The Police (Special Zemstvo) Post: A Blank Spot in Imperial Russian Postal History

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I think that many readers of Rossica encounter covers that initially raise questions or lead into blind alleys. Sometimes, upon a check of sources, these questions turn out to be rather simple to answer. Other times they have been studied and written up in the literature. But once in awhile they are found to be “terra incognita,” and the search for answers leads to the discovery of little-known pages in postal history.

Not long ago I acquired several covers that emerged from the former archive of the Arkhangel’skoe Rural District Administration (volostnoe pravlenie) in Nolinsk County, Vyatka Province. There were a number of letters addressed to this entity from various places in the Russian Empire, but two of them were sent from it, and judging by the notations, they were returned. These are two stampless official packets, shown front and back in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1.1 and 1.2 show the front and back of a stampless official envelope sent in the Vyatka province.

Figure 2.1 and 2.2 show the front and back of another stampless sealed envelope sent within the Vyatka province.
Let’s take a more detailed look at them and compare the two, because it is precisely this comparison that raised questions, the answers to which served as the reason for writing this article.

As we can see, the sender of both packets was the Arkhangel’skoe Rural District Administration in Nolinsk County, Vyatka Province, as evidenced on one cover by a manuscript notation in the lower right corner of the obverse (Figure 1.1) and on the other by a special straight-line handstamp that was applied in the same spot (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.3 “Arkhangel’skago vol.[ostnogo] pravleniya.”

Both covers bear the indicators of the Arkhangel’skoe Rural District Administration -- a handstamp seal (Figure 3.1) and a paper seal (Figure 3.2) -- that confirm its free-frank authority for official correspondence.

There are also two date stamps from the post office at which the covers were submitted for mailing – Kyrchany, a village in Vyatka Province (Figures 4.1 and 4.2).

Both packets were sent registered, as indicated by the manuscript registration numbers entered in the lower left corners of their reverse sides, No. 680 and No. 454. It is apparent that both covers were returned to the rural district administration because, as was stated earlier, they were found in that administration’s archives. But that is where their similarities end. Now we’ll move on to their differences.

The first of the covers (Figures 1) was sent from Kyrchany on September 13, 1914, and addressed to “Khabarovsk, Primors'ye Oblast’, via the Municipal Police Administration to Pavel Koz’min (Kuz’mich) Maramzin, poste restante.”

It should be noted here that such an unusual address, “Via the Municipal Police Administration, poste restante,” suggests that the sender was unaware of the addressee’s exact location, so he hoped that either the police administration or its subordinate address desk would search for it.

The Khabarovsk arrival mark on the cover is dated September 30, 1914. There is also a notation by the Khabarovsk Address Desk that the addressee failed to appear (Figure 5.1) and a postal handstamp indicating that the packet was returned presumably at the expiration of some holding period when the addressee failed to claim the item. With the handstamp confirmed by the signature of a postal official (Figure 5.2), we have our complete explanation as to why the packet was returned.

Figure 5.1. “Khabarovskiy Figure 5.2. “Za istochniem Adresnuy shol Ne yavlen” str 1 v neyavkoy adresata”

On the packet’s reverse we see that the words “Khabarovsk, Primors'ye Obl.” and “poste restante” have been crossed out with a green pencil, and there are two separate manuscript return notations: “V.[illage] of Kyrch, Vyatka Prov.” (in violet ink at top) and “To Kyrch, Vyat.” (in black ink below). Finally there is the arrival postmark, “Kyrchany Vyatk.”, of December 30, 1914, recording the date when the packet was returned to its point of origin.

Thus we could say that this is a completely standard “boomerang,” the return being conducted in full accordance with then-current postal regulations, so the item should not raise any questions whatsoever.

