

Title: Private Correspondence as Social Action: The Late-Soviet Human-Rights Movement and the Prison/Labor-Camp Mail System

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Penal codes in place from the 1960s to the 1980s accorded inmates serving terms in Soviet prisons and labor camps limited correspondence privileges. Even those sentenced to the most harsh regime could theoretically send up to two letters per month to family members and receive an unlimited amount of correspondence. Although the letters prisoners sent and received were censored, and mail privileges were often sharply reduced in retaliation for “disciplinary infractions,” this small window between the world of confinement and surrounding Soviet society played an important role in the struggle for political freedom and human rights. The act of reading and of writing prison/camp mail helped to draw the dissident community together and served as a potential entry point for those new to political activism. Letters sent by political prisoners were read aloud at private gatherings in Moscow and other Soviet cities. Information culled from correspondence sent through the official mail system and sneaked out of the camps illegally filled the pages of samizdat periodicals. The influential human-rights bulletin *Khronika tekushchikh sobytii* (The Chronicle of Current Events) regularly published lists of prisoner addresses and implicitly encouraged its readers to write to those held in prisons, camps, and special hospitals. This paper examines the ways in which Soviet dissidents exploited the official prison/camp mail system and also considers the extent to which such activities built upon literary practices and social networking behaviors that existed in earlier periods of Russian and Soviet history.