RUSSIAN DISINFECTION of mail, 1897 – 1914

The ОБЕЗЗАРАЖЕНО cachets

Greetings from the Odessa Quarantine Port, posted to Chicago, Christmas 1905
THE WORLD VIEW OF THE MENACE OF PLAGUE, 1896

In 1893, an International Sanitary Conference had decided that mail should no longer be treated as a possible carrier of cholera, recognised as a waterborne disease. But no decision was then taken on plague, known to be spread by rat fleas, and not seen by most administrations as an infection carried by mail.

However, with a plague pandemic emerging from India and China, disinfection was resumed in several countries. Handstamps on mail to certify treatment were used in Russia, Malta, Chile and – for one day only – in New York.

In June 1896, the Russian government passed a law enforcing disinfection by steam of all mail from plague-infested locations. These were not named, but the frontier stations and ports where treatment was to be carried out were identified, (the list being subsequently amended.)

“To certify disinfection, each letter or wrapper will be stamped ОБЕЗЗАРАЖЕНО.”

Mail entering Russia by land from the west was treated at Volochisk, (now in Ukraine), if directed to Odessa: but at Granitsa in Austrian Poland if addressed to St. Petersburg and the north. Mail from Persia was treated at Gaoudan, east of the Caspian Sea; or if from the west, at Dzhulfa. Letters and postcards from China were fumigated at Troitskosavsk, north of the Chinese customs post at Kyakhta, 230 miles north of Urga in Mongolia.

Of the Russian ports, Odessa cachets are encountered until 1901, when it ceased marking its mail. Vladivostok treated trans-Pacific mail between April and November, 1903. Cachets of any other ports – Batum, Feodosia, Baku - are seldom seen.

The abolition of fumigation of mail was ordered in the P. & T. Journal of 8th. May 1900. But many cachets continued in use until 1903, and at Gaoudan the practice was briefly revived between September 1904 and September 1906.

A number of cachets were introduced or resurrected between 1910 and 1914, seemingly to cope with an epidemic of plague in Astrakhan Guberniya.
VOLOCHISK, Volhynia: Austro-Hungarian frontier

21.6.1897. Registered, Peshawar (N.W. India) to Bokhara, directed via Odessa. Sent by P. & O. India from Bombay to Brindisi. By rail (Italian and Austrian), to frontier.

There disinfected by steam, as mandated by government Regulations dated 19th. April 1897, and marked ОБЕЗЗАРАЖЕНО. (But in a sans-serif font.)

Arrived Bokhara 11 July 1897, O.S. (23.7.1897.) Thirty-two days in transit.
VOLOCHISK, Volhynia : Austro-Hungarian frontier


The sans-serif cachet struck in black from a steel canceller has only been recorded used in early 1899.
VOLOCHISK

2.8.1899. French p.o. Shanghai to Bokhara, via Odessa (where the blue crayoned Cyrillic *Bukharu* was added, to assist Russian-only sorters.)

The disinfection cachet is a new seriffed type, 5.5 x 47 mm., most likely issued to Volochisk when Granitsa was given a 5.5 x 48 mm. seriffed type, in July.


By Italian and Austrian railways to frontier at Volochisk. Sorted at Odessa 3.9.99 (O.S.)

*(Coll. A. Cheung)*
24.4.1899. P.p.c. of a public beheading, from Shanghai (French p.o.) to St. Petersburg, directed Per s/s Ballarat. Mails transferred at Colombo to P.& O. Australia: bag for Russia dropped at Brindisi. Transmission by Italian and Austrian railways to Granitza quarantine station, where fumigated and struck with a 44.5 mm. disinfection cachet. Otherwise only seen used in March 1900.

No mail to north Russia from eastern countries between April 1897 and May 1899, which should have been treated and certified at Granitza, has been seen.
GRANITZA : Frontier with Austrian Poland

5.9.1899. Carrington (on the Hunter river) to Helsinki. Sent via Newcastle, N.S.W. to Sydney on ss. Montgomeryshire. Transferred same day to the Messageries Maritimes, Ligne T. No. 3, ss. Australien, which landed its mails for northern Europe at Naples on 7.10.1899.

