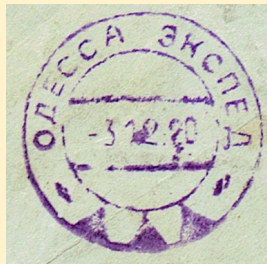


# Odessa: Clandestine Mail Surveillance, 1920-1941

Odessa, as Soviet Russia's main commercial port on the Black Sea and a major railroad terminal, played a strategic economic and military role. It was the gateway to the Ukrainian breadbasket from the south and therefore of primary concern to the Soviet secret police. It was also the home of a big post office, and a major mail-surveillance office called a "PK" (*Politicheskiiy Kontrol'*, or political monitoring site), where the secret police kept watch on some domestic and all foreign mail, incoming or outgoing. Many PKs were set up throughout the country; these were the Soviet successors to the Tsarist "Black Chambers". Among other things, the PKs resorted to postmark-like date stamps to flag censored mail.

From 1920 up to WWII, the Odessa PK is known to have used only three basic categories of clandestine mail-surveillance date stamps: "3 Triangles", "(V) *Izhitsa*" and "(Z) *Zet*." (There may well be others, but they have not yet been identified as such. The "*Zet*" postmark is extremely rare).



In these categories there are 5 recorded types of the "3 Triangles" three of the "*Izhitsa*" and two of the "*Zet*" date stamps, all of which are shown here. None of them are postmarks in the true sense of the word, but censor marks, because they were applied by secret censors and served no real postal function. Instead, they were a means of hidden communication between postal sorters in the employ of the secret police and between PK censors – the "first audience." They are one form of steganography, the science of hiding information, often in plain sight.

The "audience" for the "Received in Damaged Condition" markings, however, which were widely used in the USSR to explain away any damage to envelopes caused by the secret censors when they opened them up, was the general public. Only two types have been recorded for Odessa thus far.

## Outline of the Exhibit

### I. The First Audience: Postal Sorters and Other Secret Police Entities.

- A. cover with Odessa PK internal wax seal – only one recorded. p. 2
- B. 1<sup>st</sup> Period: The "3 Triangles" markings, 1920-1923. pp. 3-8
- C. 2<sup>nd</sup> Period: "*Izhitsa*" markings, 1925-1930. pp. 9-10
- D. 3<sup>rd</sup> Period: "*Izhitsa*" and "*Zet*" postmarks, 1931-1941. pp. 11-14

### II. The Second Audience: The General Public.

"Received in Damaged Condition" markings 1936-1940.

- A. 1<sup>st</sup> Period: Type 1 – 1936. p. 15
- B. 2<sup>nd</sup> Period: Type 2 -1937-1940. p. 16

Literature:

D.M. Skipton, S. Volis, "Soviet Clandestine Mail Surveillance 1917-1991" Chicago, USA, 2016.

# I. The "First Audience:" Postal Sorters and Other Secret Police Entities.

## A. Undated cover with an internal PK wax seal.

Private, ordinary mail to a foreign citizen.



**Above:** Tracing of the wax seal present on the cover.

**At right:** Undated cover addressed to a person with a Russian name at a café in Constantinople. (Circa 1923-early 1924). Franked with 4 RSFSR stamps and 5 Odessa cinderella charity stamps! It bears the triangular wax seal of the Odessa GPU PK. **Only recorded example!**



**Above:** Odessa cinderella Charity stamp present on the cover.



# I. The "First Audience:" Postal Sorters and Other Secret Police Entities.

## B. 1<sup>st</sup> Period: "3 Triangles" Date Stamps, 1920-1923.



In 1919, abnormal date stamps with three (rarely two) triangles at their base began to appear on mail sent abroad from the new Soviet state. Odessa's "3 Triangles" date stamps started the year after. Although censorship was widely suspected, there was no hard proof, so the debate as to their significance continued for many years. Eventually, researcher P. Batulin discovered and copied Paragraph 11 of the "Instructions on Military Censorship" (1919 amended in 1921):

*"To avoid instances where postal correspondence is examined twice by military censorship organs and to control the amount of time that correspondence is held up by the latter, all examined postal correspondence is to be stamped on the front of the envelopes using a **secret handstamp with three triangles**, the meaning of which must be kept strictly secret."*

