

## MILITARY CENSORSHIP IN IMPERIAL RUSSIA, 1904 – 1917

### ABOUT THE EXHIBIT

**Difficulty of the topic.** Any exhibitor of this topic is faced with a number of problems, not the least of which is the sheer scope of the undertaking. The Russian Empire in the early 20th Century was the largest contiguous political entity in the world, it had a huge army and a big population, and censorship encompassed the whole of them. It is impossible to do more than show selected portions, and there is no such thing as a "complete" collection, much less an exhibit.

Second, the study of Russian military censorship has been mostly limited to cataloguing the censor marks themselves, and where possible, equating them to a location or a military outfit. Over 2,000 markings have been recorded as of 2005, but many more must exist. Working back from that information plus the postcards and letters themselves, researchers have attacked the problem empirically, but that only goes so far and the assumptions they reach can be wrong.

Relatively little in the way of archival material has been uncovered, and indeed it may no longer exist. Part of the reason for this lack of documentation is secrecy: military censorship is a function of counter-intelligence, and because the Imperial Army wanted to keep its counter-intelligence operations secret, it did not publish them during the war. Then came the Civil War, the Soviets and the Red Army; they had the same concerns and no desire to publish what transpired in Imperial counter-intelligence because the Soviets adopted most of its procedures. To expose the workings of Imperial Russian military censorship would have meant exposing their own operations. Even today, Russian Federation military censorship methodology remains classified. Mail is mail, whether it is sent in 1915 or 2005, so it still has to be logged, sorted, examined, analyzed and routed in much the same way. The other part of the reason for lack of documentation is war. Many records were destroyed in WWI, the Civil War and WWII.

Third, military censorship is closely allied with military postal history. An understanding of how the military field post functioned is needed to make any sense of military censorship, and here again the same problems crop up: the sheer size of Russia's military and the theaters of military operations, the fluidity of the campaigns, and the annihilation of entire units. Even today, we have not accounted for all of the field post offices or their locations at every given point of the war. A knowledge of which units were subordinated to what formations at any given time would be extremely helpful in determining where the censor marks were applied, but such information, while voluminous, is scattered and incomplete.

**Rarity of the material.** With the exception of court, prison and exile mail censorship, which was a rather negligible percentage of the whole, military censorship encompassed the bulk of the Russian Empire's mail, both domestic and international. Regardless of where that correspondence entered the mail stream, it was examined under military censorship regulations. For the purposes of this exhibit, though, military censorship during WWI is treated as being comprised of three distinct, albeit overlapping, components:

1. **Examination of enemy POW mail, mostly emanating from or going to POW camps, but censored at sedentary civilian post offices;**
2. **Examination of mail coming from military (Army or Navy) entities (or submitted to nearby mobile field post offices) and censored at those entities or at FPOs;**

**3. Censorship of civilian mail, both domestic and international, at sedentary civilian post offices. (Mail from Russian POWs in Germany and Austro-Hungary is essentially the same as incoming international mail.)**

The distinction is necessary due to the somewhat different concerns of censorship for each component, and those differences are addressed in the exhibit.

Component 1 above - enemy POW mail - is very common viewed as a category, although many of the censor marks that appear on it are scarce to rare.

Component 2 - military mail - is almost exclusively rare to very rare. Insofar as the Army's mail is concerned, Speeckaert states that, "With the exception of marks from the military districts of Petrograd (very common except with the numbers in the 5,000 and 8,000-series) and Odessa (common), all of these military censormarks must be considered as rare to very rare. The limited material and knowledge we have of these censormarks is insufficient to allow them to be given an indication even of approximate scarcity." A number of items shown in this section of the exhibit are unrecorded by Speeckaert or any other author. Others in this exhibit were the sole examples Speeckaert had to illustrate those types. The same is true for the Navy mail section; this material is even more difficult to find than Army censor marks.