Thence by Italian and Austrian railways to Granitza, where the switch to broad gauge was effected while the mails were certified as fumigated, (by steam).

Granitza was on the main line, Vienna to Warsaw. The 1905 Baedeker stated, the Kingdom of Poland will be entered ...at Granitza: luggage and passports undergo examination.
GRANITZA, Frontier with Austrian Poland

14.7.1899. Mauritius to Borgå, Finland. Taken the same day by Messageries Ligne U. No 1, ss. Yangtse, from Réunion en route to Marseille. The Russian bag was dropped at Naples for carriage by rail to the Granitza frontier, 20 hours beyond Vienna, where there was a quarantine station.

The seriffed ОБЕЗЗАРАЖЕНО was struck in purple ink between July 1899 and November 1900, and probably later. Often attributed to St. Petersburg, its provenance seems beyond doubt, proven by handstamps on registered letters.
GRANITZA : Frontier with Austrian Poland


A proving cover. The 6 Jan. c.d.s. GRANITZA PETROVSK shows it was routed through Italy and Austria, for treatment at the Russian frontier.
GAOUĐAN, Persian frontier


Only envelopes with suspect contents were opened for fumigation. The address suggests stamps in this instance. No seals had been issued, so the staff poured hot wax over newspaper fragment to reseal it. Three examples are known.

No usages of this relatively common cachet are recorded between Spring 1899 and late 1905, after which the Persian cachet reads HOUĎA.
GAOUDAN, Persian frontier

4.3.1899. Registered, Meched to Sumatra, directed ‘London’. Disinfected at Gaoudan (shaky 45 mm. cachet) and backstamped in the post office, where a dotted-circle Russian registration mark was applied.

Thence by rail to Krasnovodsk for steamship across the Caspian to Baku. By rail to Batum for the steamship to Odessa. Railway to Granitza. By Austrian and Italian trains to Brindisi (Italian AMB. back-stamp of 8.3.) P. & O. steamer to Pt. Said, where Arcadia took it to Colombo, arr. 2.4.99. P. & O. Coromandel to Penang: backstamped N.I. Postagent on 16.4.99 and Medan, 18.4.99. Deli(tua) is 20 miles south of Medan.
DZHULFA, Persian frontier

17.5.1900. Tabriz to Moscow, via Tbilisi. Disinfected at Julfa, (Persian), a military garrison and railhead where the few mails from locations west of the Caspian Sea are known treated only December 1899 to May 1900. The purple cachet differs from that used at Gaoudan, at only 42 mm. instead of 43.5 mm.

Although it is assumed that both Gaoudan and Julfa were issued with cachets in May 1897, mail for Europe was not cachetted, (and so presumably not treated). e.g. in July 1897.

This registered letter originated in Julfa but was sent to Teheran for inclusion in the bagged mails for Europe, via Gaoudan.
22.5.1900. Peking to St. Petersburg, fumigated at the only border crossing, built by Russia 4 \textit{versts} north of Kyakhta. The 43 mm. cachet (exclusive of the full-stop, which usually failed to print), is recorded used July 1897 to June 1900.

Treatment of mail stopped well before the Trans-Siberian Railway, which did not pass through Troitskosavsk, opened for through traffic.
Batum had a handwritten ‘forerunner’ as well as a typical handstamp. The first of a pair of remarkable envelopes from Egypt, addressed to the same person in Isfahan.

18.8.1898. Cairo to Isfahan, directed ‘via Constantinople’, presumably by sea. From there to Batum, where it entered Russia.

Having no cachet at that time, the post master there wrote ОБЕЗЗАРАЖЕНО in blue crayon on the reverse, the only example seen for any Russian quarantine.

From Batum, by rail and steamer via Baku & Rasht to Teheran. Arrived 17.9.1898

(Coll. Zonneveld)
21.11.1899. Cairo to Isfahan. No direction, but via Constantinople was now the norm. Backstamped Tabriz and Teheran 23.12.1899. The fumigation cachet of Batum, (where it entered Russia), measures 42 mm. (excluding the final dot).

