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978-1-107-00105-3 - Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network

Sarah B. Snyder

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## Introduction

The rapid demise of communism in Eastern Europe, the reunification of a long-divided Germany, and finally the disintegration of the Soviet Union stunned almost all observers. These three developments, all within a few years of each other, represent for many the end of the Cold War. Understanding how and why the Cold War concluded is one of the most pressing questions historians face today. Thus far, scholars have considered a range of factors in assessing the end of the Cold War, with the predominant explanations focusing on Soviet economic stagnation, the arms race, the influence of ideas, the power of personality, Eastern European agency, and overextension abroad.<sup>1</sup> Historians generally have

<sup>1</sup> See for example, Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); John Lewis Gaddis, "Hanging Tough Paid Off," *Bulletin of American Scientists* (January/February 1989): 11–4; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "Economic Constraints and the End of the Cold War," in William Wohlforth, ed., *Cold War Endgame: Oral History, Analysis, Debates* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); T. Ivan Berend, *From the Soviet Bloc to the European Union: The Economic and Social Transformation of Central and Eastern Europe since 1973* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 6, 20; Jeffrey T. Checkel, *Ideas and International Political Change: Soviet/Russian Behavior and the End of the Cold War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Andrew Bennett, "The Guns That Didn't Smoke: Ideas and the Soviet Non-Use of Force in 1989," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7:2 (Spring 2005): 81–109; Thomas Risse-Kappen, "Ideas Do Not Float Freely: Transnational Coalitions, Domestic Structures, and the End of the Cold War," *International Organization* (Spring 1994): 185–214; Daniel C. Thomas, "Human Rights Ideas, the Demise of Communism, and the End of the Cold War," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7:2 (Spring 2005): 110–41; Robert D. English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Gregory F. Domber, *Supporting the Revolution: America, Democracy, and the End of the Cold War in Poland, 1981–1989* (Ph. D. Dissertation, George Washington University,

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underestimated the role of human rights advocacy and the influence of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, which was the culmination of three years of negotiations at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and contained principles to govern East–West interactions in Europe.<sup>2</sup> The Helsinki Final Act, however, spurred the development of a transnational network that significantly contributed to the end of the Cold War.

Examining the end of the Cold War through the lens of the CSCE also suggests a less traditional endpoint to the half-century superpower rivalry – January 19, 1989. On that date, the CSCE Vienna Review Meeting ended, representing a substantive end to the divide that had previously characterized Europe and East–West relations. The significance of the close of the Vienna Meeting lay first in its concluding document, which had been under negotiation since November 1986. The agreement contained provisions supporting religious freedom, protecting civil liberties, and easing international travel as well as most importantly, a mandate to meet in Moscow in 1991 to discuss what was termed the “human dimension,” namely human rights and human contacts. Second, unlike previous meetings that were characterized by disingenuous claims by Eastern European governments, the Vienna Meeting was notable for the concrete progress made on human rights during the course of the negotiations. Under internal and external pressure, communist leaders eased restrictions on emigration, freed political prisoners, and allowed greater access to independent information. Such changes signaled a dramatically different approach to East–West relations as well as to the relationship between state and society in Eastern Europe, which suggested the Cold War had ended or that, at least, its framework had been meaningfully altered.

From the CSCE’s opening negotiations in 1972 to the first session of the Vienna Review Meeting in November 1986, attitudes toward the conference evolved considerably. As will be shown in the chapters that follow, the Soviet Union was the principal proponent of holding the CSCE,

2008); Constantine Pleshakov, *There Is No Freedom Without Bread!: 1989 and the Civil War That Brought Down Communism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009); Victor Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009); and Charles S. Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Others have taken a broader view of the CSCE but without the benefit of multiarchival sources. See for example, William Korey, *The Promises We Keep: Human Rights, the Helsinki Process and American Foreign Policy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993).

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but once the Helsinki Final Act was signed, Soviet leaders feared possible damaging consequences from the subsequent negotiations. The United States, on the other hand, resisted the initial CSCE discussions and was skeptical of the value of the Helsinki Final Act but came to see the agreement as a valuable tool in its competition with the USSR. Over time, the Western and neutral and nonaligned participants in the CSCE were able to ensure that it became a forum that facilitated political change and eventually led to improved human rights practices.