The situation is entirely different, however, with the second cover (Figures 2). This packet was addressed to “Beloglazovo in Charyshskaya Rural
District, Tomsk Province, the village of Bobrovka, Vera Filimonova Starodumova.” The contents – “with residence permit” – are indicated in the lower left of the packet’s obverse, next to the “453” registration number.²

Other than the July 12, 1909, date stamp of Kyrchanskaya Postal Station (Figure 4.2), there are no postmarks or indications of the State Post on the cover. The packet is festooned with manuscript notations, however, some of which are backed up with handstamp seals. It is quite apparent that these latter have nothing whatsoever to do with the State Post. Making sense of them turned out to be no easy matter, but it was very interesting!

Let’s look at all the notations and handstamps in order. Please note that not all of these notations are dated, so their places in the list should be considered arbitrary.

On the reverse:

1. “Not in Bobrovskoe. Clerk Golubyat…” (Note: Bobrovskoe/Bobrovka – a village in Charyshskaya Rural District (RD), Zmeinogorsk County, Tomsk Province)

2. “Not in the village of Shipunovskoe. 27 July 1911, Elder Popov (?).” Handstamp seal reading “Seal of the Shipunovskoe Village Elder, Charyshskaya Rural District, Zmeinogorsk County.”

3. “Not in the village of Khlopunovskoe. 28 July 1911, Elder (signature illegible).” (Note: Khlopunovskoe – a village in Charyshskaya RD, Zmeinogorsk County)


6. “Not in the village of Batalovskaya. (Signature illegible)” Handstamp seal reading “Seal of the Batalovskaya Village Elder, Charyshskaya Rural District, Zmeinogorsk County.”

7. At the very top there is one more manuscript notation that I cannot make out completely: “Not in …, Za…”

On the reverse:

9. “Not in the village of Kosobokova ... (signature illegible)” (Note: Kosobokova - a village in Charyshskaya RD, Zmeinogorsk County) The black handstamp seal is illegible.

10. “Not in the village of Ponomarevskoe. Elder (signature illegible).” (Note: Ponomarevskoe - a village in Charyshskaya RD, Zmeinogorsk County)


13. “Not in the village of Bykova Starodumova. Clerk Ustin...” (Note: Bykova - a village in Charyshskaya RD, Zmeinogorsk County)

So we note the following:

A) On the packet there are 13 notations to the effect that the addressee was not found. Those 13 entries belong to 12 villages in Charyshskaya RD, Zmeinogorsk County, Tomsk Province. (Bobrovskoe was noted twice.) According to the “List of Inhabited Places in Tomsk Province for 1911”[1], that rural district consisted of 22 such places. So this particular packet made the rounds of over half of the district in search of the addressee.

B) The earliest date in these notations is February 2, 1911, from the village of Ust’-Poroziha (No. 8 above). The latest is from the village of Beztuzheva, 31 July 1911 (No. 4 above). This means that the packet went looking for the addressee in the district’s territory for six months at a minimum! This period could actually have been longer, since only five of the 13 notations are dated, and the Metelova (No. 11) entry lacks the year; even the month is uncertain.

C) The Kyrchany Postal Station date stamp shows 12 July 1909 (Figure 4.2). If that date is correct, then for a year and a half – until February 1911 – the packet’s whereabouts are unknown.

D) What is striking is the complete absence of any postal date stamps from Tomsk Province in general, and from the village of Beloglazovo in particular, even though that village is specified in the address. Moreover, Beloglazovo was the center of Charyshskaya Volost’ [rural district], and according to the data [1] for 1911, there was a post and telegraph office in operation there. In fact, it was the only one in the entire volost’! It would have been impossible for the packet to bypass it.

E) There are no postmarks or other notations from Kyrchany, Vyatka Province, that record the fact of the packet’s return.

All of these observations, both by themselves and in a
comparison of the two covers, raise some legitimate questions:

1) If we are to believe the Kyrchany Postal Station date stamp, where was the packet for the year and a half between July 1909 and February 1911? Or could the date have been erroneous?

2) By whose personnel and by what means was the packet carried from village to village within Charyshskaya Volost' during this year and a half, considering that there were no State Post establishments in any of the villages indicated in the notations above? Not only that, there was no zemstvo post at the time in that particular volost' and county, nor all of Siberia.

