

Usage of The Ring Stationery of Finland, 1891-1911

Synopsis

This exhibit of the ring stationery displays the usage of this politically motivated Russian intrusion into the postal system of the Grand Duchy of Finland.

Items of special significance are displayed with a light blue colored backing. These include; a registered wrapper to German Southwest Africa; two registered lettercards; an example of the mistaken application of the **FRAN RYSSLAND** harbor stamp on a short-paid postal card to South Africa; the return portion of a double card, returned from British Guiana; an example of the use of the August, 1900 "Mourning" label and an example of usage after demonitization and invalidation.

Mixed frankings with the 1889 or 1901 Finnish penni denominated stamps are also seldom seen, and are displayed with a light cream colored backing.

Historical discussion:

Sweden ceded Finland to Russia in 1809 after a series of military defeats, and the country was annexed to the Empire at the Peace Treaty of Hamina on September 17, 1809. Finland took the status of an autonomous grand duchy. The period of autonomy was a peaceful and prosperous one, but with the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, a downward trend began in Russia, and Tsar Alexander III began to appoint conservatives to various high positions. One of the goals of the Russian bureaucracy was to put an end to any special rights that existed in the western flank of the Empire, and the Finnish postal system was targeted to be absorbed into the Russian way of things.

The Postal Manifesto decreed in 1890 by Tsar Alexander III brought Finland's postal service under the control of the Russian Ministry of the Interior. (This was against the governmental regulations of the Autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland.) On May 1, 1891, an order went out from the Ministry for the use in Finland of postal stationery and postage stamps of the so-called Russian designs, printed in denominations of Russian currency, but with identifying "rings". The ring designs indicated that the price paid for them was credited to the Crown of Finland. The ring stamps and stationery were valid until May 14, 1911.

Although the ring stamps and postal stationery were sold only in Finland, they were also valid without restriction throughout the Russian Empire. In turn, the purely Russian stamps were valid in Finland, but were not sold there until 1899-1900. The ring items could be purchased with either Finnish or Russian currency, and therefore postal clerks had to maintain two separate cash drawers.

The Finnish people did not like the kopek frankings and preferred to continue the use of their own penni-valued postage. **Therefore, none of the ring stationery can be considered common.** It was issued in very limited quantities, and much of it was destroyed, unused, in 1911. At all times during the twenty-year period that the ring items were valid, usage of the contemporary Finnish issues, denominated in penni, was the prevalent postal system.

Key Dates:

- October 17, 1889 – Stamps issued with Russian text in addition to Finnish and Swedish
- June 12, 1890 – Issuance of the Postal Manifesto
- July 14, 1890 – Ruling specifies that as of January 1, 1890 Russian currency was equally valid tender in Finland.
- March 31, 1891 – Announcement that the Ring stamps and stationery will be issued, and that they could be paid for at the post office counter in either Finnish or Russian currency.
- May 1, 1891 – Issuance of Ring stamps and stationery
- January 1, 1892 – 1889 Finnish Coat of Arms issue no longer valid for mail to Russia and the Empire.
- July 4, 1900 - Finnish 1889 issue withdrawn and invalid for mail to foreign destinations effective August 15, 1900, and within Finland, effective January 14, 1901. Items without Russian inscription declared invalid for postage, and replaced with Russian-type Eagle stamps
- August 14, 1900 - Mourning Label usage begins
- August 16, 1900 – Mourning label prohibited.
- May 14, 1911 – Invalidation

Notes to aid in the understanding of this exhibit:**Language:**

Three languages come into play during this period – Most of the inhabitants spoke either Finnish or Swedish, and a large amount of correspondence was written in Cyrillic.

Currency:

One kopek = .01 ruple. However, the postal system and the currency system did not exactly correspond. For example, while 10 penni would buy a 3 kopek postal card, 5 penni would cover 2 kopeks and 25 penni would purchase a 10 kopek lettercard or entire.

The confusion created by this inconsistent conversion led to some interesting and very rare mixed frankings in the early years of usage.

Rates:

The Russian Empire used the luoti, which was the equivalent of about 13 grams. This measure was used for Finnish mail within the Empire until December 31, 1900, with the gram measure being used for other foreign destinations.

Calendar:

Finland used the Gregorian calendar, while Russia and most of the rest of the Empire used the Julian. At that time, there was a 13 day difference between the two, resulting in Finland covers which passed through St. Petersburg receiving a transit cancel which predated the Finnish one by 12 or 13 days.

Cancellations:

The most common cancel is the 1893/94 Russian type circular date stamp in either bi-lingual or tri-lingual (Swedish added) form.

The 1888 "Finland" cancels appear in the first few years of the ring stationery, but are scarce due to the preference of the Finnish people to use penni instead of kopek franking.

The double ring cancels with the town name and no country identifier were used parallel to the Finland cancels, and are also very scarce.

Foreign cancels are found on mail posted at various harbors, the most common of which is the **FRAN FINLAND** handstamp used in Stockholm harbor.

Covers are also occasionally found with railroad line, village/postal stop and ship cancels.

Figure cancels, applied at rural locations are rarities on the ring stationery, as they had been all but phased out by that time, having been replaced by postal stop cancels, as well as the increased use of town cancels.

Destinations:

Common destinations, in addition to the Empire, are Sweden and Germany. All other destinations are elusive, with the fringes of Europe such as Portugal and Turkey, as well as South America, Asia and Oceania being considered rare.

Overfranking:

Overfranking is quite common, as the combination of dual currency and dual weight systems was very confusing to the average correspondent.

The habit of using stationery intended for foreign usage in domestic situations, such as a 10 kopek item to an inland or Empire destination occurred so frequently, that a number of postal historians believe that when the smaller post offices were out of stock of the lower values they were instructed to furnish the higher value at the lower cost. This meant that the kopek franking would still be used as opposed to penni franking at the proper rate.

Primary References:

Arvelin, *The Ring Stamps and Postal Stationery Centennial, May 1, 1991*, Hanko, 1991.

Quinby and Vorwerck, *Russia in Finland*, Special Edition of *The Posthorn*, February, 1997.

Other References:

Matilla, *Suomen Postimaksuja 1881-1985*, Loimaa. 1985. (Finnish Postal rates).

Post Offices in Finland 1638-1985, Philatelic Federation of Finland, 1988.

(Also sundry cancellation handbooks published by various authors and societies.)