Component 3 - censorship of civilian mail - ranges from very common to very rare. The examples in this section have been chosen for their scarcity or rarity, and they are arranged geographically.

If a blue dot appears at the upper left of the page, one or more of the censor marks on that page ranges from "very rare" (2-3 recorded) to just one recorded, or the usage itself is rare or important from the standpoint of establishing when a censorship policy or procedure was instituted. Those pages lacking a blue dot contain material that can range from extremely common to rare.

**Production and layout of the exhibit.** This exhibit was produced with a PowerPoint program and Microsoft Windows 98. Where possible, sources for the scanned pictures are given beneath the captions. With few exceptions, the censor mark examples were reproduced from the Speeckaert book and its two supplements (see bibliography).

- I. **Introduction.**
- II. **Russo-Japanese War.**
- III. **WWI.**

**A. Introduction of military censorship:**

1. **Total;**
2. **Partial.**

**B. Military censorship structure in areas of partial military censorship:**

1. **Main Military Censorship Commission;**
2. **Local MCCs;**
3. **Individual censors.**
  - a. **Qualities and quality control;**
  - b. **Civilians;**
  - c. **Women.**

**C. Mail categories (the "raw material" of censorship):**

1. **Ordinary mail;**

2. **Printed matter (PPCs);**
3. **Registered;**
4. **Declared value;**
5. **Packages, parcels.**

**D. Censorship Procedures:**

1. **Mute cancels - "prior censorship" of origin;**
2. **Mail routing;**
3. **Mail sorting and logging;**
4. **Text and "non-text" effacement;**
5. **Confiscation;**
6. **Efforts to expedite censorship;**
7. **Resealing methods:**
  - a. **Wax seals;**
  - b. **Staples;**
  - c. **Adhesive tape;**
  - d. **Stamp selvages.**

**E. Problems faced by military censorship:**

1. **Mail delays:**
  - a. **Forced;**
  - b. **Intentional.**
  
2. **Correspondence posted on railroad mail cars;**
3. **Russian POWs in Germany and Austria;**
4. **Unwanted news from Russian POWs;**
5. **Propaganda war;**
6. **"Church" censorship.**

**F. Enemy POWs in Russia:**

1. **Sick POWs;**
2. **POW mail and the language problem;**
3. **Distribution of POWs:**
  - a. **European Russia;**
  - b. **Western Siberia;**
  - c. **Central Asia;**
  - d. **Eastern Siberia**
  - e. **POW inter-camp mail.**

**G. Censorship of military mail:**

1. **Military district HQ level;**
2. **Front HQ level;**
3. **Army HQ level;**
4. **Army corps level;**
5. **Fortress level (equivalent to a corps);**
6. **Regimental HQ level;**
7. **Battalion HQ level;**
8. **Company HQ level;**
9. **Battery level (equivalent to a company);**
10. **Forts;**
11. **Allied military mail;**
12. **Rear-area field post offices;**

13. **Non-combatant facilities:**

- a. **Schools;**
- b. **Hospitals.**

14. **Naval fortresses;**

15. **Warships:**

- a. **Battleships;**
- b. **Cruisers;**
- c. **Destroyers;**
- d. **Submarines;**
- e. **Transports;**
- f. **Training vessels;**
- g. **"Mute naval censor marks";**
- h. **Shore-based units and non-combatant facilities.**

H. **Censorship operations at Sedentary (Civilian) Post Offices:**

1. **Kingdom of Poland;**
2. **Baltic provinces;**
3. **St. Petersburg Province and the Grand Duchy of Finland;**
4. **The northern provinces;**
5. **Central Russia;**
6. **Ukraine excluding the Black Sea provinces;**
7. **Bessarabia and the Black Sea provinces excluding the Caucasus;**
8. **The Urals region;**
9. **The Caucasus;**
10. **Central Asia;**
11. **Western Siberia;**
12. **Eastern Siberia;**
13. **Military censorship in Persia and China.**

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