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The Russian Post Offices

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Introduction

Russian postal service with Egypt followed upon the founding of the Russian Company for Steam-shipping and Trade (*Russkoe Obshchestvo Parokhodstva i Torgovli*), commonly referred to as ROPiT, in 1856. It had weekly service between Odessa and Alexandria via Constantinople, Smyrna, and Piraeus. A post office was opened at the Company's agency in Alexandria in 1857, according to most sources, but no philatelic material is known before the 1860s. In 1868 (May 1st?), the Levant postal service was taken over by the Russian Post, and new stamps and new rates resulted.

In 1867, when the construction of the Suez Canal was well along, although not completed, a post office was opened in Port Said, served by a ROPiT line that called at ports along the Syrian coast. Both post offices were closed on October 1st 1875; the diplomatic correspondence concerning this event has been preserved¹.

The most detailed treatment of the Russian post offices in Egypt is that of Tchilinghirian and Stephen². Some information on the stamps used and on the location of the Alexandria post office has been recorded by Mazloum³. In most of the literature, there is clear indication that postal material from these offices is extremely scarce, and consequently, many details remain vague or indefinite.

Alexandria

When the office at Alexandria was opened, stamps were not made available, and the absence of identifiable covers from the early years suggests that neither date-stamps nor place-stamps were immediately supplied. The earliest philatelic material is dated "24/5 Avril, 1860"; it is stampless, and is struck with a straight-line date-stamp, SD-1 (Fig. 1) in blue. The only other recorded examples are dated November 1861 and April 1863. Another straight-line (more or less) date-stamp has the form of a large (52x34mm) ornate rectangle bearing the inscription "Aleksandriesk / Agenstvo" and the day and month in between in enormous numerals (Fig. 1). Two examples have been reported; one is on a fragment otherwise dated Feb. 1866. It cannot be said if this was a true postal cachet or a date-stamp for business papers. Stamps of Imperial Russia were then put in use, and were cancelled with an obliterater, OB-1, a truncated triangular grid of dots enclosing the number 785, or date-stamp D-1 (Fig. 2). Two types of OB-1 have been recognized: small

dots, "5" with a downward serif to the flag, and larger dots, "5" without serif. The second type is possibly a worn state of the first.



COMPAGNIE RUSSE
Alexandrie d'Egypte.
24/5 Avril 1860.

Fig. 1 Early handstamps of horizontal format.

Contemporary with OB-1, and generally accompanying it, is date-stamp D-1. This, too, has been recognized in two types, which are clearly struck from different devices. The distance between the end of PORT and the beginning of ALEKSANDRIYA is either 1mm or 2.5mm, and there are differences in the ornament at bottom. OB-1, SD-1, and D-1 are always seen struck in light blue, as, indeed, were all the handstamps of the Russian offices in Egypt. Because the stamps on which they were struck are dark, and the designs of many of them are partly or entirely blue, cancellations can be very difficult to decipher.

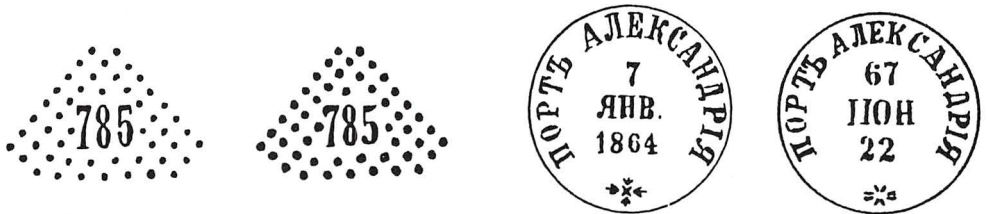


Fig. 2 Obliterator OB-1 and circular date-stamp D-1.



Fig. 3 Obliterator OB-2.

A second type of obliterator, OB-2, which is much rarer, consists of the coat of arms of ROPIT inside a double circle inscribed with the Company's name and ALEKSANDRISK AGENTSTVO (Fig. 3). Little can be said about it beyond the fact that the few examples known are on covers or stamps of the mid-1860s.

Four more circular date-stamps (Fig. 4) were subsequently introduced, apparently successively except for D-2, which appears to overlap with D-1. Tchilinghirian and Stephen state that D-1 was introduced in 1863, but that date must be

accepted with reservation because strikes of D-1 on covers dated internally as late as 1866 still show the year as 1863. The earliest and latest confirmable dates that I can trace are 8 May 1865 to 11 July 1869. The date of introduction of D-2 is given as ca. 1865, but the only date I know of is April 7th 1868. D-3 is recorded with dates of 23 Dec. 1870 to 11 Jan. 1873, D-4, 26 Apr. 1873 to 10 May 1873 and D-5, 2 Feb. 1874 to 19 July 1874. In D-5

the date may be in two lines or three. In these date-stamps, the month may be expressed in Cyrillic abbreviation or Roman numerals; e.g., АВГ. or VIII for August. They were quite often used to cancel stamps, but the obliterator OB-1 was also used until at least 1872.



