in the RSFSR/USSR from 1917 to the eve of the Nazi invasion in June 1941.² It will do this by showing the main forms of censorship that preceded it during the Imperial and Provisional Government eras, the Russian Civil War³ military censorship operation that was absorbed by the secret police and formed the foundation for the full-blown CMS operation that followed, and the “Golden Age” (1920-1940) of clandestine markings that resulted.

2) Present empirical evidence to buttress the claims the exhibit makes about the existence of a pervasive Soviet CMS operation.

3) For the first time in any exhibit, explain the reasoning (argumentation) behind the conclusions that various categories of date stamps or the “received in damaged condition” (RIDC) markings were in fact not postal in nature, but were employed in CMS by the secret police as true censor marks, flags for censorship or “fig leaves” to explain away the damage done to envelopes during opening or resealing. (This argumentation is necessary, as very little official documentation is available to confirm the claims made by this exhibit.) The approach is based upon the concept of “linkage” date stamps,⁴ amassing suspicious data points, e.g., inordinate delay, lack of postal utility, departures from the norm, etc., and imposing a logic chain on the problem.

4) Demonstrate the sweep of the Soviet CMS operation by showing an array of censorship-related, date-stamp types and the geographic range of their use, with reference to the administrative levels at which they were used.

¹ Dziak, John J. *Chekisty: A History of the KGB*, Lexington Books, 1987, xvi.

² Clandestine mail surveillance continued in an unbroken chain from 1918 up to the fall of the USSR. It did not disappear after Stalin’s death, and it continues to the present day in the Russian Federation.

³ The worst of the Russian Civil War lasted from 1918 to 1921, although there were isolated pockets of resistance that held out well into 1924.)

⁴ “Linkage” date stamps are defined as those where one odd feature on a date stamp – a letter or a symbol, for instance – that has been shown to be secret-police related is joined by yet another odd feature, thus calling into question the postal bona fides of the second odd feature.

Significance of the exhibit.

The number of recorded censor marks and manuscript notations used by the Russian Army, Navy and civilian authorities in World War I was somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000. **The identification here of well-known date-stamp categories as being secret-police related is a major discovery in Russian philately**, the rough equivalent of stumbling across one or two WWIs' worth of heretofore unrecognized censorship-related markings. Put in an American context, it would be much the same as discovering that the FBI for many years had secretly co-opted large numbers of U.S. postmarks to communicate the fact of covert censorship to other FBI entities, or to route mail to clandestine censorship offices. Given the recent revelations about U.S. covert intelligence-gathering operations against telephone networks, e-mail and other forms of communication by U.S. citizens, this topic is especially timely and relevant.

The steganographic date stamps and “fig leaves” demonstrate that the authorities conducted a massive counterintelligence war against its own people, foreign diplomats and tourists. A sobering realization from this array of newly exposed censor marks is that there are probably many more out there that remain to be identified.

Explanation of terms. Three terms unfamiliar to most are used throughout this exhibit: “perlustration,” “PK(s)” and “steganography/steganographic.”

- 1) **Perlustration** is defined as the clandestine (illegal) opening, reading and reporting of private and diplomatic correspondence.
- 2) **PK** is an abbreviation standing for *politicheskii kontrol'* (often shortened to *politkontrol'*), which can mean either the institution of political control in general (including censorship of books, plays, placards, radio broadcasts, newspapers, magazines, songs and so forth) or actual political monitoring offices. The latter were clandestine mail surveillance sites – essentially “black chambers” – located in or near major post offices in the capitals of its constituent republics, autonomous republics, *gubernii* (later becoming *oblasti* – roughly equivalent to U.S. states), *kraya* (territories) and at important railroad junctions, airports and ports. This surveillance also existed at Soviet embassies and consulates around the world, albeit with greatly reduced capability and staff, but no philatelic evidence of this aspect has been recorded.
- 3) **Steganography** is the science of hiding information in plain sight.

Structure and outline of the exhibit. The exhibit takes a modified chronological approach in order to trace the development of these censor marks masquerading as true postmarks. It is divided into three major periods: Imperial and Provisional Government, showing what the Soviets inherited in 1917 and the uses to which they put the censorship apparatus, followed by the Soviet period up to 1941.

The latter period consists of five sections, corresponding to each iteration of the secret police: Cheka, GPU, OGPU, GUGB/NKVD and NKGB, plus a closing page addressing the onset of war in the east, when CMS markings had essentially disappeared, and a section on date stamp anomalies and oddities that may eventually be confirmed as more clandestine censor marks.

These sections are in turn broken down into subsections, each one devoted to a specific type of censorship-related marking.