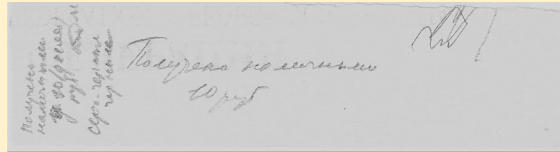
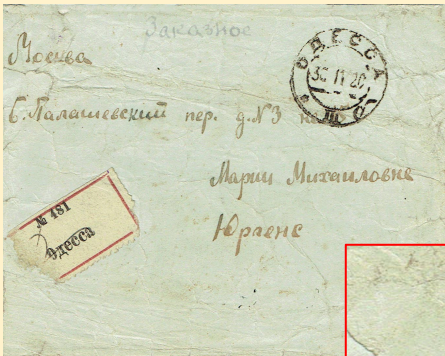
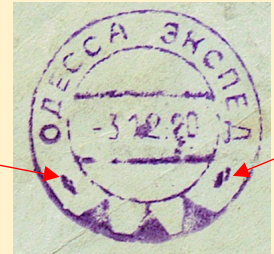
**Type 1: ODESSA EKSPED. (ОДЕССА ЭКСПЕД.)** date stamp with diamonds at lower sides

**Diameter:** 29 mm.

**Bridge height:** 8 mm.

**Period of use:** 1920. *Only recorded complete example in blue ink!*

Private, registered, domestic mail.



**Above:** Handwritten receipt (found inside of this cover) – Received 10 rub. in cash.

**Above:** Front with Odessa registration label. It was sent from Odessa to Moscow on November 30, 1920.

**At right:** Reverse with Odessa censorship (censored on Dec. 3 - 3 days after its posting) and Moscow arrival date stamps.



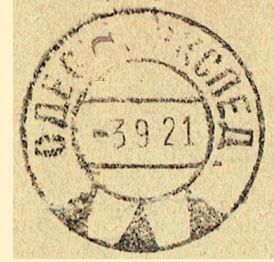
I. The "First Audience:" Postal Sorters and Other Secret Police Entities.  
 B. 1<sup>st</sup> Period: "3 Triangles" Date Stamps, 1920-1923.

**Type 2:** ODESSA EKSPED. (ОДЕССА ЭКСПЕД.) date stamp without devices at lower sides.

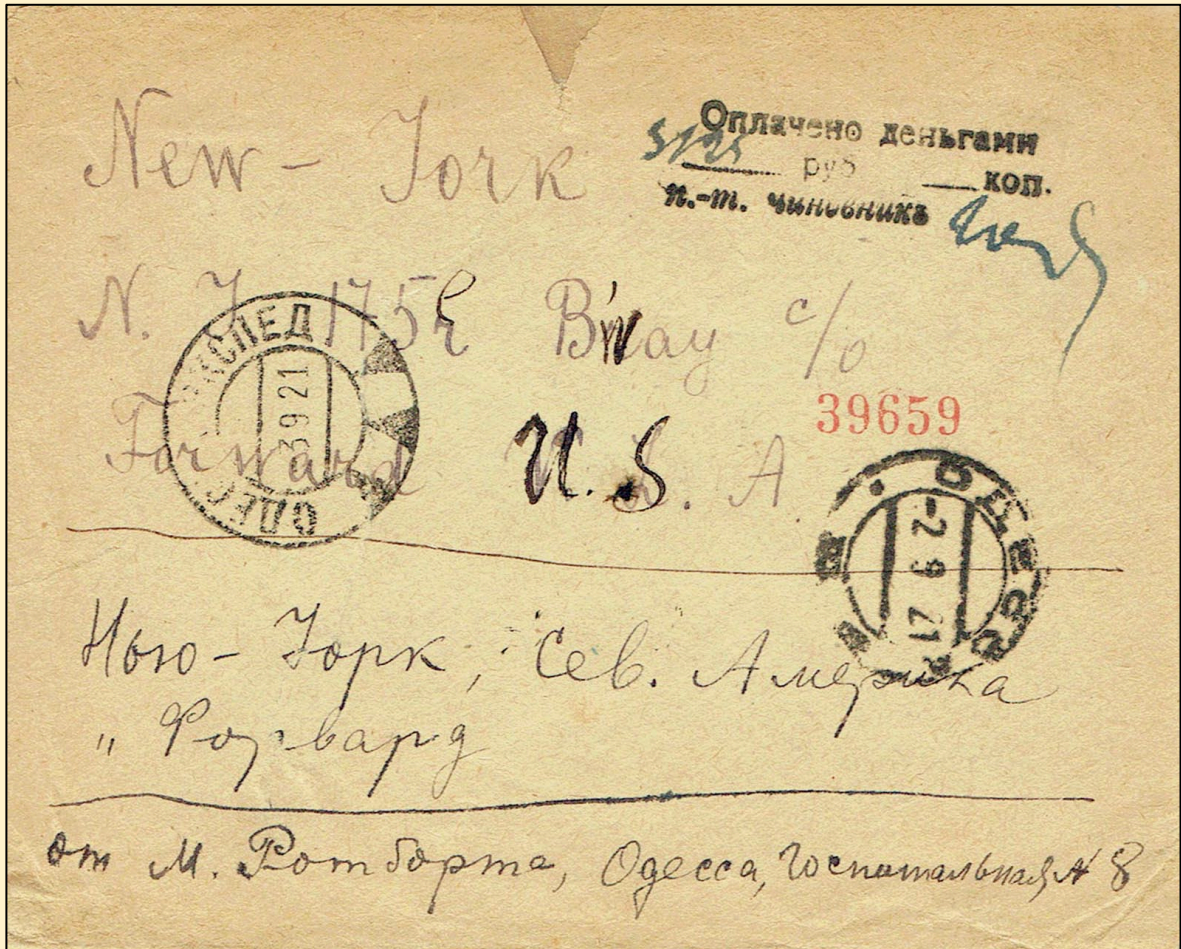
**Diameter:** 29 mm.

