

CASE REPORT

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Alleged Tampering with Mail of Dr. Yelena Bonner

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ABSTRACT: In July 1985, the U.S. Congress requested that the FBI Laboratory examine five postcards written by Dr. Yelena Bonner, wife of Dr. Andrei Sakharov, noted Soviet dissident and Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Relatives residing near Boston, Massachusetts, claimed that Soviet authorities were tampering with the mail in an effort to deceive those concerned about the fates of the Sakharovs, who were living in exile in Gorki, U.S.S.R. Examination under oblique, infrared, and ultraviolet illumination revealed several alterations to one postcard, which, when considered with other facts, indicated that the mail had been tampered with to conceal the involuntary hospitalization of Dr. Sakharov, who was being force-fed, to end one of his periodic hunger strikes. The questioned postcard became the object of considerable interest and was the subject of congressional testimony by the author on 18 March 1986.

KEYWORDS: questioned documents, mail tampering, Yelena Bonner, Andrei Sakharov, Soviet Union, U.S. Congress, human rights, dissident, document alteration

In December 1986, the world was surprised by the sudden release from exile of Dr. Andrei Sakharov. Once a highly decorated physicist who helped develop the Soviet hydrogen bomb, he fell into official disfavor as a result of his views on human rights and weapons disarmament. In 1975 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, but was not permitted to leave the USSR to accept it. In 1980, he was arrested by the KGB after criticizing the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and was exiled to the closed city of Gorki, where he lived under virtual house arrest. In 1984, his wife, Dr. Yelena Bonner, joined him in exile after she was convicted of slandering the Soviet Union.

During their exile, the Soviets volunteered little information regarding the whereabouts and condition of the Sakharovs, and they dismissed inquiries as meddling in the internal affairs of the Soviet Union. Regular communication from the Sakharovs to family members, including Dr. Bonner's mother, Ruth Bonner; son, Alexey Semyonov; daughter, Tatiana Yankelevich; and their families residing near Boston, Massachusetts, had been limited to a series of postcards written by Dr. Bonner. However, in the spring of 1985, when reports of a new hunger strike by Dr. Sakharov reached the western press, relatives experienced an interruption in the flow of the postcards and came to question the validity of certain of the messages which were received.

Concerned that Soviet authorities were engaged in an effort to provide misleading infor-

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mation about the Sakharovs, the family made allegations to the United States Congress that Soviet authorities were violating the rights of the Sakharovs, including the tampering with and the forgery of their correspondence. In July 1985, both the Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Subcommittee on Investigations of the House Post Office and Civil Service Committee requested that the FBI Laboratory examine five postcards provided by Ms. Yankelevich for evidence of tampering or alterations.

Examination

Five postcards, handwritten in Russian script, were received for examination. The postcards were addressed to Dr. Bonner's mother and, in addition to dates of writing, were numbered N18, N19, N21, N22, and N26. Nothing of particular significance was noted with regard to four of the postcards. However, the fifth card, numbered N21 and dated 21 April (Fig. 1), exhibited signs of changes or alterations in several areas.

Under low magnification using oblique light, abrasions to the paper fibers were clearly evident in and under the first line of writing (Fig. 2), within the last word of line two (Fig. 3), and preceding and following the fourth word of the third from last, or twenty-ninth, line of writing (Fig. 4). Overwriting was also evident to the character "o" within the last word of line two (Fig. 3), the second or third character of the second from last word of the nineteenth line (Fig. 5), and the last character "w" ending the fourth word of line twenty-nine (Fig. 4).

When the specimen was viewed under conditions of infrared reflectance, the erasures in and under the first line of writing and alterations to the last word on line two and the second from last word of line nineteen were visibly darker than the remainder of the entries. The alterations to the last word of line two reacted brightly when infrared luminescent techniques were used, clearly revealing that the "o" was originally a "u" (Fig. 6). The overwritten area of the last character of the fourth word of line twenty-nine exhibited no visible reaction to infrared or ultraviolet lighting conditions.

Consideration was given to subjecting these postcards to destructive laboratory examinations such as chemical ink analyses. However, to be of any value, these examinations would necessarily remove portions of the specimen in and around the questioned entries. Accordingly, it was decided that destructive laboratory examinations would be conducted if Congress so requested after the initial issues with regard to tampering or alteration were resolved.