The censor-mark and RIDC subsections are further divided into an introduction for each, the reasoning behind its inclusion as a clandestine mail surveillance marking, its meaning or informed speculation about its meaning, and a geographic range, where possible. For the “three-triangles” date stamps, there is yet another subsection added because they were at first clandestine military censor marks but continued to be used after military censorship was formally abolished, thus changing their nature and becoming true secret-police censor marks.

This approach to the problem was chosen due to the mind-numbing complexity of the political police apparatus and its constantly changing structure, especially where the CMS operations were concerned. This results in an exhibit top-heavy in the 1920-1940 period, simply because that was the “Golden Age” of steganographic markings. In the NKVD/NKGB period (1934-1941), these markings were in decline and relatively little in the way of new date stamps was being introduced. The NKGB in its first iteration lasted only a few months in 1941, by which time almost all of the steganographic date stamps had disappeared, leaving very little but the RIDC markings, so it is the shortest of all the sections.

Detailed outline:

1. The Tsarist Contribution to Soviet Clandestine Mail Surveillance.

- 1.1. The “Black Chambers.”
- 1.2. The Foreign Newspaper-and-Magazine Censorship Offices.
- 1.3. The Central Foreign Censorship Committee (CFCC).
- 1.4. Military Censorship.

2. The Provisional Government Legacy and Soviet Clandestine Mail Surveillance.

- 2.1. Military Censorship.

3. Clandestine Mail Surveillance Under the Soviets.

- 3.1. The Overt Military Censorship Under the People’s Commissariat for Military Affairs.
- 3.2. The Cheka Period (20 December 1917 – 6 February 1922).

- 3.2.1. Military Control of Military Censorship.
- 3.2.2. Military Censorship In Association With the Cheka.
- 3.2.3. “Wildcat” Military Censorship During the Cheka Period.

3.3. Clandestine Military Censorship During the Cheka Period and the Dawn of Steganographic Date Stamps: The “Three-Triangles.”

- 3.3.1. The Case Against the “3-Triangles” As Legitimate Postmarks.
- 3.3.2. Geographic Range of the “Three-Triangles” Date Stamps. **(Note: In this and all succeeding “geographic range” sections, the progression starts with 1) the RSFSR’s European part and continues clockwise: 2) RSFSR (Siberian Part); 3)**

Central Asian Republics; 4) Caucasus Region; 5) Ukrainian SSR and the Crimean Peninsula; 6) Byelorussian SSR. This progression cannot be shown in its entirety in each and every instance, however. Some steganographic date stamps were confined to a few republics or even single cities.)

- 3.3.2.1. Geographic Range of the “Three-Triangles” Date Stamps. RSFSR (European Part).
- 3.3.2.2. Geographic Range of the “Three-Triangles” Date Stamps: RSFSR (Siberian Part).
- 3.3.2.3. Geographic Range of the “Three-Triangles” Date Stamps: Central Asian Region.
- 3.3.2.4. Geographic Range of the “Three-Triangles” Date Stamps: The Caucasus Region.
- 3.3.2.5. Geographic Range of the “Three-Triangles” Date Stamps: Ukraine. (Includes the Crimea, even though at the time it was a part of the RSFSR.)
- 3.3.2.6. Geographic Range of the “Three-Triangles” Date Stamps: Byelorussia.
- 3.3.2.7. Geographic Range of the “Three-Triangles” Date Stamps: Mobile Military Censorship Sections Attached to Field Post Establishments.

- 3.3.3. The End of Military Censorship During the Cheka Period.
- 3.3.4. Early Secret Police Clandestine Mail Surveillance During the Cheka Period.

3.4. The Main Political Directorate (GPU) Period (6 February 1922 – 15 November 1923).

- 3.4.1. The Secret Police Information-Gathering Apparatus. GPU Forces / Regular Police (*Militsiya*) / Ordinary Citizens / Communist Party Members.
- 3.4.2. Continuation of the “Three-Triangles” Date Stamps During the GPU Period.

3.5. Clandestine Mail Surveillance During the Combined State Political Directorate (OGPU) Period (15 November 1923 – 10 July 1934).

- 3.5.1. Phase-Out of the “Three-Triangles” Date Stamps During the OGPU Period.
- 3.5.2. Introduction of the *Izbitsa* Date Stamps.

- 3.5.2.1. The Case Against *Izbitsa* As a Legitimate Postmark.
- 3.5.2.2. Meaning of the *Izbitsas*.
- 3.5.2.3. Geographic Range of the *Izbitsa* Date Stamps.