**Bridge height:** 8 mm.

**Period of use:** 1921.



Private, registered mail to a foreign firm.



**Above:** Registered cover (paid in cash) sent from Odessa to New York newspaper "Forward." Censored the day after its posting - September 3, 1921.

**At right:** Registration label and New York arrival date stamp on reverse.



I. The "First Audience:" Postal Sorters and Other Secret Police Entities.  
B. 1<sup>st</sup> Period: "3 Triangles" Date Stamps, 1920-1923.

**Type 3:** ODESSA-EKSPED. (ОДЕССА-ЭКСПЕД.) date stamp written with a hyphen.

**Diameter:** 29 mm.

**Bridge height:** 11 mm.

**Period of use:** Early 1922. 4 recorded.



Private, registered mail to a foreign aid organization.



A registered cover mailed from Odessa on January 1922, and censored the following day. It is addressed to Dr. Brender at the Central Aid Committee in Berlin. This was a voluminous Jewish aid correspondence that the Soviet secret police watched very closely.

I. The "First Audience:" Postal Sorters and Other Secret Police Entities.  
B. 1<sup>st</sup> Period: "3 Triangles" Date Stamps, 1920-1923.

Type 4: ODESSK-EKSPED (ОДЕССК-ЭКСПЕД) date stamp with diamonds at lower sides, upside down "2" in year date. (It was never corrected.)

Diameter: 29 mm.

Bridge height: 9 mm.

Period of use: 1922.



Private, registered mail to a foreign citizen.



Odessa to London, registered, sent and censored on May 23, 1922.

I. The "First Audience:" Postal Sorters and Other Secret Police Entities.  
 B. 1<sup>st</sup> Period: "3 Triangles" Date Stamps, 1920-1923.

**Type 5: ODESSA (ОДЕССА)** - no EKSPED., oddly angled "O" and slightly smaller "E."

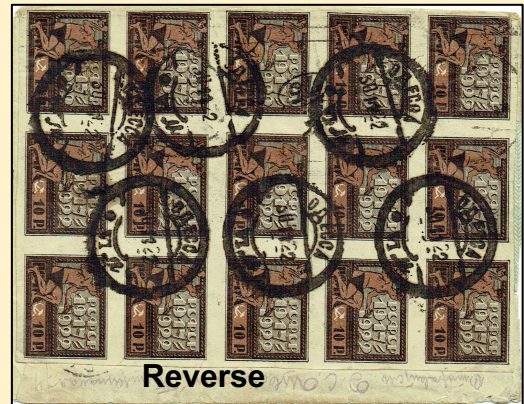
**Diameter:** 29 mm.