Translation of the postcard revealed that the alteration from a "u" to an "o" in the last word of line two changed the verb from "has come" to "has gone." Additionally, the alteration to the fourth word of line twenty-nine changed the verb from "is melting" to "has melted." Hence, with regard to time related references, the meaning was changed from the present "April has come . . . and the snow is melting" to past "April has gone . . . and the snow has melted." Furthermore, the translator noted that the fourth word of line twenty-nine, in its altered form, is grammatically incorrect to such an extent that it cannot be accurately translated and is inconsistent with the level of language skills apparent throughout the remainder of the postcard.

The validity of the date of the postcard became questioned in light of the above findings, since original references to "April has come" and "the snow is melting" are incongruent with a date of "21 April." However, examination with ultraviolet and infrared illumination and microscopic inspection failed to reveal any indication of alteration to the "21 April" entry. Therefore, the remaining possibility that either the numeral "2" or "1" was inserted to change the date from "1 April" or "2 April" was considered. Comparison of the questioned "N21 21 April" entries with the chronological number and date entries exhibited on the other four postcards did not reveal any inconsistencies with respect to the arrangement and spacing of the entries, as there was a space between the chronological number and date

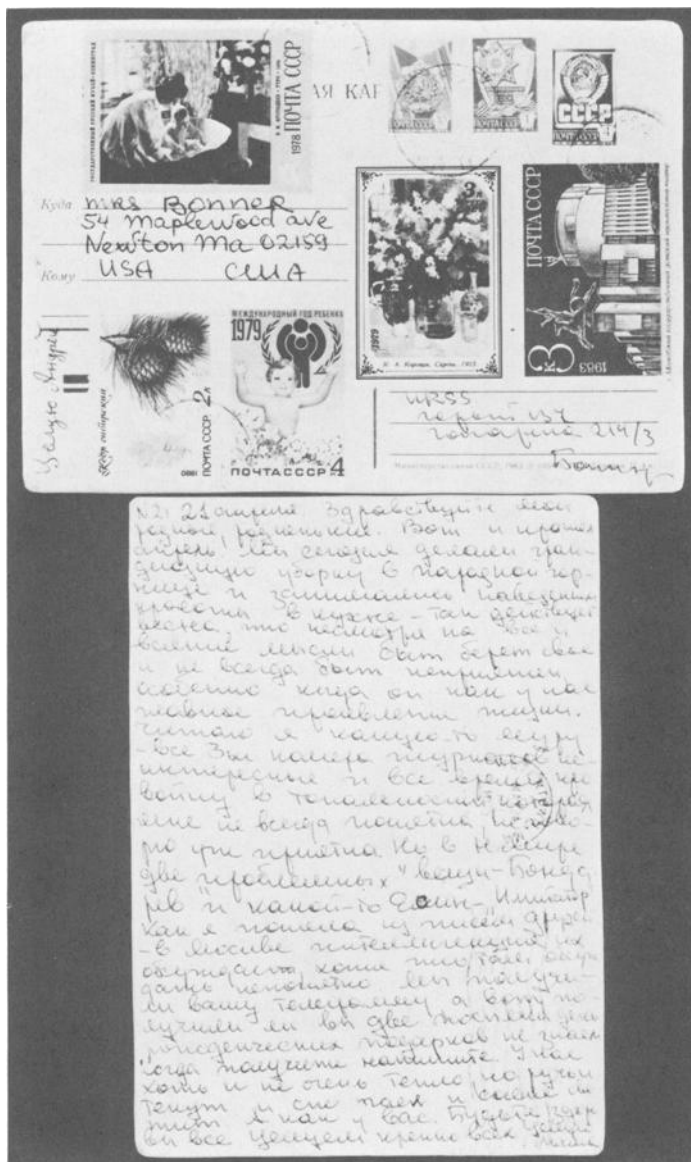


FIG. 1—Questioned postcard, numbered N21.

entries, and there was no space between the date numerals and the month (Fig. 2). However, it was noted that the form of the numeral “1” of the date entry diverged from the preceding numeral “1” of the chronological number entry and from the numerals “1” on the front of the postcard as well as the other numerals “1” contained on the other four postcards. Although it varied from the “2” preceding it, nothing of particular significance was noted with respect to the numeral “2” of the date entry, as it was similar to numerals “2” observed on the postcard’s front (Fig. 1). Hence, substantive alterations to the postcard which cast suspicion on the indicated date of “21 April” notwithstanding, there was no demonstrable evidence that the date had been altered.

