

The World's First Postal Code: The Ukrainian 'Index' System

by Inger Kuzych

The use of mail sorting codes to handle large volumes of mail expeditiously is not a new idea. The first true postal codes date to the first half of the twentieth century, and the earliest usage occurred in Ukraine in the 1930s. (Ukraine was then part of the Soviet Union and was referred to as the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.)

Setting Up the Index

The sophisticated, three-part postal code system — described as an “Index” and first introduced in Ukraine in 1932 — was not some experimental venture limited to a small region of the country. It was a fully supported governmental program that extended to all corners of the country in the years between World Wars I and II, before being abruptly discontinued in 1936.

The Indexation effort was undertaken after a study found that almost half of all the mails in Ukraine were incorrectly addressed in some way and that of the roughly 14,000 inhabited locales surveyed, more than 36 percent had the same or similar names.¹

Indexation was not introduced across Ukraine at the same time but was implemented in steps over the course of 1932. Indexes were assigned to Kyiv post offices on February

1, 1932, but it wasn't until May 31 that the Council of the People's Commissars of the Ukrainian SSR passed a resolution approving the Indexation venture for the entire republic. By August 1 the Indexes were being used in all of the cities of the republic, and by November 1 their use had spread to the village level.

Advertizing the Index

GOZNAK, the Soviet state printing office in Moscow, prepared four different Ukrainian-language informational postal cards in 1932 — each in quantities of 1 million — to announce the new Index program and to urge its adoption by the Ukrainian populace. Although the texts were all different, the messages were similar.

The text on the first of the postal cards (No. 176) reads:

I received a letter quickly because the “Index” was indicated on the letter; that is, the conventional designation that was adopted by every populated area in Ukraine. Information at the post office!

The card shows a smiling man and an envelope, addressed in Ukrainian, sporting the Index.

The next card (No. 184) states:

The conventional designation “Index,” which was adopted by every populated area in Ukraine, is by all means required to be written on each postal sending. This ensures correct and timely receipt of a letter!

The cachet design shows a postal bus and a letter, addressed in Ukrainian, using the Index.

Card No. 185 depicts a postman with a packet of letters. Here the message informs that:

The correct address on a letter guarantees timely delivery! Inform all and write on the addresses the conventional indication “Index,” which was adopted by every populated point in Ukraine. “Index” — this is the correct way to address a letter! Information at the post office!

Finally, postal card No. 186 displays an envelope with Ukrainian delivery and return addresses that each contain the new Index (for the cities of Olevsk and Kyiv, 1101



The extent of the Ukrainian S.S.R. during the interwar years. (Map adapted from R.P. Magosci, “Ukrainian Lands During the Interwar Years” in *Ukraine: A Historical Atlas*, University of Toronto Press, 1985. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.)

y 1 and 11 y 15, respectively). The text reads:

A conventional indication “Index” has been assigned to every populated point in Ukraine. The presence of such a conventional designation on a letter guarantees correct sending and timely reception! Information at the post office!

It was at post offices that a 1,268-page Russian-language book was made available to patrons. Its lengthy title was self-explanatory: *Listing of the Postal Establishments, Railway Stations, Towns, Villages, and Rural Councils of Ukraine with Their Designated Postal Codes*. Published in 1932 in Kharkiv (the Ukrainian capital at the time²), the volume was divided into two sections. The first half presented all the locales in Ukraine in alphabetical order followed by their new postal code. The second half listed all the postal codes of the country in numerical sequence (starting with 1 y 1 and ending with 486 y 53), followed by the place name. So, either way an individual searched for some information, it could be tracked down.

How the Index Worked

Every Index was composed of a number-letter-number series. The central Cyrillic “y” (pronounced “oo,” as in boot) of an Index designation stood for (Y) КРАИНА (Ukraine) and so immediately identified mails from this republic of the Soviet Union. The first number (the forenumber) designated the importance and size of a location. Numbers 1–10 were assigned to the capital city of Kharkiv; 1–7 were allocated to major *raion* (district) postal centers in the city, and 8–10 were held in reserve.