**Bridge height:** 9 mm.

**Period of use:** 1922.



In 1922, all pretense of a dispatch office was dropped from the "post mark." Now it was just the city name and the three triangles at the bottom, but even these date stamps were still different from regular, legitimate post marks because they lacked a serial letter or number.



Private, ordinary mail to a foreign firm.



An ordinary cover mailed from Odessa on Nov. 30, 1922, and censored the following day.

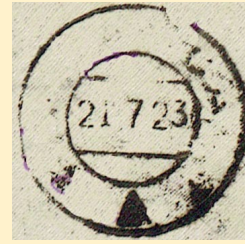
I. The "First Audience:" Postal Sorters and Other Secret Police Entities.  
 B. 1<sup>st</sup> Period: "3 Triangles" Date Stamps, 1920-1923.


**Type 5a:** All letters are missing from ODESSA (ОДЕССА) stamp.

**Diameter:** 29 mm.

**Bridge height:** 9 mm.

**Period of use:** 1923. 6 recorded.



After continues use and degradation the ODESSA "3-Triangles" date stamp lost all letters and was still used as a mute censorship date stamp. 



OD SSA

D SSA

Mute



Reverse

Private, ordinary mail to a foreign citizen.



An ordinary cover mailed from Odessa on July 7, 1923, and censored on the same day.



# I. The "First Audience:" Postal Sorters and Other Secret Police Entities. C. 2<sup>nd</sup> Period: "Izhitsa" Date Stamps, 1925-1930.



Two years after the "3 Triangles" markings disappeared; a new oddity popped up the "Izhitsa." Ostensibly a serial letter or a branch office number, it was the last letter of the Old Cyrillic alphabet that had been abolished in 1918, and the letter had been dropped from general usage many decades before that. There were three types of "Izhitsa" marks used during the period from 1925-1930, with the letter at the base of the date stamp (Type 1) or on the left side (Types 2 & 3). All are rare.

**Type 1:** Monolingual ODESSA "V-Izhitsa" with the letter "V" at the base of date stamp.

**Diameter:** 29 mm.

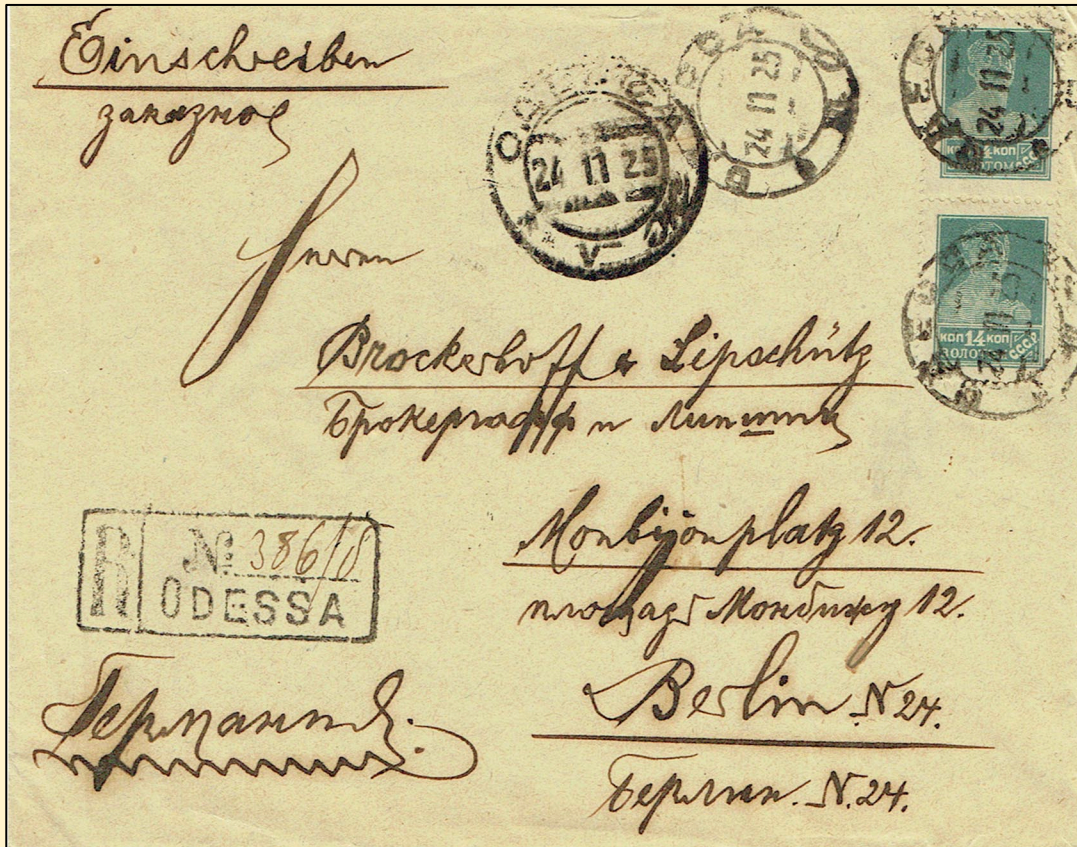
**Bridge height:** 9 mm.