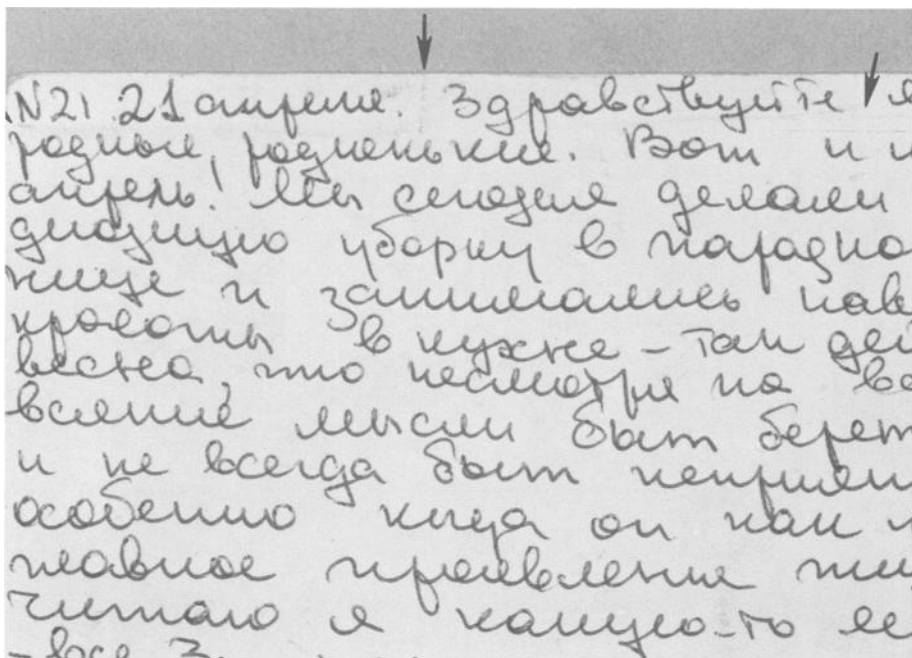


FIG. 2—Postcard number and date entries and abrasions within and under first line of writing.

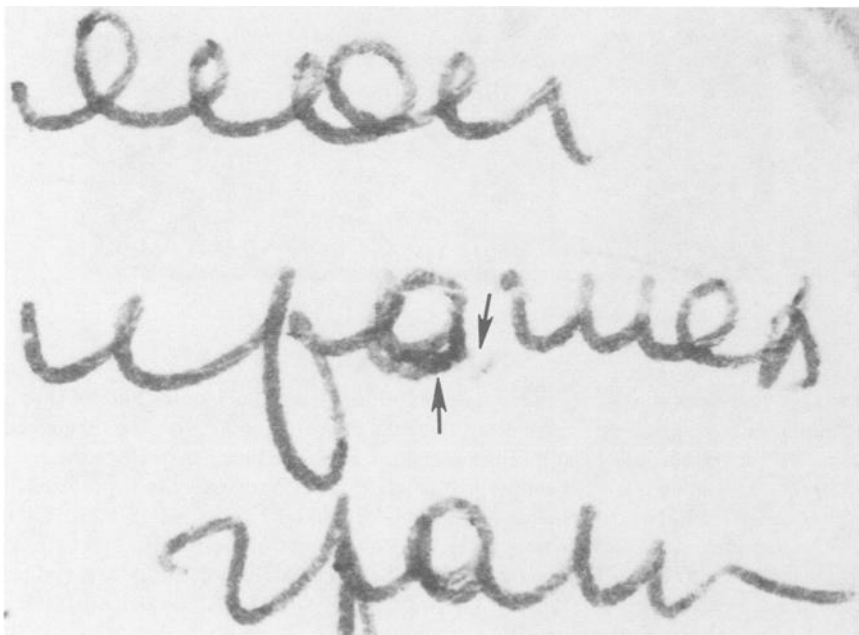


FIG. 3—Abrasion and overwriting within last word of line two.