My work makes a number of important contributions to the historical literature, including highlighting the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe as an essential advocate for and collaborator with the emerging transnational network of Helsinki activists; demonstrating its central role in transforming the United States attitude toward and position in the CSCE; examining how the Moscow Helsinki Group's decision to monitor Soviet compliance with the Helsinki Final Act reframed the content and significance of the Helsinki Final Act; explaining how United States President Jimmy Carter's focus on human rights, and more specifically on the CSCE, integrated the issue permanently into United States foreign policy toward Eastern Europe; demonstrating how the formation of Helsinki Watch and the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights strengthened and formalized diffuse Helsinki monitoring activities, heightening their effectiveness; establishing that the selection of Mikhail Gorbachev to lead the Soviet Union offered Helsinki activists and their government supporters an opportunity to achieve their objectives because he recognized that progress on human rights had become a prerequisite for his reforms; and revealing how Helsinki activism ultimately contributed to the peaceful end of the Cold War in Europe. Finally, my research adds to the growing body of literature on the history of global human rights politics.

My research on the influence of the Helsinki process on the end of the Cold War builds upon the work of scholars such as Daniel C. Thomas, who has examined the influence and acceptance of human rights norms in the wake of the signing of the Helsinki Final Act. Like Thomas's scholarship, my findings indicate Mikhail Gorbachev and other Eastern European leaders may have moderated their personal attitudes toward and thinking about human rights in the late 1980s, but the evidence currently available is only suggestive. What can be shown is that a number of Soviet officials came to see changing their country's human rights practices as in their national interests, given that their records had become tied to progress on trade, arms control, and political support. My work

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presents a more complex account, emphasizing that collective and individual human rights advocacy influenced the end of the Cold War rather than concentrating solely on human rights norms.

In the following chapters, I examine how what began as a Soviet effort to secure its post–World War II borders ultimately played a meaningful role in the end of the Cold War. Since 1954, the Soviets had pursued what they termed a European Security Conference in order to secure formal recognition of the frontiers in Central and Eastern Europe. Their proposal, however, did not gain any Western support until the late 1960s and early 1970s, when it was considered in the context of a broader effort at reducing East–West tension. Neutral states, Western European governments, and even the United States eventually saw advantages to considering and later accepting the Soviet proposal. The negotiations that followed, officially called the CSCE, were long and contentious, spanning almost three years in their first phase. They were characterized by competing ideas on the goals of the talks, as the Soviet Union and its satellites primarily focused on security concerns and expanding trade, while the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies sought to open the Iron Curtain through human contacts provisions, to enable the future peaceful reunification of the two Germanys, to prevent military interventions, and to achieve greater Eastern respect for human rights.<sup>3</sup> As the talks dragged on, negotiations became bogged down in arcane details such as the placement of punctuation in agreed texts. The final result, however, produced a new framework for East–West relations and offered citizens of CSCE states the opportunity to move beyond the division of Europe. The conference may have seemed to outside observers akin to the nineteenth century Congress of Vienna, but its potential to transform individual lives was more far-reaching.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout this work, my use of the term “human rights” is guided by the definition outlined in the thirty articles of the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and upon which the Helsinki Final Act was based. The Universal Declaration addresses three broad classes of rights: the integrity of the human being, or freedom from

<sup>3</sup> Human contacts provisions covered a range of educational and cultural exchanges as well as family visits, marriages between citizens of different states, tourism, and professional travel.

<sup>4</sup> Many have likened the CSCE negotiations that produce the Helsinki Final Act to the 1814–5 Congress of Vienna, in terms of its historical importance and geographical scope. See for example, Iuri Vladimirovich Dubinin, “Khel’sinki 1975: Detali Istorii,” *Voprosy Istorii* 11–2 (1995): 101.

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governmental intervention against the person; political and civil liberties; and social and economic rights.<sup>5</sup> Given that the Helsinki Final Act directly referenced the Universal Declaration, the states participating in the CSCE theoretically should have had a common understanding of what was meant by human rights. In actuality, differing conceptions of human rights complicated the CSCE, as Western states tended to emphasize the first two classes of rights outlined in the Universal Declaration whereas Eastern states focused on the third.