Fig. 4 The later circular date-stamps: D-2; D-3; D-4; D-5.

Two informational paid markings have been recorded (Fig. 5). The earlier is P-1, which came into use in the pre-stamp period, and may have been intended for use on port-to-port mail; it often accompanies OB-1, D-1, or D-2. It has been seen struck on stamps, but such use may have been accidental. The other such handstamp, P-2, consists of the French word PAYÉ in a small box. It has been seen on only one cover (cancelling ROPiT stamps) and it cannot be confirmed that it was applied in the Russian postal service.



Fig. 5 Handstamps P-1 and P-2.

Port Said

When the Russian post office was opened in Port Said in 1867 (month unknown), there can have been little business, for the Suez Canal did not open for traffic until 1869. Even after that event, however, business could not have flourished, for examples of covers or even loose stamps used there are rare.

No numeral obliterator was issued to Port Said. A date-stamp of the same type as D-1 of Alexandria was used for information, arrival, and cancellation (Fig. 6). The existence of a second date-stamp, inscribed П. САИДЬ, was first claimed on the basis of a single, incomplete example cancelling a 1c. Suez Canal Co. stamp in the Tapling Collection. Another example has since been seen on a cover from Jaffa to Port Said dated January 1874 (Corinphila sale, Spring 1997).

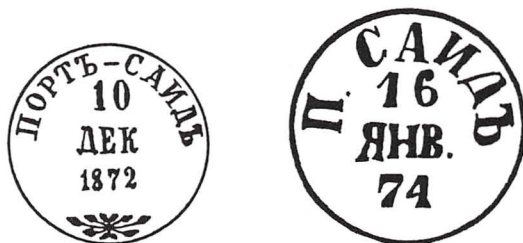


Fig. 6 Datestamps D-1 and D-2 of Port Said.

Maritime Posts

The ships of the ROPiT did not carry traveling post offices for sorting mail en route, but like the Lloyd Austriaco ships, they provided letter boxes for last-minute mail and letters posted on board. The custom has been reported that the ROPiT agents at the ports of call would board the ships, carrying with them a canceller, and would clear the letter box and cancel the letters in it immediately, presumably removing those addressed to that port. This custom explains the fact that many covers exist with a sender's cachet of Alexandria (or Port Said), with the stamps cancelled at another port, usually Beyrout (obliterator number 783).

After the closing of the Russian post offices in Egypt, the mail in the ship letter boxes was turned over to the Egyptian post office on arrival in Egypt; following regulation, such mail had its stamps cancelled with the Egyptian retta. Thus it is that stamps of Russian Levant issued after 1875, as well as those of other Levant countries, can be found cancelled with a retta. After the UPU adopted the paquebot convention in 1896, such mail was treated accordingly, and received cancellations of 'paquebot', 'pleine mer', or an Egyptian date-stamp accompanying one of the foregoing markings elsewhere on the cover.

Stamps Used and Postal Rates

The first stamps used at the Alexandria office were those of the 1858–64 issue of Imperial Russia, which were required by the terms of an Imperial Decree of 13/25 April 1863, a postal notice of 12/24 November 1862, and the contract with ROPiT. The 10 kopek, 20 kopek, and 30 kopek have been seen with OB-1 or D-1 cancellations; all are rare. Contemporary with these (and the immediately following issues) was the large, square 6-kopek stamp inscribed "wrapper shipment for the East / 6 kop. per lot", for use on printed matter. This stamp was necessitated by the fact that there was no Russian stamp of denomination lower than 10 kopeks at that time. (The Russian 'lot' was about a half ounce, like the German lot.) They were issued on January 6th 1864, and remained in use only until July, when low-value Russian stamps (1, 3, and 5 kopeks) were issued. Examples exist clearly cancelled with OB-1.

In 1865 ROPiT stamps superseded those of Imperial Russia. Only two stamps were issued, without expressed denomination. Mazloun states that they were sold in Turkish and Egyptian ports for 10 paras and 2 piasters, respectively, although they were officially stated to be 2k. and 20k. Perhaps they were sold for kopeks in Russian ports on the Black Sea, but not in Turkish territory, where Russian currency did not normally circulate. The currency conversions are not consistent, and the 2-kopek stamp may have had a nominal value of 8 paras, but was rounded up to 10 paras for convenience.

The next year saw the same two values in a new design, which had a network background printing that was at first horizontal, becoming vertical in 1867. All six of these stamps are known used at Alexandria, cancelled either with OB-1, OB-2, or D-1.

