

## Stamp Collecting in the Soviet Union It Could Get You a Train Trip to the Gulag or Worse

by Stan Cronwall

When the armies of the Soviet Union began clawing back the territory overrun by Nazi German in 1941 and 1942, dictator of the USSR Joseph Stalin was highly regarded by many in the west as good old “Uncle Joe”.

Largely unknown to westerners was the lengthy “enemies list” that Stalin and his inner circle had compiled and acted upon in the form of various purges. The inner circle included the following Viacheslav M. Molotov, Lazar Kagenovich, Marshal Kliment Voroshilov, Andrei Zhdanov, Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, Sergei M. Kirov, Valerian V. Kulbyshev, Genrikh Yagoda, and later Levrentri Beria. Kulbyshev died from acute alcoholism and a heart attack.

The inner circle itself saw some members purged. NKVD head Yagoda was found guilty in the last of the so called Show Trials and shot. Kirov was shot to death in his office. Marshal Tukhachevsky one of the five original Marshals of the Soviet Union and Chief of Staff was brought before a military tribunal, found guilty and shot.

It is interesting to note that Stalin although he succeeded Lenin in 1924 was not pictured on a Soviet stamp until the November 23, 1934 set of 6 stamps marking the first decade without Lenin. Stalin and Lenin appear on a single stamp Scott 545. Stalin next appeared on a single stamp in a set of 7 issued in March 1938 commemorating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Worker’s and Peasants Red Army (Scott 634) which has him reviewing cavalry troops.

Here are the first two stamps where Stalin appeared: (Scott 545 and Scott 634)



Members of Stalin’s inner circle were also conspicuous by their absence on stamps except for Sergei M. Kirov pictured on a November 1935 issue (Scott 582). This stamp was part of a continuation of the Portrait series remembering the murders of prominent Soviet Revolutionaries.

While Stalin viewed Kirov as a threat in life, he capitalized on his death. He immediately began a “cult of Kirov” being the first mourner at Kirov’s state funeral in Red Square and served as a pallbearer. In effect, Kirov was completely rehabilitated as we will see as his memory is honored later on other stamp issues

The purges of 1937-1938 (The Great Purge) were perhaps the most devastating to the Soviet military when literally thousands of senior officers were purged as Stalin and his minions decapitated the top of all branches. This included highly experienced and ranked individuals who had served on the Republican (Soviet supported) side of the Spanish Civil War developing tactics and fighting the Italian-German forces abetting Franco’s insurgents.

Depending which source is chosen, the attrition rate among general and field grade officers may have reached 50 percent. Reportedly, the purge included every officer above the rank of colonel, priests, academicians, foreign technical experts brought in to modernize Soviet industry, well-to-do peasants, national minorities, foreign

expatriates who had come to the Soviet Union to help build communism and even foreign communist leaders were summoned to return to Moscow.

The 1937-1938 purge also came down hard on the community of artists. Caught up in this drag net were such people as musicians, writers, poets, actors, film and stage directors, singers, painters, composers, musical directors and like artistic disciplines.

Individuals and groups known to be stamp collectors were also suspect. Otherwise why would anyone collect the stamps of countries like Germany and Great Britain. They must be malcontents or enemy agents who are somehow plotting actions against the Soviet State or other anti-Leninist activities.

Whether you were a member of the inner circle or “had the ear” of one to denounce an individual or a group, those under suspicion were at the mercy of the Soviet secret police known at that time as the NKVD. The letters NKVD = People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs which over saw state security and police forces.

The NKVD were easily recognized by their distinctive blue uniforms and garrison caps. (As shown on the right)



When their “black Mariah” vehicles parked in front of an office building, residence, or apartment house, you knew that one or more people were about to disappear into their system most likely never to be heard from or about again.

NKVD beat and tortured in order to force prisoners to denounce or name individuals or groups that harbored anti-State and/or anti-Leninist views.

The beatings and torture continued until “confessions” were gained. From there, a prisoner could just be shot and dumped into a mass grave or put on a train headed to a stop in the Gulag system.

During the Great Purge 1 in 20 people were arrested. By 1939, it is estimated that 1,772,993 people were in Soviet prison camps, and that as many as 681,692 or better than 1,000 per day had been executed.

Interestingly, only two of those purged were rehabilitated in later years. This was true early on in the case of Sergei Kirov whose name has been taken by cities, streets, schools, factories and his name is even shared by a class of Soviet-Russian naval battlecruisers.

Here are two more stamps featuring Kirov (Scott 1832) a single issued June 28, 1956 and (Scott 3185) also a single issued in 1986:



Scott 1832



Scott 3185

The next two stamps illustrate places where Kirov's name lives on; the founding of the Kirov Military Medical Academy (Scott 1330) from a set of three issued March 24, 1949, and the single (Scott 5140) commemorating the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary the Kirov (after re-naming) Opera and Ballet Theater in Leningrad.



Scott 1330



Scott 5140

The total rehabilitation of Kirov would not be complete without the single stamp (Scott 4119) from a set of 5 featuring Soviet Warships. This stamp shows the cruiser Kirov which was the first in a new class of Soviet battle cruisers:



Another purge victim rehabilitated is Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, one of the five original Marshals of the Soviet Union and Chief of Staff whose image appears on this Soviet stamp (Scott 2705) from a set of 5 issued in February 1963 to commemorate the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Soviet Army and to honor its heroes.

If you lived in the Soviet Union “back in the day,” which of our NSSS stamp club members would you have named or denounced in an attempt to save your own skin?

Think about it.

**Stan Cronwall** is a member and his collecting interests include Germany: Third Reich 1933-45 and the areas it occupied (stamps covers & cards). He also collects U.S. World War II Patriotic Covers and Cards; Civil War Patriotic Covers (both U.S. and CSA); U.S Naval Covers; DDR stamps; and, Post WW II Soviet Zone Hitler Head Obliteration stamps, covers & cards.