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SYMBOLIC POLITICS AND THE COLD WAR:

HOW HELSINKI WATCH PERSONALIZED HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

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In the aftermath of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) Belgrade Follow-up Meeting held from 1977 to 1978, the long-term future of the CSCE at the official level appeared temporarily secure, with a second review meeting scheduled to open in Madrid in 1980 and the United States exerting increased influence in the Helsinki process. Repression of Eastern European activists devoted to the implementation of the Helsinki Final Act, however, rendered the outlook for monitoring groups far bleaker.[1] To fill the void and build upon their work, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) outside of Eastern Europe were needed to aid monitoring efforts. Two critical groups emerged: Helsinki Watch, a United States-based group made up of private citizens that became the most influential Western NGO devoted to Helsinki monitoring, and later the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF), an international umbrella organization for Helsinki groups across CSCE states. Importantly, Helsinki Watch presented a model for human rights advocacy in the United States and elsewhere

[1] The 1975 Helsinki Final Act was the culmination of three years of negotiations at the CSCE and contained principles to govern East-West interactions in Europe. In addition to reaching an agreement on the inviolability of frontiers, which was the original impetus for the Soviet desire to hold the conference, the Helsinki Final Act committed the CSCE states to respect human rights and facilitate human contacts across East-West borders. The agreement also contained a follow-up mechanism, setting a meeting to be held in two years time to review implementation of the Act. The meetings continued in subsequent years, presenting repeated opportunities for those committed to implementation of the Helsinki Final Act to influence Eastern European states and shaping the course of the CSCE and the Cold War. After the agreement was signed, monitoring groups developed in Eastern Europe and elsewhere to assess government's implementation of its tenets. The first nongovernmental group was the Moscow Helsinki Group, which dramatized the plight of dissidents and Helsinki monitors in Eastern Europe, inspiring many others to join in pressing for Helsinki implementation. For further discussion of the Moscow Helsinki Group, the Helsinki process, and the evolution of United States CSCE policy, see Sarah B. Snyder, *The Helsinki Process, American Foreign Policy, and the End of the Cold War* (Ph.D. dissertation, Georgetown University, 2006).

and played a central role in the development of a broader international human rights movement. Helsinki Watch and its allies in the IHF used their influence to press Western and neutral CSCE delegations to focus attention on the plight of Eastern Helsinki monitors and abuses of human rights more broadly. The establishment of the International Helsinki Federation strengthened and formalized diffuse Helsinki monitoring activities, thereby heightening their effectiveness. Forming the IHF also broadened non-governmental support for Helsinki monitoring, incorporating a broader range of Western voices. The transnational connections forged by Helsinki Watch and the IHF were a fundamental reason human rights remained a prominent issue in East-West relations in subsequent years.

Leading up to the Belgrade Meeting, both the Carter administration and the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe in the United States Congress had been highly involved in monitoring Helsinki implementation. In addition, a number of ethnic or religious groups, often termed the "Helsinki lobby" devoted their attention to the CSCE, but the respective groups that comprised the "lobby" had varying mandates and other areas of focus—no Western group was devoted exclusively to Helsinki compliance.[2] In hearings before the congressional Commission, the former United States ambassador to the Belgrade Meeting, Arthur J. Goldberg, identified a role for a nongovernmental United States Helsinki Committee, like the Moscow Helsinki Group, and facilitated its creation.[3] Goldberg helped secure funding from the Ford Foundation for the committee, which became known as Helsinki Watch.[4] The organization's

[2] The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe was established in 1976 as a joint legislative and executive body charged with monitoring implementation of the Helsinki Final Act.
[3] According to Commission staff member Spencer Oliver, Goldberg's idea to start Helsinki Watch came from his experience working with NGOs in his years at the United Nations. R. Spencer Oliver Interview, 26 February 2008. The Moscow Helsinki Group had been established in 1976 by Soviet human rights activists to monitor their country's compliance with the Helsinki Final Act.
[4] The Ford Foundation granted Helsinki Watch $400,000 for two years, which it was assumed would cover the organization's costs through the end of the Madrid Meeting. Jeri Laber, *The Courage of Strangers: Coming of Age with the Human Rights Movement* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2002), 98.

initial mandate was to produce reports on human rights abuses in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and the United States, all of which would be released when the next CSCE meeting opened in Madrid in 1980.[5] When the Madrid Meeting dragged on for years, Helsinki Watch became a permanent fixture of the Helsinki process, lasting far beyond its original mandate.

