

Unpopular War Leads to First Russian Semi-Postals

by John Semeniuk



The first semi-postal stamps of Imperial Russia (Sc. B1-B4) were issued in response to the events of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905.

The root cause of the war lay in the competing imperialistic ambitions both of Russia and Japan with respect to the Asian mainland. According to an agreement reached by the two contenders in April 1898, Manchuria was supposed to belong to Russia's sphere of interest while Korea was to fall neatly into Japan's imperialistic orbit.

But this quid-pro-quo arrangement was not good enough for Tsar Nicholas II of Russia and his clique of closest advisors. Aggressive Russian inroads into Korea, together with an intransigent unwillingness to make any sort of meaningful political concessions on the matter to Japan, provoked the latter into taking military action.

The war began on the night of February 8, 1904, with a Japanese naval sneak attack on the Russian naval base at Port Arthur, Manchuria. By the end of April, Japan had essentially succeeded in neutralizing Russian naval power in the Pacific.

After a prolonged siege Port Arthur surrendered in January 1905. The disaster for Russia was compounded in late May 1905 when the Russian Baltic Fleet, which had set sail the previous October, was intercepted and virtually annihilated by the Japanese fleet in the waters of Tsushima Straits, which lay between Japan and the Korean peninsula. Russian losses in the encounter amounted to nearly 5,000 men in contrast to Japanese losses of just a little over one hundred.

For Russia the confrontation on land was not much better than on sea. After a number of minor indecisive encounters, the two sides clashed head-on at Mukden, Manchuria, in what has been described as one of the bloodiest engagements in military history.

Finally, bloodied and wearied, both sides decided that they had had enough of the carnage. Through the good offices of President Theodore Roosevelt, the two warring sides met at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where a peace treaty was hammered out and finally signed on September 5, 1905.

The net result was essentially a humiliating political defeat for the Russian side. The military and political setbacks of the war could not have come at a worse time for the tsarist regime, inasmuch as the Russian empire itself was being wracked at the very same time by serious internal political, social, and labor unrest. These social upheavals threatened to undermine the stability of the imperial throne itself.

Ironically, when the war had started the prevailing belief in official circles was that a wave of patriotic fervor would sweep the realm and rally

the masses around the government, thereby helping to stymie the unrest. Instead, the dismal course of the war merely exacerbated the instability, leading ultimately to the unintended and unforeseen consequence of helping to usher in certain political and labor reforms and freedoms which had been previously denied to the heterogeneous peoples comprising Imperial Russia.

The semi-postal stamps were issued in four values, each of a different design. Depending on the source consulted, the stamps were issued either in late 1904 or in early 1905. This discrepancy in dates may be due to the 13-day difference in reckoning between the Julian and Gregorian calendars. The former was used at the time in Imperial Russia (and remained in use until early 1918), the latter is the calendar currently in use.

Different sources may thus cite seemingly different dates for the same event, depending upon which calendrical system is used. Without proper attribution this can lead to confusion. All the dates in this article, unless otherwise specified, are based on the Gregorian calendar. (One additional point of note: in the 19th century the difference between the two calendars consisted of 12 days instead of 13.)

Each of the four semi-postal stamps was sold at 3 kopecks over face value, the surcharge being the amount designated for the benefit of orphans of soldiers killed in the war.

Printing was by typography on unwatermarked paper. Different perforations were used, including 12 x 12-1/2.

From left to right, the denominations and designs are as follows (the first figure indicates the nominal postal face value of the stamp, the second represents the charity surcharge):

a) 3+3 kopecks depicts the monument to Admiral Vladimir A. Kornilov (1806-1854) at Sevastopol, Crimea, in present-day Ukraine. An advocate of naval modernization, Kornilov was the commander-in-chief of the Black Sea Fleet at the time of the Crimean War. In an ironic twist of fate, he was killed on October 17, 1854, the very first day of the bombardment of Sevastopol.

The stamp is red, brown, and green in color.

b) 5+3 kopecks depicts the monument at Red Square in Moscow to Kuzma Minin (d. 1616) and Dmitri Pozharsky (c. 1578-1642). The two men came to the fore during the so-called "Time of Troubles," a period of civil war and unrest in Muscovy (as the state was then known) which was ushered in by the extinction in 1598 of the ruling dynasty in Moscow. This void gave rise to various contenders and pretenders vying for the throne, including foreign aspirants.

Appealing to the nationalist sentiments of their countrymen, Minin, a merchant, and Pozharsky, a nobleman, rallied the masses and thereby enabled the enthronement of the new Romanov dynasty, which endured until 1917.

The stamp is lilac, violet, and straw in color.

c) 7+3 kopecks depicts the well-known monument in St. Petersburg to Tsar Peter I (1672-1725). Unveiled in 1782, the statue was popularized by Alexander Pushkin in his poem "The Bronze Horseman." The pedestal on which the statue stands consists of a single solid block of granite weighing more than 1,500 tons.

The stamp is light blue, dark blue, and pink in color.

d) 10+3 kopecks depicts a scene of the Kremlin in Moscow.

The stamp is light blue, dark blue, and yellow in color.

The 3 kopeck stamp was designed by G. I. Franko. The other three values were the work of a talented Latvian graphic artist whose name has been variously given, depending on the source, as either Rikhard (sic) G. Zarrinsh, or Sarrin, or Zarin (1869-1939). His initials, in Cyrillic, appear just above the base line on the lower left-hand side of the 5 and 10 kopeck stamps (arrow). On the 7 kopeck value the initials are more prominent, each encapsulated within a circle. The "R" appears on the lower left, and the "Z" on the lower right (arrows).

Oddly enough, the 3 kopeck value lacks the initials of G. I. Franko.

Appearing in the upper part of each stamp is the designation "Pochtovaya marka" ("Postage stamp"), flanked on either side by the face value denomination of the respective stamp. Below this appears the designation "Prodazhnaya tsena" ("Selling price"). On the 3, 5, and 10 kopeck values this phrase is followed immediately by the respective full-value selling price of the stamp. On the 7 kopeck value, however, the full value price ("10 kop.") appears independently of the phrase.

Another interesting detail is that the fractional monetary unit (in Russian: "kopeck") is spelled out fully only on the 5 kopeck value. On the other values it is abbreviated as "kop."

Appearing in the lower portion of each stamp is a four-line designation which reads (in transliteration): "V polzu/ Sirot Voinov/ deystvuyushey/ Armii." This translates as: "For the benefit of/ the orphans of soldiers/ of the active (field)/ army."

A nice historical and military touch to the illustrated 10 kopeck value is provided by the clear, well-centered and nearly complete postmark on it, which is dated "2.9.05" (i.e., September 2, 1905) and reads "(G)lavnaya Polev. Pocht. Kont.," which stands for "Glavnaya Polevaya Pochtovaya Kontora" ("Main Field Post Office").

The icing on the cake is supplied by the date, September 2, 1905. This date would seem to be merely three days before the peace treaty was signed at Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

But recall the 13-day difference between the two calendar systems. The actual date, according to the Gregorian calendar, would thus be September 15, 1905, ten days after the signing of the treaty.

Although this "revised" date is a bit more removed from the event than September 2 would have been, it is still close enough to it to provide a nice historical touch to the stamp.

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