

17th Congress of the All-Union Communist Party (of Bolsheviks): Congress of Victors or Congress of Executed?

by Igor Grigorian

The 17th Congress of the All-Union Communist Party (of Bolsheviks), or AUCP(b), took place in Moscow from Jan. 26 to Feb. 10, 1934. A total of 1,956 delegates gathered together to approve the second five-year Development Plan of the USSR National Economy.

The USSR Industrial workers and rural laborers took pride in their achievements and considered it an honor to dedicate them to important events. Thus, although the network of trolleybus routes was established in Moscow on Nov. 15, 1933, the first-



Figure 1. Photo of the trolleybus with dedication.



Figure 2. Later model of the trolleybus.

ever locally manufactured trolleybus was dedicated to the 17th Congress, which can be seen in the Figure 1 photo. The writing across the front panel of the bus states *A Present to the 17th Congress of AUCP(b)*. The later model of the trolleybus is depicted on 1958 USSR postage stamp (Figure 2).

As it is not my intention to discuss here the agenda and resolutions of the congress, I will focus on its philatelic aspects. As was customary at congresses of such a scale, all delegates received

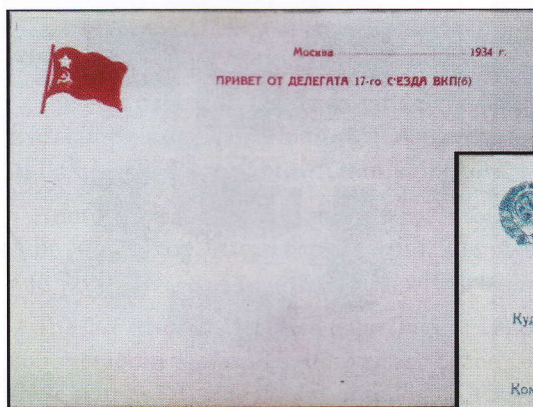


Figure 3 (above). Stationery.



Figure 4 (right). Envelope with 1931 affixed 20 kop. Dirigible Construction Industry stamp.

as a gift a piece of stationery and a pre-stamped envelope (Figures 3 and 4). The stationery has an inscription “*Hello from the Delegate of the 17th Congress of the AUCP(b)*” with a space for the month and date left for the delegate to fill, between the word “*Moscow*” and year “*1934.*” The envelope is marked *Congressional* (correspondence – IG) and contains only space for an address. At the bottom there is an inscription “*From the Delegate of the 17th Congress of the AUCP(b)* and *Moscow, January 25, 1934.*”

The Peoples Commissariat of Communications of the USSR prepared a

special stamp souvenir that was also given to the delegates; the cover is shown in Figure 5 and, in the upper-right corner there

is the communist party motto “*Proletarians of All Countries, Unite!*” In the middle of the cover page there is the Coat of Arms of the USSR above an inscription “*To the Delegate of the 17th Congress of the AUCP(b).*” The bottom of the cover features the name of the issuing authority – “*Peoples Commissariat of Communications of the USSR*” and the place and the date of issue – “*Moscow, January 25, 1934.*”

The souvenir folder contained 17 pages with stamps issued by the USSR postal service between 1922 and 1933. Stamps were affixed to the paper and canceled with a



Figure 6. Round-date stamps used to cancel the stamps.



Figure 5. Cover of souvenir folder.

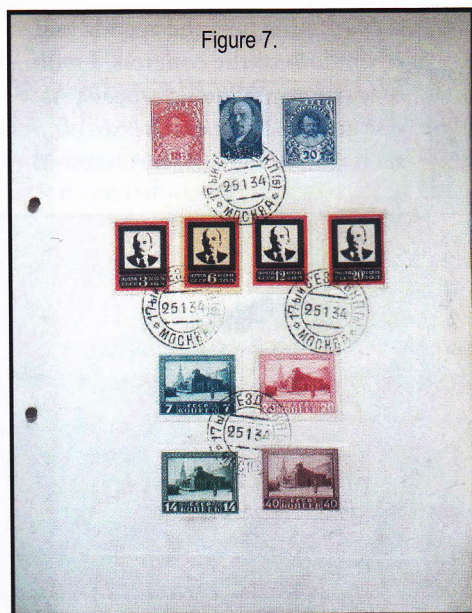


Figure 7.



Figure 8.



Figure 9.



Figure 10.

double-ring circular date stamp with the date of “25/01/34” (Jan. 25, 1934) between horizontal lines. (The date is in European format.) The text inside the ring is “17th Congress of the AUCP(b)” on top, and “Moscow” at the bottom (Figure 6).

As Armenia collectors, we are interested in stamps that depict Armenians, Armenian motifs and structures where Armenian architects and designers were instrumental in their construction. Thus, out of 17 pages, I would like to draw your attention to those that fall under that category.

The first page (Figure 7) contains stamps commemorating Vladimir Lenin. Four stamps issued in 1925 depict the original wooden cubed construction of the Lenin Mausoleum designed by A. Schusev. The same design was used in 1929, when Konstantin Najarov (Najarian) was invited from Baku to oversee the construction of the current permanent resting place of the Father of Russian Revolution.