**Period of use:** 1925-1928. 10 recorded.



Why "Izhitsa" was chosen for the postmark is unknown, but the choice may have been due a Chekist's dark sense of humor. As A. Vinokurov pointed out in a 2000 article citing the S. Ozhegov dictionary, the idiomatic phrase "to write *izhitsa* to someone" meant to give a stern warning or even whip him as punishment. Another tell-tale sign that the "Izhitsa" date stamps were not fulfilling a true postal function is that not one of them from Odessa has been recorded with a serial other than "ж" (zh).

Private registered mail to a foreign firm.



Odessa to Berlin, registered, sent and censored on Nov. 24, 1925.

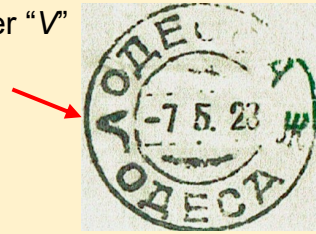
I. The "First Audience:" Postal Sorters and Other Secret Police Entities.  
B. 2<sup>nd</sup> Period: "Izhitsa" Date Stamps, 1925-1930.

**Type 2:** bilingual ODESSA/ODESA "Izhitsa" with the letter "V" on the left of the date stamp.

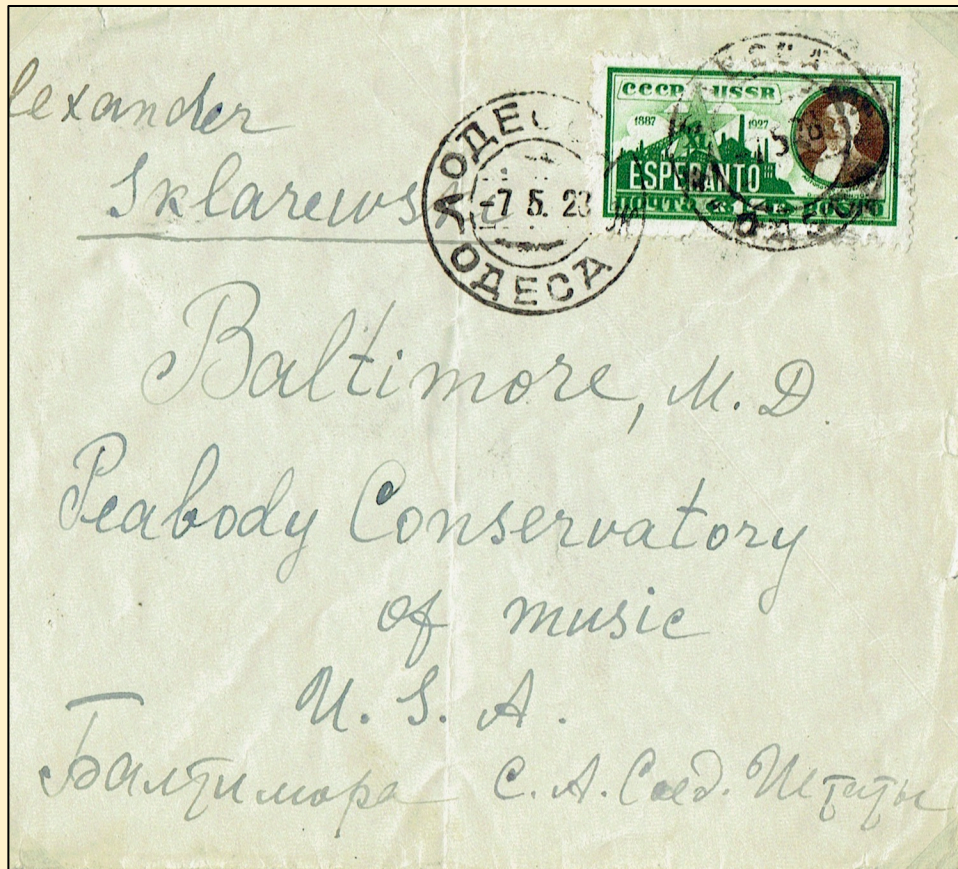
**Diameter:** 29 mm.

