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### **Abstract**

Anyone who has read classic eyewitness accounts of life in Stalin's gulag by authors such as Solzhenitsyn, Shalamov, and Ginzburg, will find the letters that inmates sent home to family members quite revealing. From an inmate's desperate request for a package of homemade dried rusks, references to swollen legs and bleeding gums, despair at a possible transfer to a new camp outpost, and half-hearted reassurances that assignment to a general labor detail really isn't so bad, we can quickly piece together a familiar landscape of horror and hopelessness: the information inmates manage to provide confirms what we already know; we understand them as inhabitants of a special kind of hell that exists entirely separately from ordinary Soviet experience.

It seems worth asking, however, how the original recipients of these letters understood them. Did ordinary Soviet citizens with little prior knowledge of the Stalinist penal system manage to piece together a reasonably accurate picture of conditions in the camps from the elliptical and often contradictory communications that they received from imprisoned relatives? How did they imagine that their own often dire material and personal circumstances, shaped by collectivization, forced industrialization, and war, compared to the experience of labor camp and prison inmates? Did they believe the imprisoned always faced more hardships and sufferings than other family members?

Because the surprisingly large corpus of Stalin-era gulag correspondence that has survived to the present day includes, in addition to letters prisoners mailed out of the camps, communications sent in to inmates by relatives and, in some cases, entire two-sided exchanges, we can arrive at least a partial answer to these questions. We can track not only what prisoners said but also how their relatives replied, and these responses provide important clues to how the labor camp system was regarded from the outside.