The next page (Figure 8) contains eight stamps issued in 1933. The bottom set of five stamps is dedicated to the 15th Anniversary of the heroic death of 26 Commissars of Baku, on a 4 kopek brown stamp, including Stepan Shahumian.

Another page (Figure 9) shows part of the 1933 set depicting peoples of the USSR. A brown, 15 kop. stamp depicts ethnicities of Transcaucasia - Georgians, Armenians and Turks (as stated on the stamp), which later became known as Azerbaijanis.

The last Armenian-related page (Figure 10) contains a 1927 set of seven stamps commemorating the 10th Anniversary of the Great October Revolution. Three of these stamps (5 kop., 18 kop. and 28 kop.) have the inscription “Post” written in the Armenian language (ՓՈՍՏ), along with Russian and Georgian (on 18 kop. and 28 kop.) and Ukrainian (on 28 kop.).

To save space, I am not showing the rest of the souvenir pages here. Should you wish to see them please contact me.

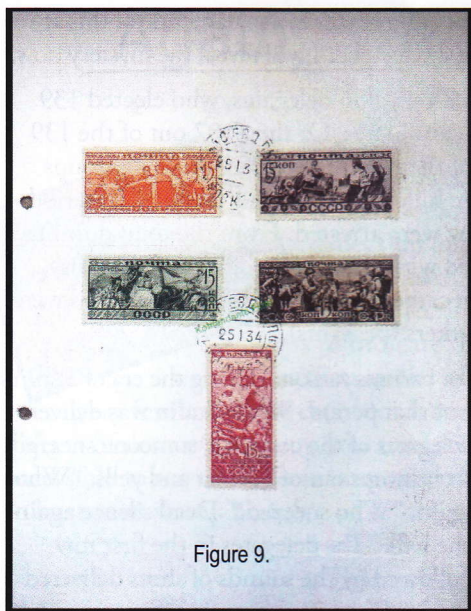


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Our impatient reader, you are no doubt wondering what's in the nametitle of this article, The Congress of Victors or Congress of the Executed. I will reveal the mystery now.

I mentioned that the congress was attended by 1,956 delegates, who elected 139 Central Committee members and member-candidates. Of these, 97 out of the 139 (70 %) were "illegally repressed," while 93 of them were executed either in groups or individually. More than half of them were killed during a short eight-day period. Five more committed suicide just before they were arrested. From the total number of delegates 1,108 (56.6 %) were also charged with counter-revolutionary activity, arrested, exiled or executed. Thus, Victors became Losers; 60% of the delegates were industrial workers, 8% were agricultural workers (peasants).

People were arrested, exiled and executed for various reasons during the era of Stalin's repressions. There is a very dark anecdote about that period. While Stalin was delivering – in the dead silence – his speech to the delegates of the congress, someone sneezed loudly. Stalin stops and looks at Beria. The latter jumps out of his seat and yells, "Who sneezed?" Dead silence in the hall. He yells again, "Who sneezed?" Dead silence again. "OK," says Beria. "First row – march out of the hall." The delegates in the first row leave the hall in an orderly fashion, which is followed by the sounds of shots delivered by a shooting squad. Beria asks the question again. Dead silence again. "Second row – march out," he orders. The second row marches out and another series of shots follows. "Who sneezed?" asked Beria again. One of the delegates stands up and says, "It was me, comrade Beria, just stop the shootings!" Everybody utters a sigh of relief. Beria looks at Stalin, and Stalin says with a smile, "Bless you, comrade, good health!"

Examining the list of delegates, I found 34 delegates with Armenian last names, who represented the following: Armenia (7), Azerbaijan (3), Transcaucasia (2), Black Sea-Azov (3), Georgia (3), Gorkovskaya Oblast (2), Kharkovskaya Oblast (1), Donetskaya Oblast (2), Saratovskaya Oblast (1), Moskovskaya (3) and party apparatus officials (3). I was able to confirm that 12 of them were executed, two killed themselves prior to the arrest, three died naturally; I was unable to find any data on the remaining 17. Two Armenians were elected to become Central Committee Members (Anastas Mikoyan and Levon Mirzoyan). Mirzoyan, who was born in Shushi, was executed in 1939, while he was the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Kazakhstan Communist Party (of Bolsheviks). Mikoyan somehow survived the terror and served under several First Secretaries during the course of his life.

Philately was not well-developed in the USSR at that time. Hardly any of the industrial workers and peasants who were among the delegates of the 17th Congress took seriously the postal souvenirs they were given at the Congress. As not many of the delegates and newly elected members of the Central Committee survived Stalin's repressions, arrests, exile and executions, this souvenir turned into a philatelic rarity. How many of them survived is undetermined, but we can say one thing – since 1971, I have seen this folder only once, and separate sheets from the folder surface from time to time. It is rumored that the complete folder with the stamps may sell as high as \$5,000.

I would like to thank Ashot Manukyan, prominent philatelist from Armenia, for providing photos of the folder pages. ☐

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