The Helsinki Final Act was an international agreement to which countries were not bound legally.<sup>6</sup> Instead, it was a declaration of intention, and therefore the obligations therein were only moral and political. As it was not binding in international law, the leaders' signatures were supposed to imbue the document with its strength.<sup>7</sup> That the Helsinki Final Act so shaped East–West relations and the end of the Cold War despite this inherent structural weakness is a testament to those who campaigned for years for its implementation and to the eventual influence of the “Helsinki effect” on policymakers.<sup>8</sup>

The CSCE negotiations from 1972 to 1975, and the Helsinki Final Act that resulted, were structured around four groupings of issues, which were called “baskets” in CSCE terminology. The first basket outlined ten principles to guide East–West relations:

- I. Sovereign equality, respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty
- II. Refraining from the threat or use of force
- III. Inviolability of frontiers
- IV. Territorial integrity of states
- V. Peaceful settlement of disputes
- VI. Nonintervention in internal affairs

<sup>5</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights, [www.un.org/Overview/rights.html](http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html) (accessed April 6, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> One observer declared the Helsinki Final Act was “a new kind of animal. It has the body of a treaty, the legs of a resolution and the head of a declaration of intent.” Angela Romano, *From Détente in Europe to European Détente: How the West Shaped the Helsinki CSCE* (New York: P. I. E. Peter Lang, 2009), 29.

<sup>7</sup> A. H. Robertson, “The Helsinki Agreement and Human Rights,” *Notre Dame Lawyer* 53:34 (October 1977): 34; and William Korey, “The Legacy of Helsinki,” *Reform Judaism* (Spring 1988): 9.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Thomas argues that “the Helsinki Final Act’s formal commitment to respect human rights contributed significantly to the demise of Communism and the end of the Cold War,” a phenomenon he labels the “Helsinki effect.” Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

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- VII. Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief
- VIII. Equal rights and self-determination of peoples
- IX. Cooperation among states
- X. Fulfillment in good faith of obligations under international law<sup>9</sup>

Basket One also included confidence-building measures (CBMs) such as advanced notification of troop maneuvers, prior notification of military movements, and provisions for the exchange of observers and disarmament. For the East, the principle regarding the inviolability of frontiers was the “cornerstone of security in Europe” because it meant the recognition of long-sought Eastern European borders.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, the West heralded Principle Seven, which addressed respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and Principle Six, regarded by Western states as a renunciation of the Brezhnev Doctrine, the Soviet justification for intervention in socialist, satellite states. In the years after the Act’s signing, CSCE diplomats, human rights activists, and political leaders repeatedly pointed to Principle Seven as marking a commitment by Eastern bloc leaders to respect human rights. Faced with Western criticism, Soviet leaders strived to claim Principle Six exempted them from criticism of their internal affairs, including their human rights practices; their argument, however, was never given serious credence internationally.

The second basket outlined how to make economic, scientific, technological, and environmental cooperation possible across the East-West divide. The agreed text discussed facilitating business contacts and industrial co-operation, encouraging tourism, and expanding transportation networks. In addition, it focused on the exchange of economic and commercial information.<sup>11</sup> The second basket did not play a significant role in the subsequent years in part because almost all CSCE states were also members of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, which already addressed East–West cooperation in this area.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The Helsinki Final Act, [www.osce.org/documents/mcs/1975/08/4044\\_en.pdf](http://www.osce.org/documents/mcs/1975/08/4044_en.pdf) (accessed May 17, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> V. Yaroslavtsev, “Basis of European Security,” *International Affairs* (USSR) 5 (May 1976): 16.

<sup>11</sup> There also was a brief statement between the second and third baskets on issues relating to security and cooperation in the Mediterranean, a concession to Malta.

<sup>12</sup> Stefan Lehne, *The Vienna Meeting of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1986–1989* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 8–9.

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Western negotiators had pushed aggressively for the Basket Three provisions, which they hoped would ease Eastern European isolation.<sup>13</sup> Agreed measures included increasing contacts related to family reunifications, bi-national marriages, and travel. In addition, Basket Three addressed humanitarian issues such as improved working conditions for journalists, educational cooperation, and the free flow of information. In the immediate aftermath of the Helsinki Final Act, Western European CSCE delegates initially focused on using the human contacts provisions in Basket Three as a means to pressure Eastern Europe to open itself to the West, as it was easy to point to specific provisions unfulfilled by the East. Over time, however, the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms outlined in Basket One became a more effective tool to advocate liberalization in Eastern Europe.

