

The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

UKRAINIAN NATIONAL POSTAL STAMPS -- COMMEMORATING UKRAINIAN INDEPENDENCE

by Lubow Wolynetz, Curator

Commemorating the independence of one's country is a deeply emotional and highly patriotic event. It is during these celebratory moments that we tend to reflect upon and highlight various aspects of the many achievements on the way to freedom and sovereignty. History books which review and analyze the events are of primary importance as source material for the study of this important observance. But, there are items, perhaps considered by some to be of a less obvious nature, which really add valuable information to the historical study of particular events; and they are, to a certain degree, also concerned with national history and thus significant in their own way. The items that I have in mind are Ukrainian national postal stamps and the meaningful role they have played in the short-lived Ukrainian Independence of 1918; and the, hopefully definitive, independence of 1991 whose 25th anniversary we are currently observing.

Postal systems, which in most cases are governmental monopolies, are an essential and indispensable feature of good administrations. Benjamin Franklin, even back in the 18th century, claimed that you cannot have a well-run government without a well-run postal system. Newly formed national governments were especially mindful of this fact and did their utmost to keep the lines of communication through the postal system functioning, even though they had other enormous problems to deal with. Regardless of present day technological innovations and computerized communication, the postal system communication is still vital, and postal stamps as tools of this system are still flourishing. A specific group of people – namely, philatelists and stamp collectors – is intensely devoted to the preservation and study of postal stamps. Thankfully, in the Diaspora, we have specialists who

library is fortunate to have a solid collection of Ukrainian postal stamps from the turbulent 1918 independence era and the 1991 independence to the present; we also have many other official and unofficial stamps (non-postal, private and organizational stamps, propaganda stamps, Displaced Person's Camp postage, etc.).

National postal stamps, more often than not, represent symbols of their countries statehood and certain aspects of their heritage. When Ukraine became independent in 1918, it was an unknown entity in the western world. Aware of the importance of first impressions, the committee preparing the first national stamps wanted to present to the world and to its own people images to underscore Ukrainian identity. This would be done in the form of national symbols, distinctive features of the people, important historical events and famous persons, cultural achievements, uniqueness of the land, and so forth. These stamps were to make a positive, memorable, and intriguing effect. The department responsible for



the production of the stamps tried its utmost to achieve good graphic design of fine artistic quality, with original lettering and wording, so as to be esthetically striking. All this would thus attract and stimulate interest in the country that produced these stamps.

The first 5 national postal stamps were printed on July 18, 1918 and consisted of 1) The Trident (Ukrainian national symbol which was forbidden to be used during the tsarist days and later during the communist occupation) with the sun in the background whose rays fall presumably upon Ukrainian

land; 2) A peasant with a scythe (the agrarian lifestyle of the Ukrainian populace, the largest producers of grain); 3) A profile of a young girl's head in a floral wreath (traditional head-dress of Ukrainian folk and a national costume) – an allegorical depiction of "Young Ukraine" (rebirth of the nation); 4) A Trident within a floral wreath; 5) A 50 shah (coin) face



devote their time and expertise to this subject. I am especially grateful to Inger Kuzych, whose articles and books on the subject of Ukrainian philately supplied me with the necessary information for the composition of this article.

Our Ukrainian Museum and Li-



value within a floral ornament with two postal horns (symbol of postal delivery used in the olden days to signal the approaching of the mail coach). For the design of these stamps the best known graphic artist were called upon – Heorhii Narbut, 1886-1920, president of the Ukrainian Academy of Arts in Kyiv, and Antin Sereda, 1890-1961. The second series of postal stamps of the Ukrainian National Re-

public were printed in 1920 in Vienna and executed by the renowned artist Mykola Ivasiuk, 1865-1930? (another talented victim of the Stalinist purge). These stamps depicted important historic personages, e.g., Bohdan Khmelnytsky, Ivan Mazepa, Pavlo Polubotok, Taras Shevchenko, Symon Petliura, Cossacks sailing on their chaika boats, windmills of Ukraine, a typical peasant house, a monument to St. Volodymyr, and others. However, because there was a shortage of the newly printed national stamps, old tsarist Russian stamps were used after being superimposed with the Ukrainian national symbol – the Trident. These and many other stamps of this era we have in our collection. This was the contribution to the world of philately by the Independent Ukraine of the early 20th century.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s brought freedom and independence to the Republics which were within its fold. Ukraine became sovereign and independent. The declaration of its sovereignty was proclaimed on July 16th 1990 and on August 24th 1991 when Ukraine declared its independence. In view of postal service, similar problems arose for the new Independent Ukraine as during its short-lived independence of the 1920s. There was a desperate need for stamps to conduct postal service. As was the case seventy years prior, former USSR stamps were used after being superimposed with the Ukrainian emblem – the Trident. In reality, Ukrainian history seems to repeat itself continuously. Nevertheless, the newly organized Ukrainian Post Office of Independent Ukraine began the production of its own postal stamps.

Prior to the printing of the official Ukrainian post office stamps, a Sovereignty stamp, not issued by the Ukrainian government, but by the collapsing Soviet government commemorating the

first anniversary of Ukraine's Sovereignty was issued on July 10th 1991. It still had the wording "Poshta SSSR", but in reduced lettering. The stamp had a depiction of a Ukrainian girl in a national costume holding up a banner proclaiming the sovereignty of Ukraine with the appropriate dates. Inger Kuzych feels that "although not a stamp issued by a Ukrainian government, this attractive release, due to its historic significance, nevertheless deserves to precede the regular stamp issues of reestablished Ukraine". The graphic design was done by the renowned artist Oleksander Ivakhnenko, 1949-2014. After this first stamp, there followed a myriad of stamps issued by



the Ukrainian Postal Office which have appeared until today. Simply by perusing the multitude of stamps and first day covers produced by the contemporary Ukrainian Postal Office, one can immerse oneself into Ukrainian past: its culture and history, its accomplishments, its heroes and traditions, its folklore and folklife, its stamps commemorating dates of major events - political, historical, cultural, etc. There is so much to learn, to be inspired, to be intrigued by just one little postal stamp, if one delves into the subject it depicts. Most of these stamps are also considered to be impressive works of art.

Our Ukrainian Museum and Library has a huge collection of Ukrainian postal stamps from the past, and the present, as well as many non-governmental stamps. These collections we preserve for posterity, hoping that philatelic scholars, and those interested in doing research on this subject might benefit from what we have collected and preserved.

P.S. Please remember The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford in your donations and your will. Donate generously. We need your support in order to continue our dedicated work.



Explore and Experience Our Past