The remaining two-digit numbers indicated the major cities:

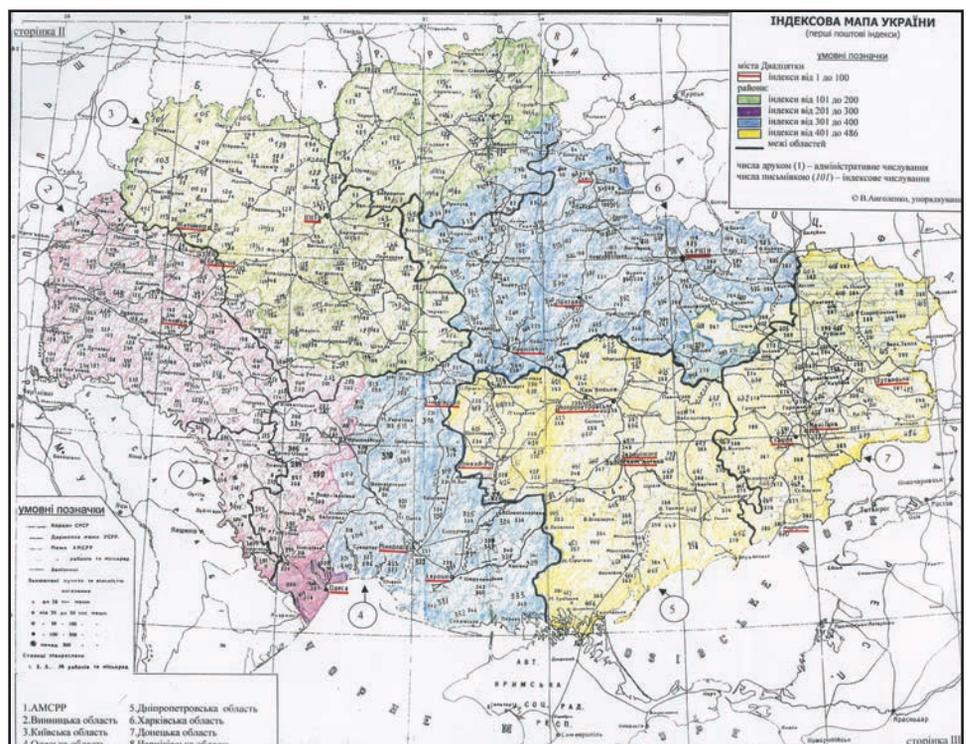
- 11–20 specified Kyiv (11–14 allocated, the remainder in reserve);
- 21–29 Odesa (the first five



Postal card No. 185 not only advertises the new Index system, but also bears three examples of its use. Mailed from the Kyiv 12 y 1 station (on the cancel), it transited post office 14 y 2 (center) before being delivered to the addressee at 14 y 8.

numbers allocated, the rest reserved);

- 30–33 Mykolaiv (only the number 30 assigned);
- 34–39 Dnipropetrovsk (the first four numbers allocated);
- 40–44 Zaporizhia (all five numbers allocated);
- 45–48 Stalino (presently Donetsk, all four numbers



Map showing the ration numbering distribution throughout the seven oblasts (provinces) and one autonomous republic of Ukraine in the 1930s. (Map adapted from Viacheslav Anholenko, “About the Establishment of the First Indexes” in *Ukrainian Philatelic Herald*, No. 74, 2004. Reprinted by permission of the author.)



Postal card No. 175 mailed from Odesa to Geneva on January 24, 1933 bears a 22 y 1 Index number in its double-ring cancel.



Circular date cancellations from a variety of locales display Indexes incorporated into their design.

- allocated);
- 49–51 Mariupil (just the number 49 assigned);
- and so on to 89–91 for Kherson (only the number 89 assigned).
- Numbers 92–100 were kept in reserve.

In all, twenty prominent cities received designations using numbers under 100.

Three-digit forenumbers indicated raions of lesser importance in the country. For example, 101 stood for the Oliev district (in Zhytomyr province), and this district was divided into thirty-nine smaller postal drop-off and pick-up points, mostly village post offices. These raion subdivisions were indicated by the hindnumbers of the postal index. The Oliev subdivisions, therefore, ranged from 101 y 1 to 101 y 39.

Raion subdivisions could vary tremendously in number, from 130 in Kharkiv raion to just nine in Staro Kermenchyk raion. Usually, though, they ranged between twenty and forty in number. In all, 440 raions are enumerated in the *Listing*, while forty-six large city raion number slots were set aside for future use (i.e., the raion forenumbers go as high as 486). More than 25,000 unique raion subdivision receiving points are specified.