(Coll. Zonneveld)

Fumigated, (card shows signs of rough handling). A 45 mm. warped cachet applied. Arr. St. P/burg 17.1.1900 (O.S.), 9 days from Port Said.

28.6.1900. Ismailia to Finland. By rail to Alexandria, then by R.O.P.i.T. steamer to Odessa, where it was fumigated. Cachet 47 mm, (excl. dot).

Arrived at St. Petersburg on 24.6.1900, (O.S.) Eight days transit from Alexandria.

Unbagged post cards from Egypt were ineligible for the faster services to ports in Italy, (Brindisi, Naples), used for mailboats coming through the Suez Canal.
2.10.1901. Mersin in Turkey, Russian P.O., registered to Paris.

Conveyed by R.O.P.i.T steamer from Const’ple to Odessa. Thence to Marseille for Paris. 18 days transit in all. (ex-Meyer, Coll. V.T.)

The sans-serif cachet measures 44 x 5 mm.-no stop is visible. The curvature is much less pronounced than of the earlier type. They are all presumed made by a rubber stamp.

(The small circular mark on the reverse is of a postman in Paris unable to locate the addressee).
5.6.1900. From the Crimea, (perhaps from ship under quarantine), to Göteborg. The boxed cachet, ‘Cleaned in / Feod.(osiya) Quarantine’ measures 37x 13 mm.

(Coll. Vladimir Tyukov)
FEODOSIA

Feodosia had a quarantine, as attested by at least four different postcard views.

A fine view of the esplanade, sent to Dundee in May 1906, with the message, *This is a view of Theodosia, which we didn’t see, being in quarantine – are having a terribly stormy day today & wish we were safely in a berth.*
In the summer of 1899, a virulent outbreak of plague at Yingkow in Russian Manchuria caused departing vessels to be quarantined at each port of call for ten days. The plague was over by November 1899.

But in summer 1902, cholera, (widespread in China), entered Manchuria through Yingkow. The Russians quarantined the sick and disinfected the trains, but the disease spread. It seems possible that disinfection of mail from the Far East by Russia – cachetted at Vladivostok - was occasioned by cholera after 1902, despite the international agreement that disinfection of mail against cholera was futile.
13.4.1903. San Francisco to Vladivostok, censored on arrival. Uniquely, it has a backstamp of Port Arthur, though most probably fumigated at Vladivostok.

PORT ARTHUR is an unlikely quarantine station. An ice-free harbour, it was leased from China for 25 years in 1898. If a quarantine station, it should have been listed in the Law of 1901. The Russians had intended that mails landed at Port Arthur should be sent by rail via Mukden to Harbin, but the railway had not been completed because of the ‘Boxer’ rebellion. A mis-sort seems more likely than disinfection at Port Arthur and then by steamship to Vladivostok.

A half-dozen Vladivostok cachets have been recorded, some struck in grey ink, but only between April and November, 1903; and no others backstamped thus.
ASTRAKHAN

Every known usage of a disinfection cachet in the period 1897 to 1906 was on mail from places abroad. From 1910 this is no longer true.

Measures taken between 1910 and the outbreak of W.W.1 were directed against an imminent epidemic of plague in the Russian Caucasus. The International Sanitary Conference held in Paris, 1911-12, was warned by Russian delegate, Dr. Zabolotny. He and Dr. Haffkine had studied 10,000 cases of pneumonic plague in Manchuria, the earliest in hunters of tarbagans, (marmot.) Chinese huntsmen ate the fat of the axillary lymphatic gland as a delicacy. The mission found pure cultures of plague bacilli in human cadavers in the frozen soil.

No Post Office regulations for fumigating mail are known after its mandated abolition in May 1900. (Later usages of handstamps are known for five offices).