3.5.3. Introduction of the *Zet* Date Stamps.

- 3.5.3.1. The Case Against *Zet* As a Legitimate Postmark.
- 3.5.3.2. Meaning of the *Zets*.
- 3.5.3.3. Geographic Range of the *Zet* Date Stamps.
- 3.5.3.4. Introduction of the “N” Class of Date Stamps.
- 3.5.3.5. The Case Against the “N” Class As Legitimate Postmarks.

3.5.4. Introduction of the “Three-Dots” Date Stamps.

- 3.5.4.1. Dotted Predecessors in the Imperial Period.
 - 3.5.4.2. The Case Against the “Three-Dots” Date Stamps As Legitimate Postmarks.
 - 3.5.4.3. Meaning of the “Three-Dots” Date Stamps.
 - 3.5.4.4. Geographic Range of the “Three-Dots” Date Stamps.
- 3.5.5. More “Dotted-Date-Stamp” Varieties: Introduction of the “2-,” “4-“ and 2+4-Dots.”
- 3.5.5.1. The Case Against the “2-,” “4-“ and “2+4-Dots” Date Stamps As Legitimate Postmarks.
 - 3.5.5.2. Meaning of the “2-,” “4-“ and “2+4-Dots” Date Stamps.
 - 3.5.5.3. Geographic Range of the “Four-Dots” Date Stamps.
 - 3.5.5.4. The “2+4-Dots” Date Stamps.
 - 3.5.5.5. Geographic Range of the “2+4-Dots” Date Stamps.
 - 3.5.5.6. The “Two-Dots” Date Stamps.
 - 3.5.5.7. Geographic Range of the “Two-Dots” Date Stamps.
- 3.5.6. The “Received In Damaged Condition” (RIDC) Markings.
- 3.5.6.1. The Case Against the “Received In Damaged Condition” Handstamps As Legitimate Postmarks.
 - 3.5.6.2. Geographic Range of the RIDCs.
- 3.6. Clandestine Mail Surveillance During the Main State Security Directorate (GUGB) Period (10 July 1934 – 3 February 1941).
- 3.6.1. Continuation of the *Izbitsa* Date Stamps.
 - 3.6.2. Continuation of the *Zet* Date Stamps.
 - 3.6.3. Continuation of the “Three-Dots” Date Stamps.
 - 3.6.4. Continuation of the “2-” and “2+4-Dots” Date Stamps.
 - 3.6.5. Continuation of the “Received In Damaged Condition” Markings.
 - 3.6.6. Introduction of New City-Specific Clandestine Censor Marks.
 - 3.6.6.1. The Leningrad International Dispatch Office Serial “b.”.
 - 3.6.6.2. The Odessa Serial “Zh” Clandestine Censor Marks.
 - 3.6.7. Introduction of the “*Izbitsa*/N-И” Class: RSFSR (European and Siberian Parts).
 - 3.6.8. Introduction of the Combination *Izbitsa*/*Zet* Date Stamps: RSFSR (European and Siberian Parts).
- 3.7. Clandestine Mail Surveillance During the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) Period (28 March 1938 – 3 February 1941).
- 3.7.1. Continuation of the *Izbitsa* Date Stamps.
 - 3.7.2. Continuation of the *Zet* Date Stamps.
 - 3.7.3. Continuation of the City-Specific Clandestine Censor Marks.
 - 3.7.4. Continuation of the “Received in Damaged Condition” Markings.

- 3.7.5. Introduction of the “Three-Lines” (3L) Date Stamps.
 - 3.7.5.1. The Case Against the “Three-Lines” Date Stamps As Legitimate Postmarks.
 - 3.7.5.2. Introduction of a New Type of “Three-Lines” (3L) Date Stamp.
 - 3.7.5.3. Introduction of a New “Doubled-Serial” Date Stamp.
- 3.7.6. The Return of Overt Mail Censorship During the NKVD Period: People’s Commissariat of Communications (NKS).
- 3.8. Clandestine Mail Surveillance During the First People’s Commissariat for State Security (NKGB) Period (3 February 1941 to 20 July 1941.)
 - 3.8.1. Continuation of the Moscow 8th Dispatch Office Doubled-Serial Date Stamps.
 - 3.8.2. Continuation of the *Zet* Date Stamps: Ukrainian SSR.
 - 3.8.3. Continuation of the “Received In Damaged Condition” Markings.
 - 3.8.4. Continuation of the City-Specific Censor Marks.
- 3.9. The “Great Patriotic War” and the Return of Overt Military Censorship.

4.0. Suspicious Features, Oddities and Anomalies.

- 4.1. The Ordzhonikidze “Three-Lines” Date Stamp.
- 4.2. Date Stamps with Combination Serial Letters.
- 4.3. Anomalies.