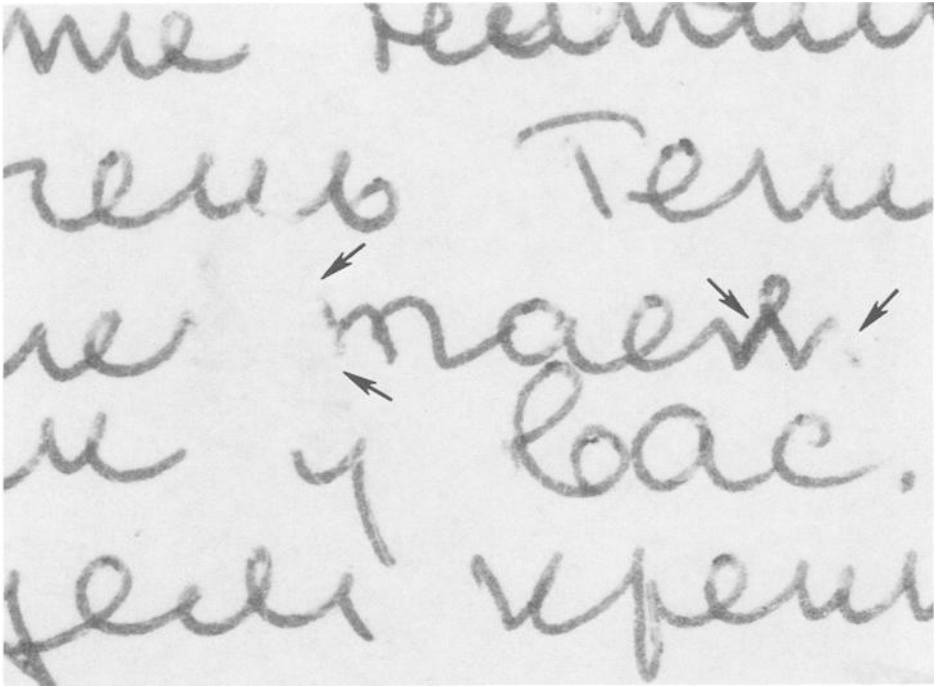


FIG. 4—Abrasions preceding and following, and overwriting within, fourth word of line 29.

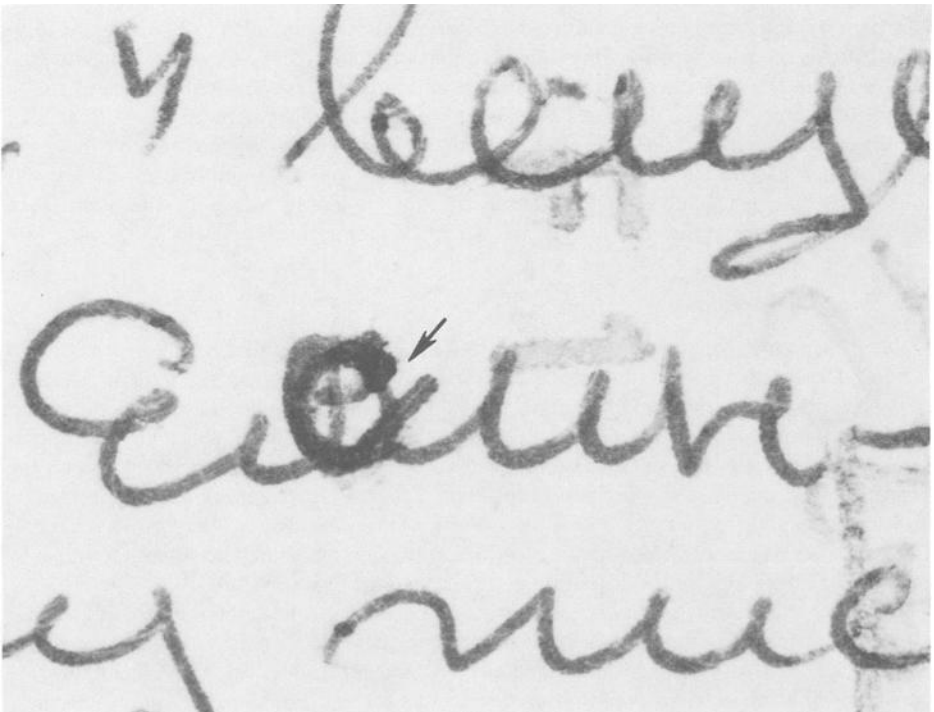


FIG. 5—Overwriting within second to last word of line 19.