Stamps for Russian Levant (inscribed 'Eastern Correspondence') were introduced in 1868 with four expressed denominations: 1k., 3k., 5k., and 10k. They first appeared perforated 11½, on horizontally laid paper, but in 1872 they were issued with perforation 15, on paper either horizontally or vertically laid. There are thus twelve varieties, all of which appear to have been used at Alexandria, and several, if not all, at Port Said. They were cancelled with OB-1 or one of the date-stamps. These stamps are

often found with flecks or patches of the design missing, for the ink is easily dislodged by soaking.

All of the foregoing stamps can be rated very scarce to rare with identifiable cancellations of an office in Egypt. Covers, of course, are all rare; I have not heard of any on which the ROPiT 10 paras is used as a single, but a number are known franked with the 2 piasters. The Russian Levant stamps are almost as rare on covers, which usually bear two 3k. stamps or a 1k. and 5k.

The letter rate for carriage between Alexandria and the Levant ports and Odessa or Taganrog was 20 kopeks or 2 piasters until mid-1868 (March is the latest I have seen for this rate). An additional 10 kopeks was required for letters to or from internal Russia. Later in 1868, the sea-transport rate was reduced to 6 kopeks and apparently remained at that level until the closing of the offices in Egypt.

Occasional covers have been seen franked 3k., 4k., or 5k. In some cases, a stamp may have been lost. It is also a possibility that these covers were underfranked, with the deficiency being collected from the recipient. Although no postage-due marking is known on mail carried by the Russian Post, none may have been necessary, for such mail would have been handled entirely within the Russian system. The receiving agent would have been well aware of the correct rate, and would have known exactly how much to demand of the recipient for a short-paid letter. The possibility of a 5-kopek rate at some period cannot be dismissed, however.

I know of no registered cover from the Russian offices in Egypt. However, a registered cover of about 1884 from Latakia to Alexandria is known; it has no special registration markings, and its status is indicated by handwritten "Recommandée" and a number. Probably registered letters were handled similarly at Alexandria when the office was operating. Lindenberg has stated that the registration fee was 10 kopeks (he also stated that the letter rate was 10 kopeks per lot from May 1st 1868, but that is not consistent with the 6 kopek rate encountered on most covers).

Although for newspapers the 6-kopek stamp of 1864 corresponded to the rate at that time, the rate may have been reduced in 1865 to account for the issue of a stamp sold for 2 kopeks (or 10pa.) by ROPiT. Unfortunately, no indisputable example of a cover or wrapper franked at the newspaper/periodical or printed matter rate appears to be known.

All of the known covers from the Russian offices in Egypt are addressed to ports in the Levant, most commonly Beyrout or Alexandretta (for Aleppo). The rates were apparently the same for all ports. The rate progression was evidently uniform, for heavy letters are franked in multiples of 2 piasters at first, and later, multiples of 6 kopeks.

The total number of covers bearing postal markings of the offices in Egypt, outgoing, incoming, or in transit, gleaned from auction catalogs of major collections from about 1950, seems to be about 30, but presumably a substantial number would be missed by such a survey.

Mixed franking with *Posta Europea* franks or Egyptian stamps was in principle possible for mail to or from interior Egypt. However, no example has appeared on the market, and I have heard of only one, as an unreliable rumor. An incoming cover to Cairo from Aleppo was in the sale of the Byam collection; it was franked 1pi.20pa. for Turkish postage as far as Alexandretta, and was carried by the Russian Post (6 kopeks in stamps) to Alexandria, where it was rated 80pa. postage due for Egyptian postage to Cairo. Mixed franking with stamps of other Levant postal services is known for mail passing through the Russian post office at Alexandria. Letters from Aleppo or

Alexandretta are known carried by the Russian Post to Alexandria, and from there by the French Post to Europe.

For a time in the early 1870s letters from Odessa to Mytilene were carried by ROPiT ships to Constantinople, franked with Russian stamps (10k.), and were then handed over to the Egyptian post office there for the last stage of the journey. I have seen examples only with postage due for the Egyptian part charged on arrival, but franking with Egyptian stamps from Constantinople might also have occurred.

References

Special Acknowledgement

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1. I. Chaftar, *L'OP* No. 85, 271-6 (Jan. 1954).
2. S.D. Tchilinghirian and W.S.E. Stephen, *Stamps of the Russian Empire Used Abroad*, Part Two, The British Society for Russian Philately, Aberfour, Banff., 1958, pp. 172-7; *ibid.*, Part Six, 1960, pp. 548-9.
3. A. Mazloum, *L'OP* No. 53, 412-15 (Jan. 1946); No. 61, 248 (Jan. 1948); No. 79, 418 (July 1952).
4. S.D. Tchilinghirian, *British J. Russian Philately* No. 30, 15 (Mar. 1962).
5. The word can also mean "band" or "printed matter"; a "lot" is a unit of weight, approximately 15 grams in Central Europe.
6. F.J. Melville, *The Stamp Lover*, XVII, No. 7, 155-8 (Dec. 1924).
7. P.P. Lindenberg, *SC* 1950, 425 (Dec. 16).