The ОБЕЗЗАРАЖЕНО is similar to those of 1900, but new, at 41mm. without final stop. Public safety (and the rarity of covers) makes Odessa as the location of treatment improbable: disinfection in the Caucasus seems much more likely.
ASTRAKHAN GUBERNIYA

27.7.1911. From Novaya Kazanka, (Astrakhan Guberniya), to St. Petersburg.

(Coll. David Jay)

The disinfection cachet in lower-case lettering is otherwise unrecorded. It is unlikely that this village had a cachet: most probably struck in ASTRAKHAN.

A Dr. D. N. Zabolotny gave evidence to the International Sanitary Conference in Paris, 1911-12, that plague was endemic in the Astrakhan region earlier in the 20th century. The revival of treatment of mail, by whatever Russian agency, was surely against plague and not cholera.
ASTRAKHAN

26.10.1912. Reval (Tallinn), via St. Peters burg, (27.10.) to Rakhin ke, population 12,000. It was 503 kms. N.W. of Astrakhan. The envelope is addressed to:

Dr. Dmitry Yakovlevitch Feodorov, who is fighting the plague.

Rakhin ke was one of the seven towns visited by plague in the Summer of 1912.


(Coll. David Jay)

The 43 mm. ОБЕЗЗАРАЖЕНО is similar to that ascribed to Astrakhan in 1912. But it is more likely that it was struck at BAKU, to which it probably travelled by sea. Arrivals from a plague area would seem much more ‘dangerous’ there.

There had been 45 deaths from plague in Astrakhan between May 25th. and June 5th. 1914.
A SUMMARY of KNOWN FUMIGATION CACHETS, 1897-1914

Land borders, 1897 – 1906

VOLOCHISK
1. Sans-serif, 4 x 42 mm. (43 with stop) Purple, June 1897 to December 1898
   Black, March 1899
2. Serifed, 5.5 x 47 mm. Purple, August 1899 (to be verified)

GRANITSA (Granica)
1. Sans-serif, 4 x 44.5, (46 with stop.) Purple, late May 1899 & March 1900 (tbv)
2. Serifed, 5 x 48 mm. No stop. Purple, July 1899 to November 1900.

GAOUDAN (Houda)
Type 1. Sans-serif, 4.5 x 43.5 mm. No stop? Purple, May 1898 to September 1906.
1a.? ditto 5 x 45 mm, no stop. ? As described by K.F Meyer, Sept. 1906.
(N.B. Nothing seen between 1902 and September 1904)

DZHULFA (Julfa)
Type 1. Sans-serif, 4 x 42 mm. No stop? Purple, December 1899 to August 1900.

TROITSKOSAVSK
Type 1. Sans –serif, 4 x 43 mm. No stop. Purple, July 1897 to May 1900.

Seaports, 1897 - 1903
Cachets for BAKU are believed to exist, but no examples seen.

BATUM
Type 1. Manuscript, blue crayon. Blue, August 1898.
2. Sans-serif,? 4 x 42 mm.(43 w. stop.) Purple, November 1899.

ODESSA
Type 1. Sans-serif, curved (concave) 5 x 45 mm, (46 w. stop.) Purple, Dec. 1899 to Jan.1901.
2. ditto ditto 5.5 x 47 mm. (48 w. stop.) Purple-blue, May to June 1900.
2a ? ? 6.5 x 46 mm. illus. by K.F. Meyer, p. 293, May 1900.
3. ditto straight 5 x 44 mm. No stop ? Purple, October 1901.

VLADIVOSTOK
Type 1. Sans-serif, 4 x 43 mm. (44 with stop.) Grey, April and November 1903.
Purple, May, October ; grey-blue November 1903.

PORT ARTHUR (putative)
Type 1. Sans-serif, 4 x 42 mm. (43 with stop.) Purple, May 1903.

FEODOSIA, (status uncertain.)
Type 1. Cursive, in box 37 x 13 mm. Black, June 1900.

All stations since 1907

ASTRAKHAN
Type 1. Sans-serif, 5 x 41 mm. (42 w. stop.) Purple, October 1910.
Type 3. Sans-serif, 4 x 43 mm. ? No stop. Purple, December 1912.

BAKU (putative)
Type 1. Sans-serif, ?4.5 x 43 mm. Purple, December 1914.