Those most active in the organization, including Robert Bernstein, Orville Schell, Aryeh Neier, and Jeri Laber, were drawn to human rights work through their professional and academic experiences. Robert Bernstein, president of Random House, became interested in Soviet human rights abuses after firsthand contact with Soviet censorship in the early 1970s, his relationship with Soviet human rights advocate Andrei Sakharov, and his commitment to publishing texts banned in the Soviet Union.[6] Bernstein took the initiative on forming a nongovernmental Helsinki committee and invited both Schell and Neier to take leadership roles. Schell had been president of the New York Bar Association and had become interested in human rights after visiting the Soviet Union on a trip sponsored by the Union Councils for Soviet Jews.[7] Neier had worked as Executive Director of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and had come to know Bernstein through a joint Random House-ACLU lawsuit against the Central Intelligence Agency.[8] Laber, who became Helsinki Watch's Executive Director, had written a master's thesis on Soviet writers pressing for greater freedoms.[9] She became more involved in human rights issues, including joining an Amnesty International chapter, after reading an article by Rose

[5] *Ibid*., 97-99, 117; Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, "The Belgrade Followup Meeting to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe: A Report and Appraisal," 17 May 1978, Hearings and Reports 1977, Box 2442, Dante Fascell Papers, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida; and R. Spencer Oliver Interview, 26 February 2008. Monitoring United States compliance was seen as essential to maintaining international credibility. Laber, *The Courage of Strangers*, 103; and Jeri Laber Interview, 29 April 2008.
[6] Laber, *The Courage of Strangers*, 79-80.
[7] *Ibid*., 98.
[8] Aryeh Neier, *Taking Liberties: Four Decades in the Struggle for Rights* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), 149-50, 152.
[9] Laber, *The Courage of Strangers*, 54-5.

Styron on torture in the *New Republic.*[10] While participating in an Amnesty International rally on behalf of Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovsky, Laber met Bernstein, who later hired her to work for the Association of American Publishers' International Freedom to Publish Committee. It was through this association that Laber came to work for Bernstein when he formed the Fund for Free Expression and later Helsinki Watch.[11]

Helsinki Watch was conceived as an organization devoted to advocacy and focused primarily on Eastern European human rights monitors who suffered harassment, arrest, or imprisonment for their efforts. It worked to keep their repression under an international spotlight, pursuing an array of tactics to do so. Helsinki Watch's influence was built in part upon the comprehensive research reports it produced. In addition, Helsinki Watch staff members traveled regularly to Eastern Europe to offer material and moral support to human rights activists there, and in the United States and Western Europe, they worked to keep international attention focused on imprisoned monitors and those suffering state repression.

The organization aspired to influence a range of audiences. First, Helsinki Watch wanted to shape United States policy for the Madrid meeting and the CSCE meetings that later followed. In speaking about the organization's relationship with United States policymakers, Helsinki Watch Vice Chair Aryeh Neier said, Helsinki Watch "tried to keep them honest and focused on the human rights issues."[12] Second, Helsinki Watch hoped it could win support for Helsinki monitoring among Western and neutral CSCE diplomats. Third, and far more ambitious, Helsinki Watch aspired to reach Eastern European diplomats and officials to influence their attitudes toward the Helsinki Final Act and its monitors in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Finally, Helsinki Watch recognized an important audience in the United States public, whose

[10] *Ibid.*, 69-71.
[11] *Ibid.*, 74-8, 83.
[12] Aryeh Neier Interview, 24 April 2008.

support of official and non-governmental efforts in the defense of human rights was important to the long-term success of Helsinki advocacy.

In order to accomplish these far-reaching goals, Helsinki Watch pursued a range of methods. Over time, Helsinki Watch became well-known for the quality and comprehensiveness of its research reports, which were relied upon by policymakers, diplomats, and others interested in Helsinki compliance. Helsinki Watch, and in particular its Executive Director Jeri Laber, also sought to garner public support and attention for their cause by highlighting repressed or imprisoned individuals by issuing press releases, writing op-eds, and speaking out publicly. Finally, Helsinki Watch sought to influence CSCE diplomats through direct contact, making themselves a permanent, visible presence at CSCE meetings.