Difficulty of the subject. Prior to the fall of the Soviet Union, this field was primarily based on empirical evidence and deduction. Since that time there has been an explosion in the number of academic articles and monographs detailing CMS operations, structure, illegality and so forth, but those articles are almost all in Russian and none of them address the postal history aspect of the problem. There are also a few declassified accounts by defectors from the ‘50s and ‘60s, but the field remains difficult to pursue, especially now as the Putin government has again clamped down on Russian society and closed many of its archives.⁵ The project has involved extensive reading in academic literature, recording and compilation of information and examples from the Internet, other collections, philatelic works and auction catalogs. It has been 25 years in the building (1992-2017).

Background: Military censorship during WWI was quite open and known to everyone. It made absolutely no secret of its existence, as attested by the censor marks prominently displayed on mail. Under the Soviets, however, military censorship during the Russian Civil War was run for the most part on a conspiratorial basis, with the fact of military censorship itself classified as secret. With the exception of a few censorship handstamps like those from the Red Third Army in the Urals, the markings the military censors used were steganographic in nature, saying nothing at all about censorship, but the symbols on them denoted that very thing to the mail sorters and secret-police officials who had been initiated into their meaning. Political monitors (censors in the PKs) were often recruited from the ranks of military censors.

⁵ A trickle of official documentation is now escaping into the public domain from some of the former Soviet republics, notably Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine.

These PKs were established at the end of 1921 when military censorship was abolished and their staffs were wholly absorbed by the secret police. As their number increased, so too did their staffs. The people who were employed as secret censors eventually came to constitute a fair-sized army numbering in the tens of thousands, an army that struggled to cope with the ever-increasing volumes of mail after the Civil War.

This massive operation was in direct violation of the country's own constitution, which guaranteed the privacy of correspondence to its citizens, but it operated with the sanction and encouragement of the Communist Party leadership – the ultimate customer of the PKs' product.

After December 1921, the secret police were in complete control of the country's perustration operations. At various times, the secret police were called:

- VChK (“Cheka”) – 20 December 1917 to February 1922. Independent.
- GPU (Main Political Directorate) – February 1922 to July 1923. Subordinate to the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs).
- OGPU (Combined Main Political Directorate) – July 1923 to July 1934. Independent.
- GUGB (Main State Security Directorate) – July 1934 to February 1941. Subordinated again to the NKVD.
- NKGB (People's Commissariat for State Security) – February to July 1941. Independent.

In addition, the central authority within the secret police that controlled the PKs underwent a number of changes in name and hierarchical level. These are briefly addressed in the exhibit, but the information is very secondary to the main points.

What is not shown in the exhibit. Quite a lot, in fact! There are well over a dozen date stamps recorded thus far that are suspected of sinister intent, but for which an insufficient mass has been accumulated and too few data points have been established to be confident of their status. Given what we know today, there are probably even more out there. They are not included here unless they happen to share a cover with a known steganographic marking, or are right on the very edge of having enough data points compiled against them for “conviction” as CMS markings.

Mail was also surveilled by other entities, notably Customs and the philatelic control points, which were used either openly or as cover for the secret police, a “fig leaf” excuse to explain away the opening and discovery of forbidden contents, and to peruse packets, packages and envelopes coming or going abroad. These two aspects of Soviet mail surveillance are not addressed in this exhibit because they were relatively small sideline operations and were mostly overt in nature.

Condition difficulties. Much of the material in this exhibit had to survive a brutal Civil War, artificial famine, the Great Purge, the incredible destruction of WWII plus the usual vicissitudes that afflict what we collect, so the examples are not always pristine. This is especially true for the “three-triangles” material from the inflation period of the early 1920s. In addition, the quality of Soviet-made envelopes and postcards left much to be desired; they did not hold up well under mail sorting and delivery. A fair number of the covers shown here have had their postage stamps removed by collectors who were unconcerned about preserving postal history.

Highlights: The exhibit is noteworthy for its numerous examples of international mail between unusual points of origin and destinations, e.g., Durban, South Africa to Tomsk; Semirechensk to Auckland, NZ; Barnaul to The Netherlands; Buenos Aires to Taganrog; Chimkent to Czechoslovakia; Kokand to New York, Western Australia to Leningrad, and Yemen to Moscow. Rare types of mail bearing clandestine censor marks are also present, like a Marconigram from London to Moscow, wrapper mail from Japan to Leningrad and Iraqi Overland Mail to Tomsk. Inflation mail abounds in the “three-triangles” section, and there is correspondence to notables, too, such as Mary Pickford, Margaret Sanger’s son Grant, and Dr. Ralph Lutz. And of course, there are many unique to very rare clandestine censor marks, identified by red frames.

Production of the exhibit. This exhibit was produced with Photoshop Elements on PowerPoint slides, using Garamond 12-pitch font.

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