3) Why, with such a large number of notations from the bigger and smaller villages, is there not a single postal date stamp from Tomsk Province? Why, in contrast to the first packet (Figure 1), are there no official State Post notations about the return of the packet (Figures 5.1 and 5.2)?

4) Why, unlike on the first cover (Figure 1), are there no arrival date stamps of Kyrchany, Vyatka Province, recording the date of the packet’s return?

Of course there is no way to definitively answer the first question. The packet could simply have gone astray en route, flopping down in one of the mail-sorting places through which it would have had to pass. But it is just this point that could explain its further travels: with the passage of a year and a half before the packet reached Charyshskaya Volost', the addressee could have departed long before. However, we cannot exclude the possibility that the date stamp was in error. (One theory close to the postal realities of the day lies outside the scope of this article, but because it could be of interest to readers, I present it in a footnote.)

Now we come to the most interesting aspect! Exactly how did this packet make its way around Charyshskaya rural delivery for 18 months or more if, as we have already noted, there was no State Post and no zemstvo post present in those 12 villages?

In Lev Ratner’s book “Auxiliary Postal Points of the Russian Empire”[6], we find the following: “In the last quarter of the 19th century, three types of postal system existed in Russia: 1) The State Post, 2) Zemstvo, and 3) Police (a special [form of] zemstvo post).” I should point out that this is the only use of the term “police post” that I have found in numerous philatelic literature works. In personal conversations with Mr. Ratner, he told me that he had encountered mention of the police post in GUPIT [Main Post and Telegraph Administration] archives only three times, two of them being only notations that such a post was used in Siberia to deliver mail to far-flung regions.[7] He had encountered one document, however, that expanded on the subject in greater detail. This was the “Postal Operations in the Trans-Siberian Railroad Area (Pochtovoe delo v rayone Sibirskoy zheleznoy dorogi), Notes Compiled by the Office of the Committee of Ministers, St. Petersburg, 1898.” This document contains a subsection entitled “The Police (Special Zemstvo) Post” (Figure 6).

![Figure 6. Photocopy of "The Police Post" section from a 1898 document](https://example.com/figure6.jpg)

In view of its exceptional importance, I think it is necessary to reproduce it almost in its entirety (with a few small exceptions):

“The police (special zemstvo) post.”

“In addition to the State and zemstvo posts, Russia has yet a third type of postal organization: the police post. (Here and for the rest of the document, the bold facing is mine – A.A.) Its immediate purpose is to serve as a means of continuous, timely communications between county police administrations and the precinct police chiefs (stanovye pristavy)… However, the lagging development of the State and zemstvo posts have resulted in a significant expansion of the boundaries set forth in the law for using the police post.

“As is evident from the ‘humble’ reports on Siberian administration over a number of years and information that the Ministry of Internal Affairs possessed, the police post was an establishment that supported and frequently replaced the State Post. Thus, from the overview of Yakutsk Oblast for 1891, we learn that the State Post moved over four main routes: the Irkutsk, Okhotsk, Aimginsk and Viluyisk.
Taken together, these routes covered 2,626 versts [2,801 km] within the boundaries of the oblast. On six other, lesser routes (the Verkhoyansk-Kolyma, Ust'-May, Bulun, Ust'yans, Verkhne-Kolymsk and Sredne-Kolymsk, totaling 3,995 versts [4,262 km]), all postal correspondence, both official and private, was carried exclusively by the police post via district police administrations. Besides instructions that concerned the movement of this post, the police administrations mentioned above also bore the costs of maintaining this post. These costs were paid for exclusively from their own money, because there were no other sources to cover them. (Correspondence was sent at no charge.)

"In the provinces of European Russia where zemstvo establishments were introduced, 180 counties, or 50.1 percent of the total number, had no zemstvo post of their own and thus made extensive use of the police post services. In the provinces and oblasts of Siberia and the Central Asian possessions, this post, due to the extreme scarcity of State postal establishments, was often the only means of communication available to the populace.