Helsinki Watch worked to maintain concerted, public pressure on the United States government to pay attention to Helsinki issues, and its press releases and research reports were essential to its objectives. The organization's reports were based on documents transmitted from Eastern Europe, often from domestic monitoring groups, testimony of recent emigrants, and first-hand research conducted through fact-finding missions. Helsinki Watch relied upon the research of the Moscow Helsinki Group and other monitoring groups in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In addition, Helsinki Watch often worked with Ludmilla Alekseeva, the Moscow Helsinki Group representative in the West, to compile research reports on particular types of human rights abuses or assessments of the human rights record of a specific country. According to Aryeh Neier, the dependability and detailed nature of Helsinki Watch's research heightened its influence: "We were able to get, I think, the most reliable information that was available on the individual victims of abuse."[13]

[13] Aryeh Neier Interview, 24 April 2008; and Neier, *Taking Liberties*, 157.

Helsinki Watch was sophisticated in its tactics, mixing well-researched reports with poignant stories that enabled individual connections to the issue. Through Helsinki Watch's efforts, the American public was exposed not only to the names of these Eastern activists but also to their faces, as they accompanied as many reports and press releases as possible with photographs. Helsinki Watch's emphasis on visually representing dissidents had begun with Laber's first visit to Moscow in 1979, when she photographed activists gathered to meet with her in Andrei Sakharov's apartment to dramatic effect. The photos were later published in *Life* magazine.[14] Laber's efforts were part of a concerted campaign by Helsinki Watch of "symbolic politics" to make repressed human rights activists familiar to the broader public. As Neier later said, "In order for people to rally to the human rights cause it is very often necessary for them to have an identification with individuals. . . And when people started to get to know the names of someone like Yuri Orlov or Havel or Michnik, that was important."[15] In several instances, Helsinki Watch was even able to document the toll of imprisonment on particular activists. For example, Helsinki Watch produced a report entitled, "Where are They Now?: Monitors in the USSR: Ten Years After Helsinki." The report's cover juxtaposed photos of a smiling Orlov in 1977 before his arrest and a weary Orlov in exile seven years later.[16] According to Laber,

[14] Laber, *The Courage of Strangers*, 118.
[15] Aryeh Neier Interview, 24 April 2008. Yuri Orlov was a founding member and the head of the Moscow Helsinki Group, Vaclav Havel was a dissident playwright and spokesman for Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, and Adam Michnik was an activist in Poland. For further discussion of "symbolic politics," see Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 1998), 16.
[16] U.S. Helsinki Watch Committee, "Where are They Now?: Monitors in the USSR: Ten Years After Helsinki," August 1985, USSR: Helsinki Accords 10th Anniversary, 1985, Box 16, Country Files, Cathy Fitzpatrick Files, Record Group 7, Human Rights Watch Records, Center for Human Rights Documentation and Research, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library, New York, New York; and Anna Husarska, "'Conscience Trigger': The Press and Human Rights," in Samantha Power and Graham Allison, ed. *Realizing Human Rights: Moving from Inspiration to Impact* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 342. (Hereafter HRWR.)

Helsinki Watch worked to reach its primary audience, the United States public: "Our purpose was to try to dramatize the situations of these people."[17]

Laber and others also published letters to the editor, articles, and op-eds in prominent, national publications such as the *New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal,* and the *New York Review of Books*. Helsinki Watch's goal was to foster support for Helsinki monitors' plight and to "shame and embarrass" repressive governments. For example, in an op-ed in the *New York Times* on the occasion of tenth anniversary of the Moscow Helsinki Group's founding, Laber wrote that Orlov had "endured in a manmade hell of physical cruelty and broken dreams."[18] In Neier's view, Laber made the stories of Eastern European dissidents immediate to a wide audience:

> [She] proved an effective advocate by writing frequently for newspapers and magazines about the Russians, Poles, Czechs, and others she encountered on her frequent travels to the region who stood up to persecution. Her impressionistic articles humanized men and women with unfamiliar-sounding names struggling against apparently all-powerful regimes with what seemed then little or no prospect of making headway. Thereby, Jeri helped many in the West care about what happened to individuals who otherwise had only a blurred collective identity as dissidents.[19]

