

Synopsis

Via the Red Skies The Russian Air Network – 1922-1941

The Soviet air mail covers presented herein provide the viewer with a tour-de-force of the early development of the Soviet civil air mail service (1922 – 1941). Many of the covers are extremely rare especially early flights on a given route and those from the more obscure routes in regions east of the Urals, e.g., Siberia, the Far East, the Far North and North-Central Asia. Nearly two decades of collecting has emphasized the scarcity here and abroad of much of the philatelic material needed to document this period of Soviet aviation and air mail history. The exhibit has won several grand awards and international golds.

The organization format is chronological and by air routes within regional sectors of the U.S.S.R. The covers selected are the result of intensive worldwide search and research and were chosen to document many of the air routes of the growing Soviet air network. A map of the U.S.S.R. on the introductory exhibit page illustrates the Soviet air network by ~1935. Page formatting states the significance of each cover and documents changes in postal rates and air etiquette. Larger exhibit pages have been employed to obviate the crowding found with larger European-style covers when presented on conventional exhibit pages.

Moscow, as the seat of government, provided the major air hub for the development of the Soviet air network and was the only air connection with the western world (Moscow–Königsberg–Berlin) during the 1920s. Covers flown during the first months of operation of this route and during the last months of the season when the first airmail stamp was issued are quite scarce. Postal rates are documented during the inflationary period 1922-1924. Other covers carried from Moscow on this international route during the next few years illustrate changes in postal rates, air mail postage, etiquette and various destinations.

Air communication routes gradually opened in the Ukraine and western Russia, international air mail was funneled through Moscow. Internal air mail during the first years also is sparse since rail was the conveyance of public choice as air offered little advantage in speed over short distances. A second route from Leningrad to western Europe became operational by the end of the 1920s; it also became connected with Moscow and through Moscow with other parts of the Soviet Union.

The Trans-Siberian air route from Moscow east to Irkutsk was opened in 1928/29 and was finally completed to Vladivostok in 1933. Air links to/from Europe and western Russia to China/Japan became available with the Moscow–Irkutsk line and extended rail lines. In 1926, a short air line was opened between Verkhneudinsk (near Irkutsk) and the border state of Mongolia. Episodic air connections also evolved slowly in the Siberian Far North in the early 1930s and joined with towns along the Trans-Siberian air/rail lines in the growing air network. Also, in the mid-1920s, an isolated air net service was opened in the remote South-Central Asian sector but air connections with western Russia were not established until 1930. Few flown covers to/from these remote and sparsely populated frontier regions posted during the first years air service have survived. Such covers form a significant portion of this exhibit with some equating with the rarest air covers of the world.

Sectors and routes in this exhibit have been divided as follows: Pre-Soviet Aviation Period; Moscow–Königsberg and Western Europe; Moscow–Leningrad and Vicinity; Ukraine and Southwestern U.S.S.R.; East of the Urals - West and Central Siberia; Central Siberia and Far East; Far North - Northern Siberia; South-Central Asia and Special Flights. Extraordinary covers are shown in each section.

** Philatelic references regarding Soviet air mail and the development of the Soviet air mail service are meager. My book *Via the Red Skies* is the only comprehensive study of the Soviet air network between 1922 and 1945; it is profusely illustrated with flown covers (copy available in APS library). It is strongly recommended to anyone interested in this area of aerophilately. In addition, I have published a number of articles on the subject published in the *Rossica Journal*, *Post Rider* and *Airpost Journal*. A selected reference list accompanies this synopsis.