The fourth basket addressed follow-up procedures, continuing the CSCE by stipulating that a review meeting would take place in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in 1977 to assess the progress countries had made in fulfilling the terms of the Helsinki Final Act. Although initially expected to have little significance, the CSCE meetings subsequent to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act and known collectively as the “Helsinki process” were instrumental to increasing compliance with the agreement. These meetings presented repeated opportunities for those committed to implementation of the agreement to influence Eastern European states. Held in Belgrade (1977–8), Madrid (1980–3), and Vienna (1986–9), they shaped the course of the CSCE and the Cold War.

Given that the content of the Helsinki Final Act’s commitment to human rights derived from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, why was the Helsinki Final Act far more influential on the observance of human rights and the Cold War? Unlike the Universal Declaration and other international attempts to elevate the importance of human rights, the Helsinki Final Act was uniquely formulated to give rise to a transnational network because the terms of the agreement established that CSCE states could exchange views on implementation of the Helsinki Final Act, meaning human rights abuses would now be subject to international diplomacy.<sup>14</sup> The key difference was the follow-up meeting agreed

<sup>13</sup> Peter Wallensteen, “American Soviet Détente: What Went Wrong?” *Journal of Peace Research* 22:1 (March 1985): 5; and Julian Critchley, “East-West Diplomacy and the European Interest: CSCE, MFR and SALT II,” *Round Table* 255 (1974): 306.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Borgwardt has argued that the 1941 Atlantic Charter should be considered the first international declaration on human rights but as its purpose was conceived differently, its successor the Universal Declaration is a more appropriate point of comparison.

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to in Basket Four and the resulting development of a Helsinki process. The promise to evaluate Helsinki implementation provided the rationale for establishing a United States congressional commission and human rights groups to monitor adherence to the agreement. Importantly, the first review meeting led to a second; a whole series of meetings followed that fostered links among Helsinki advocates and cemented the CSCE and human rights advocacy onto the international diplomatic agenda.

The signing of the Helsinki Final Act by thirty-five European and North American parties, and in particular the document's publication in Eastern Europe, spurred the development of a network devoted to ensuring its implementation.<sup>15</sup> Over the years, what I consider a transnational Helsinki network came to include a range of groups and individuals, including politicians, diplomats, human rights activists, Jewish refuseniks, ethnic nationalists, international NGOs, journalists, human rights experts, and ethnic interest groups.<sup>16</sup> Together, and across national borders, they pressed for adherence to the human rights and human contacts provisions of the Helsinki Final Act. The range of transnational contacts inspired by the Helsinki process was broad and unprecedented. It became commonplace for an Eastern European dissident to write to an American diplomat asking that his plight be addressed in upcoming talks or for an American-Polish activist to press the Polish Ambassador to the United States to free a trade union organizer.

In the chapters that follow, I explore how the Helsinki Final Act came to play an influential role in East–West relations and analyze the essential

Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 1–11.

<sup>15</sup> Transnational advocacy networks, like the Helsinki network, are bound together by a commitment to shared values. Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 1998), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Those engaged in human rights advocacy were inspired by diverse motives. Some were drawn to Helsinki activism by their own ethnic or religious affinity with those oppressed in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Others became involved based on a broader commitment to respect for human rights. Finally, some supporters felt compelled to get involved after moving personal encounters. Varied actors, spread across the CSCE-signatory states, changed the place of human rights in East–West diplomacy and pressured Eastern states to moderate their treatment of their citizens. Here I draw upon a previously published examination of the emergence of the transnational Helsinki network: Sarah B. Snyder: “The Rise of the Helsinki Network: ‘A Sort of Lifeline’ for Eastern Europe,” in Poul Villaume and Odd Arne Westad eds., *Perforating the Iron Curtain: European Détente, Transatlantic Relations, and the Cold War, 1965–1985* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010), 179–193, which is reprinted here in revised form with permission from Museum Tusulanum Press.