Closely connected with Helsinki Watch's advocacy of repressed dissidents was the support it offered monitoring groups and individuals in Eastern Europe. Attention by Helsinki Watch could include boosting morale, offering financial support, and providing some degree of protection. Helsinki Watch records demonstrate efforts over the years to secure teaching and research appointments at American universities for those facing state repression, to publish

[17] Laber reports she and her staff were very focused on the individual dissidents they were championing, because they had met many or were well-acquainted with their personal stories and therefore very invested in supporting them. Jeri Laber Interview, 29 April 2008.
[18] Jeri Laber, "10 Years Later, the Legacy of the Moscow Helsinki Group," *New York Times* 11 May 1986.
[19] Neier, *Taking Liberties*, 156.

Eastern European monitoring groups' reports, and to deliver medicine and office supplies to activists in the East.

Helsinki Watch would become a key pillar in the transnational network of monitoring groups; and its first connections to human rights monitors in Eastern Europe were made in Moscow. Human rights activist Andrei Sakharov had issued an appeal for "the creation of a unified international committee to defend all Helsinki Watch members" in May 1978, and Helsinki Watch viewed its organization in that mold.[20] Laber subsequently initiated efforts to open up direct lines of communication with the Soviet and Eastern European monitoring groups.[21] Those efforts produced a joint statement by Helsinki Watch and the Moscow Helsinki Group in July 1979 that called for Helsinki monitoring groups to be established in all CSCE signatory countries. To draw attention to their proposal, Helsinki Watch organized a public ceremony during which it phoned the Moscow Helsinki Group and spoke briefly with member Yelena Bonner before the call was disconnected, heightening the drama of the event. Speaking to those assembled, Helsinki Watch Chair Robert Bernstein noted the irony that "nothing has done more to focus the attention of the world on human rights abuses in the USSR and Czechoslovakia than the persecution of members of the Soviet Helsinki monitoring groups and of Charter 77."[22] Further heightening the public display of solidarity between the two groups,

[20] Andrei Sakharov, "Human Rights . . . A Common Goal," Support for US Helsinki Committee, 1978, Box 29, General Files, New York Office Files, Record Group 7, HRWR. Sakharov was not a member of the Moscow Helsinki Group, but his wife, Yelena Bonner, was.

[21] The first indication that the Moscow Helsinki Group was aware of the existence of Helsinki Watch came in a March 1979 letter from Sakharov and Naum Meiman, but the letter was intended for Scientists for Orlov and Shcharansky, a scientists' advocacy group, not Helsinki Watch, demonstrating Helsinki Watch needed to enhance its ties with the Group. Meiman and Sakharov to Colleagues, 10 March 1979, Helsinki Watch Steering Committee, 1979, Box 3, General Files, New York Office Files, Record Group 7, HRWR; and Laber to Bernstein, 26 April 1979, *ibid;* and Laber to Fishlow, 31 December 1978, Helsinki Watch – Hearings [1978-1979], Box 1, *ibid*.

[22] Charter 77 was not an organization like the Moscow Helsinki Group but a grass roots effort that drew attention to contradictions between Czechoslovak law, the government's signature of the Helsinki Final Act, and life in Czechoslovakia. Joint Statement of the Moscow Group to Promote Observance of the Helsinki Accords in the USSR and of the American Helsinki Watch, 31 July 1979, USSR: [HW] Joint Statement of the Moscow and

former Soviet dissidents Alexander Ginzburg, George Vins, Petro Grigorenko, and Alekseeva also spoke at the ceremony in New York.

