

Statistics on Sputnik-1

Postage Stamps

By Don Hillger, Garry Toth, and Peter Hoffman

It is a challenge to compile a list of postage stamps and related postal items that depict Sputnik-1, the first Earth-orbiting artificial satellite. That is because Sputnik-1, more than any other unmanned spacecraft, has probably appeared on more postal items than any other satellite. Yet, while it was not the authors' prime intention to create an expansive checklist of postal items depicting Sputnik-1, we have regardless compiled the Sputnik-1 postal items that form the basis for this study.

A single article, or even a series of articles, would not do justice to the Sputnik-1 topic. Thus, we will cover only a few Sputnik-1 postal items in detail. Rather, this article will present some interesting statistics on what we have found by doing a Sputnik-1 collection, such as the number of postal items found, what countries produced those items, and what years those items were issued. (These statistics do not include Sputnik-1 launch covers, those canceled for post-launch events, or anniversaries of the launch of Sputnik-1.)

We would however be remiss if we did not at least present a few Sputnik-1 postal items, including the first postal items that marked the historic launch and orbiting of Sputnik-1. Two USSR/Russia stamps were issued, about a month and about 2 months respectively, after the launch of Sputnik-1. The 4 Oct 1957 launch date is on both of these stamps. Since Sputnik-1 was the first artificial satellite of Earth, it was well publicised around the world after its launch. Other countries quickly followed with their own Sputnik-1 postage stamps and other postal items. This started the large volume of Sputnik-1 and related postal items, which resulted in space philately becoming one of the most popular themes among topical philatelists.



Russia (USSR) Scott 1992-1993 Michel 2017 and 2036 (1957 Nov and Dec issue, respectively), depicting the orbiting Sputnik-1 with the 4 Oct 1957 launch date on each.

Some statistics on Sputnik-1 postal items and selected examples

The authors' collection of Sputnik-1 items can be found on the website provided at the end of this article. Thus, readers can see what the authors have compiled, and therefore what has gone into the statistics that will be discussed. The authors' collection includes postage stamps, postal covers (except launch covers) and FDCs, and even a few numismatic items and other ephemera. All items either mention or depict Sputnik-1 in some form, including Sputnik-1 as part of the logos created for numerous anniversary-of-launch items. Some of the postal items include Sputnik-1 without Sputnik-1 being the primary reason those postal items were issued. (For example, many USSR/Russia stamps that have nothing to do with Sputnik-1 show it in the sky.)

The authors' Sputnik-1 collection is large but never complete, as more items can always be found. Included are all postal items that have been discovered while compiling online lists documenting many aspects of un-manned spacecraft philately. Using that collection, some interesting statistics will be presented as the main reason for this article. The Sputnik-1 collection includes 831 items from 116 countries at the time this is being written! A further breakdown of the statistics of that collection by country and year follows.

Which countries issued the most Sputnik-1 postal items and in what years?

The following table includes the top Sputnik-1 issuing countries. This list includes 21 countries, down to a minimum of 10 postal items based on the authors' collection. There are two number columns, the first is the number of postal items and the second is the number of years for which those items were issued. The difference reflects that multiple items were issued in most years.

Table: 21 countries issuing the largest numbers of Sputnik-1 postal items
(in descending numerical order, down to 10 items minimum);
(including 12 prolific stamp issuing countries in red text)

Country	Total number of Sputnik-1 postal items	Number of years Sputnik-1 postal items were issued
USSR/Russia	159	33
United States	33	13
Romania	33	10
Gabon	33	8
Benin	27	5
Cuba	24	7
Chad	24	6
Mali	23	9
Djibouti	22	8
Congo Republic	20	6
Ivory Coast	20	4
Guinea Republic	17	8
St Thomas	17	8
Central African Republic	16	8
Korea (North)	11	6
Bulgaria	10	6
Germany (East)	10	6
Madagascar	10	6
Poland	10	5
Niger	10	4
Australia	10	1

USSR/Russia, as expected, was the largest issuer of Sputnik-1 items at 159 items issued in 33 years, or almost half of the 68 years from 1957 to 2024. The following graph shows when those Sputnik-1 items were issued, based on the authors' collection. The blue line is the number of postal items. Interestingly, there is only one large peak for the USSR/Russia-only items, for the 20th anniversary of the launch of Sputnik-1 in 1977. Other minor peaks occur at or near many 5-year anniversaries.



The United States comes in second place with 33 items issued in 13 different years. A plot of USA items by year would reveal only one major peak in 1992 (and little else for other years, so no graph is provided), the year that blocks of 4 similarly-designed space stamps were jointly issued by the USA (*Scott 2634a, Michel 2235-2238*) and Russia (*Scott 6083a, Michel 241-244*). These items marked the 35th anniversary of the launch of Sputnik-1 but without acknowledgement of that anniversary. One of the four stamps in each block depicts Sputnik-1, as well as other USA and Soviet manned spacecraft, which are not of interest for this article.