**Bridge height:** 9 mm.

**Period of use:** 1928-1930. 12 recorded.



Private, ordinary mail to a foreign citizen.



Odessa to Baltimore, posted and censored on May 7, 1928. The addressee, Aleksander Sklarevski, had been on the faculty of the music conservatory before he and his family fled Russia soon after the October 1917 Bolshevik coup. His son Rimma Sklarevski, would eventually become a driving force in the U.S. reincarnation of the Rossica Society. As a White Russian emigre of some prominence, Aleksander Sklarevski was of interest to the Soviet Secret Police.

I. The “First Audience:” Postal Sorters and Other Secret Police Entities.  
 D. 3<sup>rd</sup> Period: “Izhitsa” and “Zet” Date Stamps, 1931-1941.

**Type 3:** Bilingual small ODESSA/ODESA “Izhitsa” with the letter “V” on the left of the date stamp.

**Diameter:** 29 mm.

**Bridge height:** 9 mm.

**Period of use:** 1939-1940 **One of two recorded and the latest “Izhitsa” for Odessa!**



Type 3

**Type 3 “Izhitsa”** date stamp on private, international mail transiting Odessa. Type 3 has a smaller “Izhitsa,” the “ODESA” font at bottom is smaller, the letter “ж” is spaced differently, and the date stamp itself is more crudely produced. Even the bars aren’t horizontal to one another. The precise meaning of the “Izhitsa” marking is unknown, but it had to have been much more than simply “we already censored this” (like 3 Triangles), otherwise there would be far more of them recorded.

**Type 2** is shown for comparison.

Private, transit, ordinary mail to a foreign citizen.



A postcard from Romania to Lvov, posted on February 22, 1940, and censored on February 26 at Odessa. In keeping with the “Izhitsa” date stamps that preceded it a decade earlier, it is a serial “ж.” This usage of the “Izhitsa” date stamp came 10 years after the next latest “Izhitsa.” The reason for the decade-long gap in usage remains a mystery, but it could have been re-introduced due to the start of WWII.

I. The “First Audience:” Postal Sorters and Other Secret Police Entities.  
 D. 3<sup>rd</sup> Period: “Izhitsa” and “Zet” Date Stamps, 1931-1941.



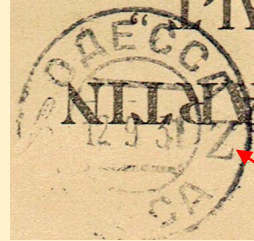
After the “Izhitsa” markings apparently disappeared in 1930 (before resurfacing in 1940), another strange “postmark” popped up in 1931, only to vanish until 1939. This was the “Zet,” a Latin letter that was a stranger to the Cyrillic alphabet. But per Vinokurov again, the Russian dictionary by V. Dal’ gives the definition of the Russian verb *zetit’* literally, to zet someone, as “to spy on a person.” The Odessa “Zet” date stamps have been recorded almost exclusively on mail from Polish refugee camps in Romania to the western Ukrainian city of Lvov, recently annexed by the Soviet Red Army in the September-October 1939 “Polish Campaign.”