Helsinki Watch wanted to forge further, direct connections with the Moscow Helsinki Group by sending a representative to the Soviet Union. In September 1979 Laber traveled to Moscow, ostensibly for the Moscow Book Fair, and met with members of the Moscow Helsinki Group at Sakharov's apartment. The group discussed how best to influence Soviet leaders, garner Western press coverage for the cause, and communicate despite government efforts to block mail.[23] In her words,

> I told the group who I was and that we had recently formed the U.S. Helsinki Watch in response to what was happening to them. I assured them that they were not alone, that we and others abroad were aware of the arrests and imprisonment of their members and were issuing protests. I suggested that we plan some joint actions, like issuing reports together and holding press conferences simultaneously at prearranged times.[24]

Laber's trip was an important step in connecting often geographically dispersed monitoring groups into a transnational network. In former Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky's view, "Helsinki Watch was one of the best things that happened in America." He said, Helsinki Watch was a "powerful light directed into the Soviet Union that [showed] what [was] really happening."[25]

Helsinki Watch also worked to establish links with activists and monitoring groups in Poland and Czechoslovakia, and Laber's memoirs recount her repeated trips to Eastern Europe to

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American Watch Group, 1979, Box 53, Country Files, Jeri Laber Files, Record Group 7, HRWR; Press Release, 31 July 1979, *ibid;* and Statement to the Press by Bob Bernstein, 31 July 1979, *ibid*

[23] Memo to the Record, n.d., USSR: Alexeyeva, Ludmilla: Correspondence, 1976, 1978-1983, Box 2, Country Files, Cathy Fitzpatrick Files, Record Group 7, HRWR.

[24] Having met and spoken openly with dissidents in an apartment undoubtedly under surveillance, Laber had attracted the authorities' attention and was refused a Soviet visa in the years that followed. Laber, *The Courage of Strangers,* 117.

[25] Natan Sharansky Interview, 19 November 2009. Anatoly Shcharansky changed his name to Natan Sharansky upon his emigration to Israel. I have chosen to use the original spelling of his name when discussing his activities in the Soviet Union.

communicate with dissidents.[26] Laber reports she tried to remain as inconspicuous as possible during her travels, listing tourism as the reason for her visit and "housewife" as her occupation. She even rolled up her notes from conversations with dissidents and kept them at her fingertips in her coat pockets rather than risk losing them in a search of her suitcase.[27] Laber first traveled to Warsaw in September 1979 where she met with members of the Committee for Social Self-Defense (KSS-KOR) and facilitated efforts to form a group devoted to Helsinki monitoring within the KOR framework.[28] According to Laber, Polish activists began organizing a Helsinki committee immediately in response to her suggestion.[29] Polish activists also shared with her their efforts to reach out to Czech dissidents and the Moscow Helsinki Group, indicating connections were being formed amongst Helsinki activists in many directions.[30] When Laber visited again in 1981, the Polish Helsinki Committee was vigorously reporting on repression of union leaders and Solidarity members, who would later play a key role in transforming Poland.[31] Helsinki Watch supported these activists throughout the years that followed. In one instance, Neier and his wife traveled to Poland in March 1984 to meet activists, including Zofia Romaszewska, whose husband Zbigniew was the founder of the Polish Helsinki Committee and imprisoned for his role in Solidarity.[32]

Laber also traveled to Prague in September 1979 where she built links to Czech dissidents including Charter 77 spokesman Jiri Hajek. Helsinki Watch worked to maintain connections with human rights activists in Eastern Europe, with Laber visiting Czechoslovakia

[26] Jeri Laber Interview, 29 April 2008.
[27] Laber, *The Courage of Strangers*, 134, 146.
[28] KOR changed its name to the Committee for Social Self-Defense (KSS-KOR) in late 1977.
[29] Laber, *The Courage of Strangers*, 148.
[30] Memo for the Record, n.d., USSR: [HW] J. Laber's Memos [on Eastern Bloc Meetings], 1979, Box 53, Country Files, Jeri Laber Files, Record Group 7, HRWR.
[31] Laber, *The Courage of Strangers*, 151-2.
[32] Neier, *Taking Liberties*, 246. Solidarity, the Polish trade union that became a larger social and political movement, was forced underground when Poland declared martial law on December 13, 1981.

again in October and November 1981. During that trip, Laber met with Ivan Havel, the brother of imprisoned Charter 77 spokesman Vaclav Havel, who also faced trial. Ivan Havel emphasized the importance of publicizing the plight of dissidents but noted at that juncture that economic pressure could be more important than public rhetoric in influencing the Czechoslovak government.[33]