United States *Scott 2633 Michel 2237* (1992), from block of 4 (*Scott 2634a*);
 Russia *Scott 6082 Michel 243* (1992), from block of 4 (*Scott 6083a*)

Romania, as a vassal state of the USSR, issued the third-greatest number of Sputnik-1 items, most of which were either for the launch or the first anniversary of the launch of Sputnik-1 in 1957 and 1958. Other years had insignificant numbers of items (so no graph is provided).

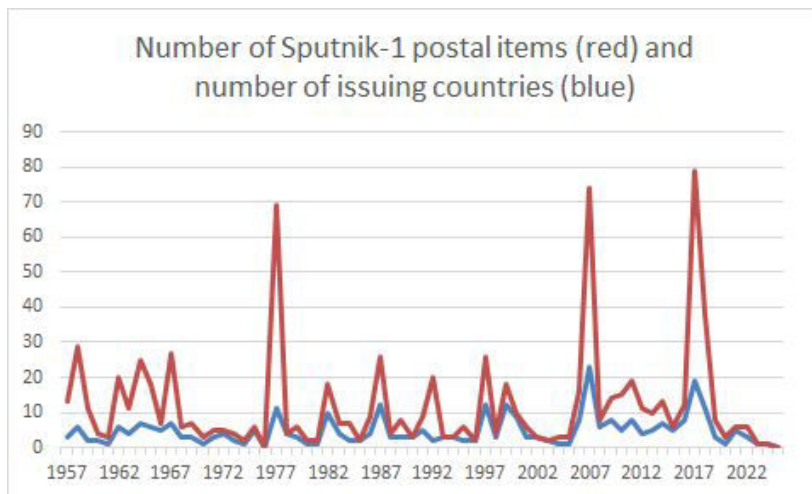
Skipping over Gabon and Benin, the 4th and 5th countries in the table, Cuba, also in the Soviet domination camp at the time, ranked 6th in the number of Sputnik-1 items. Items for Sputnik-1 from Cuba were mostly issued for the 7th, 8th, 10th, and 20th anniversaries. Nothing was found from Cuba after the 20th anniversary in 1977. This is the same peak issue year already noted for USSR/Russia Sputnik-1 items.

Twelve of the 21 countries in the table are prolific stamp-issuing countries, mostly African nations, with little or no connection to Sputnik-1 or space exploration. (These countries typically issue many more postal items on almost any topic than more traditional stamp-issuing countries.) The authors have highlighted these prolific stamp-issuing countries in red text in the table.

The interest in Sputnik-1 by these countries was likely meant to capture sales from stamp collectors and seldom for postal use. A number of these items are also “known illegal issues” based on determinations by those who track illegal postal stamps (<https://americantopical.org/Illegal-Stamp-Issues> and [Illegal Stamp Country List](#)). For this reason, some philatelists do not collect postal items from these countries. Yet some, but not all, of the items from these countries are listed in the major stamp catalogs such as *Scott* and *Michel*.

The table includes several other countries with slowly decreasing numbers of postal items, down to the 10-item minimum for this table. (Countries issuing 9 or fewer postal items are not included in the table for sake of brevity.) At the bottom of the table is Australia with 10 items, all of which are part of a large set of space-related postage stamps (one of which will be presented later in this article) issued in 2007 marking 50 years in space (the 50th anniversary of the launch of Sputnik-1).

The following graph shows when Sputnik-1 items were issued by all countries including USSR/Russia, based on the authors' collection. The red line is the number of postal items. The large peaks in 1977, 2007, and 2017 are for the 20th, 50th, and 60th anniversaries of the launch of Sputnik-1, respectively. On those anniversaries, more than 2 or 3 times as many postal items were issued than for most other years in the graph. Minor peaks occur at many 5-year anniversaries.



When the all-country graph is compared to the graph for USSR/Russia only, it becomes evident that the large anniversary peaks in 2007 and 2017 are due to stamps issued by countries other than USSR/Russia. According to the authors' webpage and spreadsheet, the two latter large anniversary peaks are due almost entirely to the prolific stamp-issuing countries marked in red in the statistics table above. For example, almost all the items issued by Gabon, Benin, Chad, Mali, Djibouti, Congo Republic, and Ivory Coast (in descending order, all with 20 or more items; plus others with fewer items) were issued for the 50th (2007) or 60th (2017) anniversaries of the launch of Sputnik-1. (These countries likewise have issued anniversary-of-launch items for many other spacecraft, usually in souvenir sheet form.)

The blue line in the graph is the number of issuing countries for Sputnik-1 items, with as many as 20 countries represented in the 50th anniversary peak year (2007), but fewer than 10 countries most years. Interestingly, there was only one year in which no Sputnik-1 postal items were found; that was 1976, just before the first large peak in 1977. Items may intentionally not have been issued that year in anticipation of the following year being a major Sputnik-1 (20th) anniversary year. The 2007 (50th) anniversary peak was likewise preceded by years with low but non-zero numbers of issued items. However, a minimum is not found in the years before the 2017 (60th) anniversary.