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components of the transnational network: the establishment of the United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the formation of international human rights groups, and an increasing American role in the CSCE follow-up meetings. In August 1975, Representative Millicent Fenwick (R-NJ) was so moved by her interactions with dissidents in the USSR that she proposed a joint legislative and executive committee to monitor compliance with the Helsinki Final Act, especially Basket Three, and to advocate greater international implementation. The result of these efforts, the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, became a strong advocate for United States activism on human rights and an essential part of the transnational Helsinki network.

At the same time Fenwick established the Commission, human rights activists in the Soviet Union, prompted by publication of the Helsinki Final Act in Soviet newspapers, proceeded to form their own group dedicated to compliance with the agreement. Popularly known in the West as the Moscow Helsinki Group, it included activists with a range of agendas but a common goal of monitoring Helsinki implementation. The establishment of the Moscow Helsinki Group and the Commission within a month of each other raised the international profile of the Helsinki agreement and garnered greater attention for Helsinki issues in East–West relations. As important, the Moscow Helsinki Group inspired the formation of many other monitoring groups in the East and the West, which collectively exerted influence on international diplomacy.

The effectiveness of nongovernmental human rights activism more broadly was heightened through partnerships with key governments committed to Helsinki compliance, none of which was more crucial than the United States. Although Ford signed the Helsinki Final Act, it was the 1976 presidential election of Jimmy Carter that brought high-level attention to human rights and a strong government commitment to the Helsinki process. Unlike his predecessors, Carter made human rights an important component of United States foreign policy, one he valued personally and spoke out on vocally. His focus on human rights, and more specifically the CSCE, put the issue permanently on the agenda of United States foreign policy toward Eastern Europe. Carter raised the American profile within the CSCE such that the United States was the most forthright advocate of Helsinki compliance at the 1977–8 Belgrade Follow-up Meeting. Without Carter's leadership, the Belgrade Meeting could have offered Eastern states the opportunity to tout their efforts at Helsinki implementation with little dissent. Instead, Carter appointed an outspoken jurist, Arthur J. Goldberg, to head the United States delegation.

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Goldberg's brash negotiating style was unique to the traditionally staid and deferential multilateral forums such as the CSCE. He arrived in Belgrade armed with detailed statistics and narratives of Eastern abuses compiled by the Commission, the Moscow Helsinki Group, and other interested nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and he challenged Eastern European states to adhere to their international commitments. Goldberg's style infuriated many, but he and Carter successfully established a standard whereby those who flouted their Helsinki obligations would be publicly humiliated in an international forum. Given the unique Soviet–American relationship, United States adoption of the network's agenda and pursuit of Helsinki implementation in bilateral and multilateral relations were essential to later progress on Helsinki compliance in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Because Goldberg's diplomacy required heavily documented briefs to support his charges of Eastern human rights abuses, his tenure as ambassador strengthened links among Eastern-monitoring groups, United States diplomats, and the Commission, which acted as an international clearinghouse for Helsinki information. To this end, Goldberg suggested in the aftermath of Belgrade that the burgeoning transnational Helsinki network would benefit from a United States–based monitoring group made up of private citizens. His idea became Helsinki Watch, the most prominent Western NGO devoted to Helsinki monitoring. Helsinki Watch's establishment proved critical because as Eastern repression of Helsinki activists escalated, Western NGOs were needed to lead the monitoring effort. Helsinki Watch later initiated more formal links among Helsinki monitoring groups throughout the CSCE, transforming the informal Helsinki community into a more formal Helsinki coalition.

My work studies how the network operated, examining the intertwined efforts by dissidents, human rights activists, and Western politicians and diplomats to champion human rights in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.<sup>17</sup> The Helsinki network began as disparate monitoring groups committed to similar ideals but with little means to coordinate strategy or influence international diplomacy. Over time, transnational activism related to the Helsinki Final Act gave rise to a more formal

<sup>17</sup> Claus Jäger, a member of the West German parliament, argued at a European conference on human rights that human rights activists should not be termed “dissidents,” which he argued “belittles and minimizes the decisive role of the groups.” Instead, he suggested they be called “human rights fighters” or “freedom fighters.” Claus Jäger, “Human Rights in Enslaved Europe,” 1979, Folder 44, Box 35, Accession 3560–006, Henry M. Jackson Papers, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington (hereafter Jackson Papers).