"The vast expanses of Siberia, the complete lack of roads, railroads, and (often) fluvial routes, plus the negligible number of postal establishments, clearly explain why the police post was so significant for the locals. As was stated above, this post carried the mail for free, but nevertheless its services cost the population rather dearly, because the so-called cart duty mandated the use of privately-owned horses for transportation. According to Addendum 1 of Article 217 in the Statute on Zemstvo Duties (Compendium of Laws, Vol. III of the 1890 continuation), the police post was organized in the following manner:

- For continuous, timely communications between the county police administrations and [precinct] police chiefs in the municipal or rural precincts (uchastki and stany) entrusted to them and under their immediate purview, there shall be a special zemstvo post in each county. (Article 1)
- This post shall be dispatched from the county seat once per week, on the day following reception of the mail from the provincial capital. (Article 2)
- Packets sent with the [special] zemstvo post shall be entrusted to one of the messengers at the county police administration. (Article 3)
- The messenger with the zemstvo post may be sent up to 30 verstas out from the county seat, or as far as that point where the first change of horses is made at a county police administration that keeps horses for the travels of its officials. Provincial authorities shall assign horse-exchange points throughout the county. The messenger with the zemstvo post shall always travel in two-horse carts. (Article 4)
- "From the first station out in the county, the regularly scheduled or weekly messenger shall be issued carts for the zemstvo post. These carts may also be used by messengers sent with orders of the county police administration. (Article 5)
- "Of those packets received by the precinct police chief, the ones that are to be forwarded to rural deans, priests, property owners, and rural district boards, estates, and other rural authorities shall be delivered directly to them by the "hundredsmen" (sotskie). (Article 8)
- "The precinct police chiefs and especially the county police chief shall be responsible for making certain that the zemstvo post is kept in good working order. (Article 9)"

As we can see, the term “police (special zemstvo) post” is used in an official document of the Cabinet of Ministers. The vast scope of its activities is also apparent. However, there are no orders whatsoever in GUPiT Chief circulars about transferring mail to the police post. Why? First of all, it is because this stems from the “boundaries of police post operations, established by law.” Secondly, it applied only to a few remote regions. In all probability, the chiefs of the corresponding [post and telegraph] districts were given instructions once about cooperating with the police post, and further documents were not required. Both posts – the State and the police – existed officially, both were controlled by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and they were combined in the person of the Minister of Internal Affairs. It is logical to assume that with his authorization, such cooperation arising out of the “boundaries established by law” would be maintained on the basis of the principle that “what is not forbidden is allowed.”

Taking all this into consideration, I think that as far as these two posts within the Ministry of Internal Affairs are concerned, we don’t have to reinvent the wheel. The order in which mail was transferred from the State Post to the police would have been the same as the well-established procedures for acceptance and dispatch of the State
Post between sedentary postal establishments and railroad mail cars, or between one railroad mail car and another. Mail and documents were transferred without being opened. They were done up in postal packets, bags, and steamer trunks and listed on waybills specifying the number of items being transmitted and their individually assigned numbers. Everything was done in the usual manner.

Now let’s consider the lack of postmarks. We are accustomed to seeing dispatch marks and arrival marks on letters, and sometimes transit marks if the letter went in an open postal packet. But here, in my opinion, the situation is different. As we have already noted, this was an official letter with a residence permit, i.e., a document. According to postal regulations, an official letter “with document [enclosed]” had to be wrapped in a postal packet to be sent to its destination (in this case, to the village of Bobrovka) even if there was only one item in the packet. That is, if only one letter “with document [enclosed]” was sent that day from Kyrchany to Bobrovka – and the odds of that are extremely high – then it would have been put into a separate postal packet at Kyrchany. The postal packet would have been sent in accordance with the routing guides to the postal establishment nearest to the destination. In this instance we can be certain that the nearest such place was Beloglazovo. The officials at the Beloglazovo post and telegraph branch office would have known that there was no postal establishment in the small village of Bobrovka, and they would have been able to see on the register accompanying the packet that there was only one letter and that it contained a police document. They would have sent the postal packet on without opening it to the correct police entity (for instance, to the precinct police chief or even to a village elder) via the police post. Thus all of the State Post markings that would have been applied to the postal packet in its travels would have appeared only on the postal packet, not its contents. Once it reached the police post, the letter would have been extracted from the postal packet for delivery to the addressee (in the same way that it would have been done in the State Post). And because at that point it “wandered around” without the enclosing postal packet, the numerous notations by village elders and clerks confirm the path that the letter took within the police post.