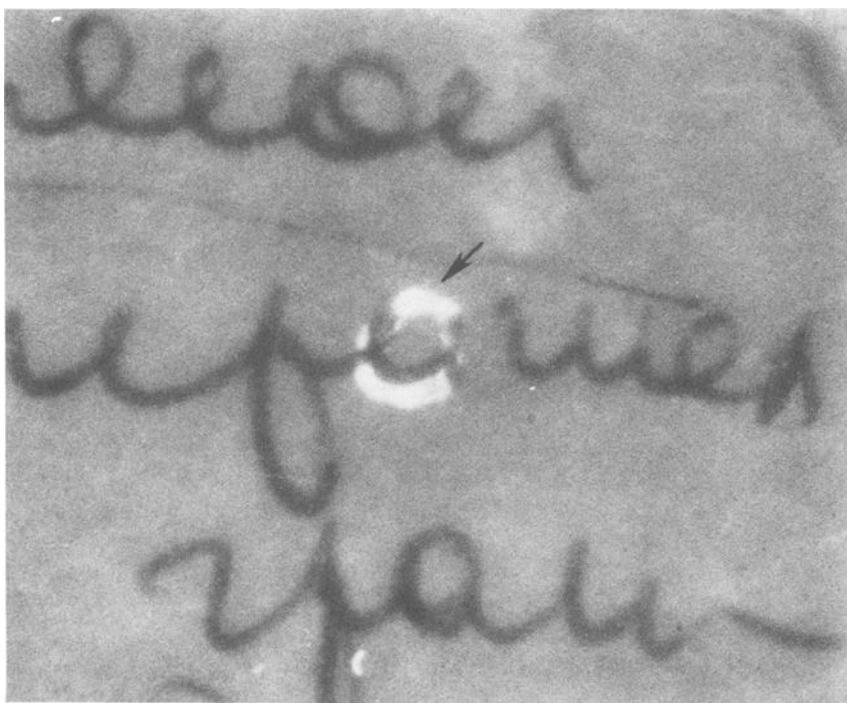


FIG. 6—Alteration to last word of line two.

A handwriting examination conducted to determine if it was possible to eliminate the original writer as the person performing the alterations produced inconclusive results. While the nature of the alterations examined, namely, a mixture of erasures, scrapings, and subtle alterations to characters, differed from Dr. Bonner's habit elsewhere on the postcards of merely crossing over mistakes, the alterations themselves were simply too limited in scope to evaluate adequately. Therefore, other than documenting the existence of certain alterations and noting divergent handwriting characteristics, the issue of by whom the alterations were performed lay outside the field of objective scientific inquiry in this case.

Congressional Testimony

On 18 March 1986, the joint subcommittees held a hearing on recent developments regarding Dr. Sakharov. The questioned postcard was the object of considerable interest.

Present at the hearing was Dr. Bonner, who had been in the United States since December 1985 on a temporary visa to receive medical treatment, which included a heart bypass operation. Apparently to avoid antagonizing Soviet authorities who issued her travel visa on the condition that she not communicate with the press, Dr. Bonner neither testified nor made any statements at the hearing. However, her son, Alexey Semyonov, testified to conversations with her which confirmed his suspicions that the postcard had been altered to convey a misleading impression of the true state of affairs in Gorki in April 1985.

Mr. Semyonov testified that Dr. Bonner used a chronological numbering system and that textual comparisons of the messages revealed that postcard N22, dated 3 April, and postcard N26, dated 17 April, were written later than postcard N21, dated 21 April. Therefore, he concluded that his mother's numbering system was correct, but that the date of postcard

N21 was changed and would have to have been written before April 3, either on the first or second of that month.

Mr. Semyonov noted that in the spring of 1985, the interruption to the flow of mail coincided with reports reaching the western media that Dr. Sakharov was engaging in a new hunger strike. On 15 May 1985, the Associated Press reported that Dr. Sakharov had begun a hunger strike on 16 April and that on 21 April he was taken to a hospital and force-fed. These events were clearly contradictory to the content of the questioned postcard which indicated that everything was normal on "21 April." Mr. Semyonov stated that in his opinion, the date of postcard N21 was changed to conceal the existence of Dr. Sakharov's hunger strike and forced hospitalization, and represented an effort by Soviet authorities to mislead the world about the conditions and whereabouts of his parents.

This author's testimony before the joint subcommittee began with an opening statement of the examination and results. With the aid of a chart consisting of photographic enlargements of the critical entries, the results of the document examination were demonstrated. As expected, the results of the laboratory examination corroborated portions, but not all, of the allegations made by the family.

The joint subcommittee also heard testimony from Mr. Mark Palmer, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, U.S. Department of State; Mr. Walter Duka, Assistant Postmaster General, U.S. Postal Service; and Mr. Vladlen Taulenkov, General Manager, Freedom of Communications, Incorporated, on the subject of Soviet treatment of Dr. Sakharov and interference with delivery of international mail.

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