The map shown on the previous page shows the raion numbering distribution throughout the seven *oblasts* (provinces) and one autonomous region making up Soviet Ukraine in the 1930s. The twenty major cities that received Index forenumbers from 1–100 are underlined in red. The raions designated with Index forenumbers 101–200 are in green (these made up most of the Kyiv and Chernihiv oblasts). Index forenumbers 201–300 are in violet (Vinnytsia oblast, the Moldavian A.S.S.R.,³ and the western part of Odesa oblast). Index forenumbers 301–400 are in blue (the remainder of Odesa oblast, most of Kharkiv oblast, and a sliver of Chernihiv oblast). Index forenumbers 401–486 are in yellow (all of Dnipropetrovsk and Donetsk oblasts, and a small part of Kharkiv oblast).

Examples of Use

Postal Index codes most frequently appeared on the bottom halves of canceling devices, but they also could be found across



Cancellations from Kharkiv showing the use of the two-digit system preferred in that city.

the tops and sometimes on the side. A prominent 22 y 1 cancel can be seen on a postal card sent from Odesa to Geneva, Switzerland on January 24, 1933. This card, No. 175 in the Soviet series, was ordered on May 4, 1932, the same date as the four previously described cards. It differs from the others in a couple of key aspects, however.

While still displaying a cachet related to postal mailings, the card's text is all in Russian and makes absolutely no mention of an Index system. The slogan states only: "A correct address ensures rapid letter delivery!" This card, then, was meant more for the rest of the Soviet Union outside of Ukraine where no Index structure was set up. It is further evidence that the Index system was meant solely for Ukraine.

A sample of additional cancel types, not only from Odesa but from a variety of locales, demonstrates how the Index typically was incorporated into cancelers either across the top or the bottom.

Kharkiv's cancels, however, were different. Instead of displaying a three-part Index, they usually only showed a two-digit number. This situation occurred because this city "owned" the single-digit forenumber designations 1-7. Its cancels often only required two single-digit numbers. So, to streamline the Index a bit, the central "y" was frequently dropped. For example, the third pick-up point in the second raion of the city would normally be designated as 2 y 3, but this could be shown on a cancel simply by combining the two single digits into a "23."

The use of two digits in Kharkiv, as opposed to the three-part Index, was also a holdover from the late fall of 1931 when a two-digit postal code system was first established in that city. (The earliest known examples on cancels date to November 1931.) In a way, the Kharkiv effort served as the forerunner for the all-republic venture the following year.

The postal codes frequently were used on registration etiquettes (labels) as well — both those indicated with the Russian Cyrillic "З" (for zakaznoe; generally domestic correspondence) or with the Latin "R" (for registered; usually international mail). Shown is a cover sent from Kyiv to New York. The post office designation of 11 y 1 appears promi-

nently on the registry etiquette, as well as on the cancels. Other types of etiquettes with Index numbers are shown in a separate illustration.

Fate of the Index System

The Ukrainian Index system was annulled by decree on June 1, 1936, but examples of its continued use on cancels turn up frequently far beyond this date — such as the letter sent from Kramatorsk in eastern Ukraine (Index 474 y 16) to New York City on September 23, 1937. Far later dates have been reported, even as late as 1941 (well beyond the outbreak of World War II in the fall of 1939). An instance of use has been reported under the German occupation of Ukraine (which began during the summer of 1941), but this may have been privately arranged.

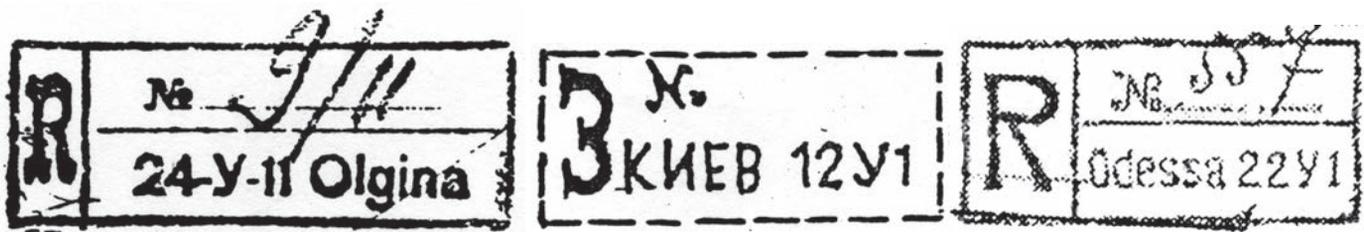
What circumstances brought about the order for the abrupt cessation in the use of the Index in 1936 after only four years has not been established.⁴ We know that some raion name changes and consolidations occurred during this time period, but that should not have had a serious impact on the well-thought-out Index system. Hopefully future research will provide an answer.