And what would have happened to the postal packet? Considering that postal packets for registered mail were manufactured exclusively from paper (as opposed to the leather or linen bags for money and parcel mail) and that their transfers from one post to the next would have been recorded in the receipts on the waybills, there would have been no reason to save them, so they would have ended up in the wastebasket.

So, how to explain the lack of postmarks on the reverse? Apparently, having failed to find the addressee, the police authorities (in the person of the Bobrovka village elder who put his notation on the envelope twice, as if closing the circle on its wanderings) decided to send the letter back. Thus the letter was not submitted by a private individual or establishment, but was transferred from one post to the next. We can assume that the letter was transferred from the police post to the State Post in the same manner that it was received – by a registry list and inside a postal packet – and returned to the Arkhangelskoe Rural District Administration in Vyatk Province. Once again, all of the postmarks would have been confined to the postal packet.

There is one thing, however, that raises some doubts. According to the “Postal Operations in the Trans-Siberian Railroad Area,” the police post operated practically everywhere where there was no State or zemstvo post, especially in Siberia and Central Asia. So if this was true, then the police post had to have handled an immense number of items. But where are they? Why are they completely unknown to collectors and researchers?

Here, I think, is the reason. In all probability the police authorities had no special “postal” handstamps whatsoever, and official seals were not used as markings to note the acceptance or dispatch of correspondence, if we are talking specifically about the “police post” (not to be confused with official document circulation or police censorship of mail)! As we can see from the example of this cover, all of the seals of the village elders act as “certifications” of the manuscript notations about the failure to find the addressee. We can be certain that if this letter had been handed to the addressee the first time, the village elder would not have made any notation at all, and what is more, he would not have put his seal on it. The letter would simply have changed hands (and in the best instance, with a receipt) and that would have been that. We would never have been able to make any sound conclusion that it had passed through the police post, since no evidence of that would have been present. There would have been no proof. And that is precisely what
happened in the overwhelming majority of cases!

Moreover, the forms used to record the acceptance and sending of mail were filled out only in the establishments (both postal and police) where they were exchanged, and they were destroyed after three years.

This cover, without exaggeration, can be considered as extremely rare and perhaps unique. Fortunately for us, the disappearance of the addressee and the requirement to record all of the attempts at delivery (since the letter contained a police document) forced this “submarine of the police post” to the surface and show us its “Charyshskaya Odyssey” in all its glory!

I hope that someone among the readership can continue this dialog, based on archival documents or materials from his or her personal collection. I would also welcome any clarifications or additions (email: Anderson2004@list.ru).

In conclusion, I would like to express my profound gratitude to Lev Ratner for his substantial and timely help during the work on this article.

Translated by David M. Skipton

Endnotes:

1. Many cities in the Russian Empire had no address desks, and in those places where they were lacking, their functions were performed by employees of the police administrations.

2. In the Russian Empire, the “residence permit” was a document issued in place of a passport in certain circumstances established by law.

3. As is apparent from the title of this article, we are concerned here only about the pre-Revolutionary period. It is well known that a zemstvo post was established in Zmeinogorsk County, Tomsk Province, after the Revolution in 1919. [2]

4. A delay of one and a half years would certainly not have been a record for that era. There is a card in my collection sent from Merv in Transcaspian Oblast’ to Moscow, where it sat for seven years, from 1886 to 1893! The philatelic literature also records instances of delays up to nine years! [4]