Helsinki Watch worked to develop relations with dissidents elsewhere in Eastern Europe including countries where the human rights situation was less severe and activists were not as well known. During a trip to Hungary, Laber found two groups of dissidents had developed: Democratic Opposition and Nationalist Opposition, both focused on monitoring human rights outside of the country, in particular the situation of Hungarian minorities.[34] In 1983, members of Helsinki Watch traveled to Hungary again to meet with dissidents; while there they met with people who had written on Helsinki violations in Hungary and were interested in forming a Hungarian Helsinki group. Laber, however, discouraged formal establishment of a Hungarian group out of concern for the safety of the activists.[35]

Laber's trip reports illuminate the challenges to making transnational human rights connections in this period. Despite Helsinki Watch's efforts to communicate its formation to Czech dissidents by postal mail, only some of the letters reached their recipients; news of the group's formation was spread more effectively by Voice of America reporting.[36] When Laber met with Czech dissidents in late 1981 one dissident reported to her that he thought Helsinki Watch had become dormant given the lack of successful communication in the two years

[33] Memorandum for the Record, n.d., Czechoslovakia: Conditions – General, 1977-1983, n.d., Box 3, Country Files, Janet Fleischman, Record Group 7, HRWR.
[34] The external focus may have been a measure of self-preservation. Laber, *The Courage of Strangers*, 154-60.
[35] Memorandum, 8 March 1982, Hungary: Independent Organizations, 1981-1987, Box 29, Country Files, Janet Fleischman Files, Record Group 7, HRWR.
[36] Memo for the Record, n.d., USSR: [HW] J. Laber's Memos [on Eastern Bloc Meetings]; 1979, Box 53, Country Files, Jeri Laber Files, Record Group 7, HRWR.

previous, further demonstrated the difficulties in maintaining connections among Helsinki monitoring groups.[37] Most significantly, in many Eastern European countries discussing human rights abuses with an American was grounds for harassment, arrest, or imprisonment, making the potential costs of informal or formal connections quite high.

Despite the frustrations Laber and Helsinki Watch encountered in their efforts to keep lines of communication to Eastern Europe open, there were signs, at times dramatic, that their endeavors were deeply valued by dissidents. For example, after the head of the Polish Helsinki Committee, Zbigniew Romaszewski, was arrested, a note was smuggled out of Poland requesting someone to "please find the person from the US Helsinki Watch Committee who came to Warsaw in 1981" and ask her to act to "save the Romaszewskis."[38] Eastern European activists would later often attribute their survival, release from prison, or permission to emigrate to advocacy by Helsinki Watch. For example, in June 1985, a Mihajlo Markovic, Yugoslav dissident, wrote to Neier asking for his help with a Yugoslav facing trial and testified to Neier's work on behalf of other Yugoslav dissidents, "You have literally saved them from very long prison sentences."[39]

Helsinki Watch's efforts to connect with Eastern European monitoring groups were aimed in part at enhancing the influence of NGOs at the Madrid Meeting. At the Belgrade Follow-up Meeting, these groups generally had been low in numbers, resources, and political clout. By the opening of the Madrid Meeting, however, evidence of a transnational network existed. Based on Laber's reporting of her conversations in the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia,

[37] Memorandum for the Record, n.d., Czechoslovakia: Conditions – General, 1977-1983, n.d., Box 3, Country Files, Janet Fleischman, Record Group 7, HRWR

[38] Bulletin #5, 6 December 1982, USSR: International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, 1982-1987, Box 19, Country Files, Cathy Fitzpatrick Files, Record Group 7, HRWR; and Laber to the Editor, *New York Times* 8 December 1982.

[39] Markovic to Neier, 7 June 1985, Yugoslavia: Defense [of Yugoslav dissidents] Europe, 1984-1985, Box 9, Country Files, Cathy Fitzpatrick Files, Record Group 7, HRWR.

and Poland, many activists were looking toward the Madrid Review Meeting and how best to draw attention to the cause of human rights. To political scientist H. Gordon Skilling, the activities of the press and human rights activists created an "Alice in Wonderland atmosphere" at Madrid; Laber describes the opening of the Madrid Meeting as a "circus" because so many groups had emerged to participate.[40] At Madrid, an informal network of dissidents, human rights activists, and members of ethnic groups with varying degrees of connection to one another attempted to influence CSCE delegates to adopt their agendas.[41] For human rights activists the review meetings enabled an exchange of information—the opportunity to disseminate their work more widely and to influence international and domestic public opinion.