**Type 1:** Bilingual ODESSA/ODESA small “Zet” with the letter “Z” on right of the date stamp.

**Diameter:** 29 mm.

**Bridge height:** 11 mm.

**Period of use:** 1931, 1939-1940. It is the earliest recorded Odessa “Zet” for either of the two known types!



**Type 1 - 1931**

Private, ordinary mail to a foreign commercial firm



Odessa to a commercial firm’s agent in Paris, censored on September 12, 1931. This cover with its “Zet” date stamp is an anomaly, falling far outside the previously recorded range of usage of 1939-1940 **Type 1** bi-lingual “small Zet” serial “e.”

I. The "First Audience:" Postal Sorters and Other Secret Police Entities.  
D. 3<sup>rd</sup> Period: "Izhitsa" and "Zet" Date Stamps, 1931-1941.

**Type 1:** Bilingual ODESSA/ODESA small "Zet" with the letter "Z" on right of the date stamp.

**Diameter:** 29 mm.

**Bridge height:** 11 mm.

**Period of use:** 1931, 1939-1941. 5 recorded!



No examples of a "Zet" date stamp have been recorded from 1932 through 1938, so it is unknown whether they continued in use without interruption during those years or were discarded for a time and then resurrected when mail began to flow during the first year of WWII in 1939. The "Izhitsas" and "Zets" disappeared in 1941, after overt universal military censorship was instituted in the USSR.

Incoming private international mail transiting Odessa.



Targoviste, Romania to Lvov, USSR and censored at Odessa by the Secret Police on December 14, 1939.

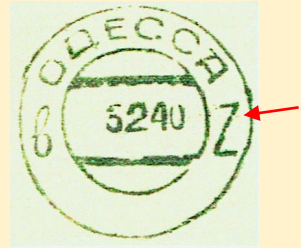
I. The "First Audience:" Postal Sorters and Other Secret Police Entities.  
D. 3<sup>rd</sup> Period: "Izhitsa" and "Zet" Date Stamps, 1931-1941.

**Type 2:** Bilingual ODESSA large "Zet" with the letter "Z" on the right of the date stamp.

**Diameter:** 30 mm.

**Bridge height:** 11 mm.

**Period of use:** 1939-1941. 4 recorded!



All of the examples recorded for this type that are struck well enough to show the serial letter on the left side are serial "6," the same as for the "small Zet" markings.

Incoming, private international mail transiting Odessa



Buzau, Romania to Lvov, USSR via Odessa. Censored by the People's Communications Commissariat (violet machine mark) and again, on January 17, 1940, by the Secret Police.

## II. The "Second Audience:" The General Public.

### A. "Received in Damaged Condition" markings 1936-1940.

**Type 1:** Received in the Odessa Exchange Office in Poor Condition. Postal Agent.

**Length:** 47 mm.

**Height:** 20 mm.

**Period of use:** 1936. **Only recorded example!**

Reçu au bureau déchange  
d'Odessa en mauvais état  
de section.  
Agent de Poste.

Many examples of "Received In Damaged Condition" (RIDC) markings have been recorded from the USSR, most of them on mail items that either show no traces of damage to the casual eye or obvious wrinkling from too much steam applied to open the flaps. However, RIDC markings from Odessa are extremely rare and such a handstamp from 1936, is the only one recorded.

The registered cover below, was mailed from Sobolevka, Vinnitsa Province, Ukraine to Rusca-Montana in western Romania on April 26, 1936 and censored in Odessa on May 3, 1936.

Private, registered mail to a foreign citizen.



## II. The "Second Audience:" The General Public.

### B. "Received in Damaged Condition" markings 1936-1940.

**Type 2:** *Received in the Odessa Exchange Office in Poor Condition. Postal Agent.*

**Length:** 50 mm.

**Height:** 20 mm.

**Period of use:** 1937-1940. **One of two recorded and the earliest for Odessa!**

Another extremely rare Odessa RIDC marking appeared in 1937 and survived through 1940. Only two examples of this type are recorded.

**At right:** Fragment of the reverse with RIDC marking.

The registered cover below was mailed from Kiev, Ukraine Vinnitsa Province to Istanbul, Turkey on February 8, 1937 and secretly censored in Odessa on February 12, 1937.

**Reçu au bureau d'échange  
d'Odessa en mauvais état  
de section.**

**Agent de Poste.**



Private, registered mail to a foreign citizen.