5. The Kyrchan P.S. date stamp in Figure 4.2 is that of a postal station, i.e., a postmark of the old 1890 template. All postal stations that conducted postal operations (to include Kyrchan) were turned into postal branch offices (otdeleniya) in 1890. In the List of Postal Offices in the Russian Empire compiled by Kiryushkin and Robinson[3], we find the following information: “Kyrchan pys-po 01.01.91,” which means that as of January 1, 1891, the Kyrchan Postal Station became a postal branch office. The Main Post and Telegraph Administration (GPUIT) Circular No. 44 of October 27, 1890, states that “the name-bearing items (seals, postmarks, etc.) on hand at the [postal] stations may still be used after the stations are upgraded to branch offices.”[5] According to the inventory table for branch offices, each was assigned just one date stamp with the name on it. In all probability, in 1909-1911 Kyrchan was using the new-style postmark (Figure 4.1), but kept the old-style one, just in case. Why did they use the old-style postmark in this particular instance? It’s possible that prior to dispatching the mail, they were unable to process a large batch of letters and cards that they had received using just the one [new] canceler, so they hailed out the old one and used that, too. Or perhaps the branch office chief, who according to regulations had to store the “name-bearing item” in a locked cabinet, was absent that day due to sickness, drunkenness, or some other reason. Since neither the year nor the month on the old-style canceler coincide, we could suppose that they simply neglected to change the date plug and just banged away with it, thus continuing to show the date on which the handstamp was last used. Knowing how postal workers operate at branch offices, when the chief and a post and telegraph official handle the receipt and sorting of mail, and a postman or a guard does the handstamping, this particular explanation is quite possible.

6. Translator’s note: In Imperial Russia at this time, counties (uezdy) were divided into at least two stany, often more. In 1910, for instance, Zmeinogorsk County had three stany. The highest police authority in a stany was the pristav, who answered to the county police chief, or ispravnik. I have rendered stan as “precinct” and pristav as “police chief.”

7. Let’s keep in mind this formulation -- “...a significant expansion of the boundaries set forth in the law for using the police post” -- because it can explain much about the cooperation between the State and the police posts, and suggests that some mechanisms of this cooperation might have been unregulated by the law. Later on we will return to this subject in greater depth.

8. It is necessary to point out that Addendum 1 to this Article 217 of the aforementioned “Statute on Zemstvo Duties” was called the “Law on the Zemstvo Post.” To be more precise, this “Law” was at first Addendum No. 1 to Article 217 of the 1857 Statute; in the same updated “Statute” of 1890, though, the “Law on the Zemstvo Post” had become an addendum to Article 296. Only the cart-duty article itself changed, but what is of interest to us is that Addendum 1 to that article, i.e., the “Law on the Zemstvo Post,” remained essentially unaltered. We should also note that the “Law on the Zemstvo Post” was in fact preceded by the “Law on the Zemstvo Post at Zemstvo Courts” of June 3, 1837. As some works on the history of the zemstvo post have mentioned (for instance, [9] and [10]), the 1837 Law stood at its very origins. A comparison of these two “Laws” leads us to conclude that the police post we examine in this article is to a greater extent the successor to the zemstvo court post of 1837 than is the zemstvo post itself (i.e.,
the post of the zemstvo councils). Unfortunately, a comparison of these posts and their evolution exceeds the boundaries of this article.

9. In remote settlements where there were neither precinct police chiefs nor judges, their duties were performed by village elders and clerks. Police post transportation was carried out in the same manner as it was in the volosti and zemstvos — by rearranged fee arrived at by agreement with someone from the peasantry.

Sources:

1. Список населенных мест Томской губернии на 1911 г. [List of Inhabited Places in Tomsk Province for 1911], published by the Tomsk Province Statistical Committee, Tomsk, 1911.
6. Ibid. p. 5
8. "Почтовое дело в районе Сибирской железной дороги" (Записка, составленная Канцелярией Комитета Министров СПб, 1898 г.) [Postal Operations in the Trans-Siberian Railroad Area. (Notes Compiled by the Office of the Committee of Ministers, St. Petersburg, 1898)], (missing cover and title page), Rossica Library.
9. K.B. Bazilevich, Земская почта в России 1865-1917 [The Zemstvo Post in Russia, 1865-1917], Moscow, 1926.