Helsinki Watch sought to influence those most involved in the CSCE negotiations directly, specifically targeting CSCE diplomats.[42] In an effort to shape United States policy in advance of the meeting, Helsinki Watch weighed in on the recurring debate between "naming names" and "quiet diplomacy" with an op-ed in the *New York Times* that warned against cautious State Department diplomacy and advocated a strong American stance in support of imprisoned Soviet monitors.[43] During the meeting, Helsinki Watch made appeals for human rights activists in the Soviet Union, held press conferences to publicize their plight, and provided Madrid

[40] H. Gordon Skilling, "The Madrid Follow-up" in Robert Spencer, ed. *Canada and the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe* (Toronto: Centre for International Studies, University of Toronto, 1984), 317; Laber, *The Courage of Strangers*, 120-1; William Korey, *The Promises We Keep: Human Rights, the Helsinki Process and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Institute for East West Studies, 1993), xxvi; and Xinyuan Dai, *Compliance Without Carrots or Sticks: How International Institutions Influence National Policies* (PhD. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2000), 146, 186, 191.

[41] Commission Staff also estimated that 1500 members of the press, including 90 from the United States, reported from Madrid in the opening week of the meeting. Janie Leatherman, *From Cold War to Democratic Peace* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 176; Commission Staff to CSCE Commissioners, 6 January 1981, Helsinki/Madrid, Box 112, Millicent Fenwick Papers, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey; and CSCE Review Meeting Opens in Madrid, 12 November 1980, Folder 1, Box 140, Aloysius A. Mazewski Papers, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

[42] Jeri Laber Interview, 29 April 2008.

[43] Calibrating the United States approach to CSCE negotiations always involved striking the right balance between public condemnation of human rights abuses and private entreaties to improve conditions in Eastern European countries. Jeri Laber, "Moscow vs. Rights," 31 July 1980 *New York Times*.

delegations with first-hand research on the situation in Eastern Europe.[44] Helsinki Watch members also repeatedly wrote to Soviet officials to convey their displeasure at Soviet human rights practices.[45] Helsinki Watch also maintained a presence in Madrid for the duration of the meeting after most NGOs and journalists had left, intending to serve a "dual function of providing a voice for the human rights spokespersons we have invited and acting as a clearinghouse for the receipt and dissemination of written materials."[46] To that end, Helsinki Watch employed a permanent representative and local support staff in Madrid to continue exerting pressure on delegates and publicizing Helsinki Watch's research on human rights.[47] As the Madrid Meeting dragged on and press interest waned, Helsinki Watch struggled at times to capture attention for its cause.[48] When Laber stopped in Madrid at the end of a 25-day trip to Eastern Europe, United States CSCE ambassador Max Kampelman arranged a luncheon with 14 NATO and Neutral and Non-Aligned ambassadors. To her surprise, as she conveyed her findings Laber reports sensing she was giving the ambassadors new information and educating them about the situation in these countries: "I realized that many of them were focusing for the first time on the personal tragedies caused by human rights violations. Their response led me to believe that in the future they would raise human rights issues more vociferously with the

[44] U.S. Helsinki Watch Committee, "The First Fifteen Months: A Summary of the Activities of the U.S. Helsinki Watch Committee from its founding in February, 1979 to April, 1980," Helsinki Watch – Annual Report, 1979, Box 1, General Files, New York Office Files, Record Group 7, HRWR; and Helsinki Watch – Annual Report, 1986, Box 1, Subject Files, Cathy Fitzpatrick Files, Record Group 7, HRWR.
[45] For example, Bernstein and Schell to Ilichev, 12 January 1981, USSR: Political Prisoners: Campaign on their Behalf, 1981, Box 60, Country Files, Jeri Laber Files, Record Group 7, HRWR; and Bernstein and Schell to Ilichev, 23 January 1981, *ibid.*
[46] Jeri Laber Interview, 29 April 2008; and The Madrid Office, 19 March 1980, Madrid pre-conference plans, 1979-1980, Box 37, General Files, New York Office Files, Record Group 7, HRWR.
[47] Laber, *The Courage of Strangers*, 123.
[48] Helsinki Watch's full-time representatives in Madrid, however, were bolstered by periodic visits by Laber, Helsinki Watch board member Orville Schell, and others who could draw the attention of CSCE delegates. Report from Madrid – 2, November 1982, Madrid: November 9, 1982, Box 38, General Files, New York Office Files, Record Group 7, HRWR.