Endnotes

1. Part of the problem stemmed from the over-enthusiastic adoption of Communist-related naming, so one encountered nineteen versions of Lenin (Leni-



Cover sent from Kyiv to New York on March 9, 1933 displays the 11 y 1 Index on both the cancels and registration etiquette.



Examples of registration etiquettes with Index numbers.

na, Lenino, Lenindorf, Leninovka, Leninskyy, Leninskoye, etc.), fifteen of October (Oktiabrskaya, -brskyy, -brskoye, etc.), and twenty-two related to the First of May (Pervomayskiy, -mayska, -mayskiy, -mayskiy, -mayskiy, etc.).

2. The Bolsheviks established Kharkiv as the capital of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic from 1919 to 1934, after which the government returned to Kyiv.

3. The Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was an autonomous republic of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic between October 12, 1924 and August 2, 1940. It was created as a base for spreading Communist ideology into neighboring Bessarabia, then part of Romania, in the hopes of eventually attracting Bessarabians away from Romania. Despite the name, the ethnic makeup of the Moldavian A.S.S.R. was roughly half Ukrainian and less than one-third Moldavian.

4. I speculate, but it is not out of the realm of possibility that the Index system was eliminated because the use of "y" in the postal codes was seen as a manifestation of Ukrainian nationalism. Stalin had a visceral hatred of Ukrainians and had killed millions of them in the brutal *Holodomor* (artificial famine) of 1932–33. (Estimates range as high as 10 million dead, but 7 million is a commonly cited figure.) In subsequent years, many more Soviet citizens would be eliminated in various purges. The 1930s were a very insecure time in the Soviet Union. A simple comment by Stalin related to the Index could have sent postal officials scurrying to "sanitize" the situation in Ukraine.

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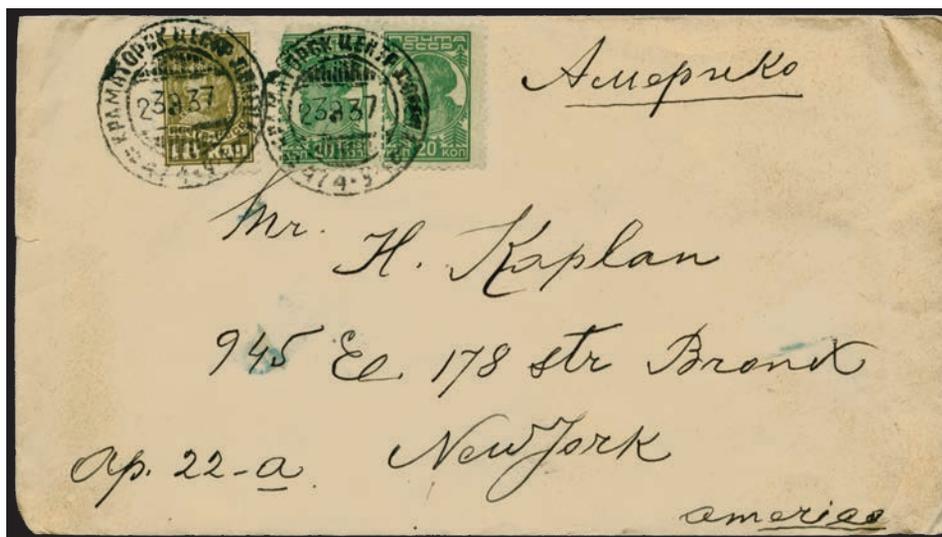
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The Author

Dr. Inger Kuzych is of Austrian and Ukrainian extraction and has made a profound impact on the philately of both countries. He is the current vice president and immediate past president of the Ukrainian Philatelic and Numismatic Society, and the former vice president of the Austrian Philatelic Society. He has written hundreds of articles for dozens of philatelic publications, written or edited several books dealing with Ukrainian philately, and served as editor of the *Ukrainian Philatelist* journal. In addition to Austria and Ukraine, he avidly collects two time periods that reflect Austrian-Ukrainian overlap: the postal history of Western Ukraine (1918–1919, a short-lived successor state to the Austro-Hungarian Empire) and the postal history of Lemberg (part of Austria from 1772–1918, but today the city of Lviv in Ukraine).



Letter sent from Kramatorsk to New York City on September 23, 1937 bears a 474 y 16 Index.

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