Selected Sputnik-1 items for peak anniversary years

Following are a few examples of the many postal items that were issued during the peak anniversary years. The first example provided is a USSR/Russia airmail stamped envelope with a black pictorial cancel (dated 4 October 1977) and a multi-color printed cachet for the 20th (XX) anniversary of the launch of Sputnik-1. This cover also contains an extra postage stamp (Scott 4589, Michel 4648), one of a set of 6 Russian space stamps issued in 1977, all of which have a 20th (XX) anniversary "logo". On this cover, the depiction of Sputnik-1 in both the stamp and the cancel has a Russian 5-pointed 'red' star on the spacecraft body, and the antennas on this Sputnik-1 design are parallel to each other. The real Sputnik-1 has antennas that are not parallel but rather are angled slightly away from each other, as correctly depicted by the Sputnik-1 in the cachet of this item.



Russia (USSR) stamped envelope (1977) with extra Scott 4589 Michel 4648



(left) Australia Scott 2736 Michel 2885 (2007); (right) Germany Citykurier private post (2017)

Moving forward to 2007, an example for the 50th anniversary is a stamp issued by Australia (Scott 2736, Michel 2885), with a realistic depiction of Sputnik-1. For the 60th anniversary in 2017, an example is a Citykurier private post stamp from Germany. Note that the antennas on this Sputnik-1 appear to angle towards, rather than away from, each other as they extend farther away from the spacecraft body. This rendering may be due to the perspective of the design, as this depiction of the Sputnik-1 antennas has not been found on any other postal items.

Items depicting the first 3 Sputniks (Sputnik-1, 2, and 3)

A common design on a large number of postal items that include Sputnik-1 is a depiction of all of the first three Sputniks (Sputnik-1, 2, and 3). An example of this is postage stamp issued by East Germany in 1962 (*Scott 634c*, *Michel 928*). The depictions of the three Sputniks are nicely detailed, along with the launch date for each. Note also the 5-pointed red star next to each spacecraft name and launch date, clearly indicating the USSR/Russian origin of these spacecraft. USSR/Russia as well issued several postal items with depictions of all three Sputniks, one example of which is a stamp issued in 1959 (*Scott 2160*, *Michel 2192*).



(left) Germany (East) *Scott 634c*
Michel 928 (1962);
(right) Russia (USSR) *Scott 2160*
Michel 2192 (1959)

A design error in Sputnik-1 depictions



Germany (East)
Scott 370 *Michel*
603 (1957)

Several Sputnik-1 postal items incorrectly depict Sputnik-1 as having antennas that radiate in four different directions. The basis for this incorrect depiction is a stamp issued by East Germany in 1957 (*Scott 370*, *Michel 603*). According to the *Michel* catalog, this stamp shows "Künstlicher Erdsatellit Sputnik I, Teil der Erdkugel, Mond" which translates to "Artificial Earth satellite Sputnik I, [and] part of Earth [and the] Moon". The stamp includes the Sputnik-1 launch date, yet the spacecraft design is somewhat like USA's Vanguard-2. This stamp was issued on 7 Nov 1957, before the first Vanguard satellite was launched. This same stamp has also been found in some stamp-on-stamp reproductions on postal items (not shown here) from Cuba and Hungary.

Summary

This article contains statistics derived from the authors' collection of postal items for the Sputnik-1 satellite. Besides the first Sputnik-1 stamps that were issued, a few postal items were included as examples of the anniversaries (of the Sputnik-1 launch) with the largest numbers of postal items. Depictions of all three of the first Sputniks was also a common theme on postal items. In addition, incorrect depictions of Sputnik-1 have been found on stamps issued by more than one country.

The authors' online and ever-growing list of Sputnik-1 postal items is available at <http://rammb.cira.colostate.edu/dev/hillger/sputnik-1.htm>. (The American Topical Association has an updated Sputnik-1 checklist thanks to the third author of this article.) A challenge is posed to readers to find additional philatelic items related to Sputnik-1 that have been missed. Please let us know by contacting us at the email addresses below.

Biographical notes

The authors have researched and written extensively on the subjects of weather, climate, and un-manned spacecraft on stamps and covers. Their Un-manned Spacecraft Philately website can be found at <http://rammb.cira.colostate.edu/dev/hillger/satellites.htm>. Email correspondence with the authors is welcome, using the addresses below.

Don Hillger, PhD, is a retired research meteorologist formerly with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) but still associated with Colorado State University. Send correspondence to don.hillger@colostate.edu

Garry Toth, MSc, now retired, worked many years at the Meteorological Service of Canada. Send correspondence to gmt.varia@gmail.com

Peter Hoffman, MS, now retired, was part of the Apollo Lunar Module guidance team and now contributes to the *Scott* catalogs and some online stamp-related websites. Send correspondence to PeterH5292@aol.com