Eastern bloc delegates at the conference."[49] Laber's experience in Madrid demonstrated to her the effect Helsinki Watch could have on CSCE diplomats.

Internal Helsinki Watch documents suggest it regarded its presence in Madrid as having a positive impact. For example, in a report about Helsinki Watch Vice Chair Orville Schell's March 1981 trip to the Madrid Meeting a staffer reported on the growing influence of Helsinki Watch: "it became very obvious during his visit that the members of the U.S. delegation, but even more importantly, the other delegations regard the U.S. Helsinki Watch Committee as a force to be reckoned with, and treated Orville with the respect due a representative of a very important and influential group. I feel that the prestige of [Helsinki Watch] has grown during the course of this meeting."[50] Finding its ongoing presence effective, Helsinki Watch would go on to pursue a similar strategy at subsequent CSCE meetings.

As its reputation developed, Helsinki Watch was able to wield increasing influence, at times greater than states could exert. Helsinki Watch's status as a nongovernmental organization to some degree freed it from broader problems in East-West relations that prevented progress at the governmental and at the state level. Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs Paula Dobriansky has argued human rights organizations such as Helsinki Watch and Amnesty International can "sometimes accomplish more than the U.S. government. This usually occurs in dealing with individual human rights cases because a nationalistic government sometimes finds it easier to give into the demands of world public opinion than to

[49] In 1981 Helsinki Watch decided that it needed to move beyond its strategy of collecting information and begin conducting its own research into human rights practices in the countries it was monitoring. So, in the fall of 1981, Laber embarked on a solo research trip to Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, and Yugoslavia. Laber later reported on a trip to Romania and argued against holding the next CSCE conference there, as Romanian President Nicolai Ceausescu wished. Laber, *The Courage of Strangers*, 132-3, 162, 198-9.

[50] Report from the Helsinki Watch Madrid Office, 1 March to 3 April 1981, Madrid, 1981-March 1982, Box 38, General Files, New York Office Files, Record Group 7, HRWR.

grant the official request of the U.S. government."[51] The United States ambassador in Prague similarly emphasized the dependent nature of state-level human rights advocacy, writing to Helsinki Watch: "Our relations [with the Czechoslovak government] are so bad here that we can't help . . .much!"[52]

Faced with an abundance of groups trying to advance their objectives at Madrid, Helsinki Watch recognized that forming connections among like-minded groups across CSCE states could facilitate more effective human rights advocacy. As such, Helsinki Watch initiated the formation of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, or IHF as it was called, which established a formal umbrella organization for Western, neutral, and Eastern national Helsinki committees. The IHF was formed at the urging of Aryeh Neier, who decided in early 1982 that Helsinki Watch should forge an alliance with Helsinki committees in Western Europe. Identifying or establishing Helsinki groups in Western Europe to join what became the IHF, however, initially presented considerable challenges.[53] With the exception of monitoring groups in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, Helsinki Watch did not have many natural allies as other human rights organizations such as Amnesty International were not particularly active in that area of the world.[54] When Helsinki Watch began working on forming the umbrella group, only three countries had existing Helsinki committees in addition to the United States: the Netherlands, France, and Norway, and the groups were quite diverse. For example, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee was made up of over 2000 members and funded in large part by the government. The Dutch committee on the other hand was comprised primarily of lawyers who were focused on legal aspects of the Helsinki process.

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[51] Paula J. Dobriansky, "Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Policy," *Washington Quarterly* (Spring 1989): 167.
[52] Luers to Fitzpatrick, 20 July 1984, Czechoslovakia: General, 1984-1986, Box 16, Country Files, Files of Jeri Laber, Record Group 7, HRWR.
[53] Helsinki Watch's efforts to form the IHF were funded by the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation.
[54] Jeri Laber Interview, 29 April 2008.

By July 1982, Laber had found representatives from 18 countries to attend a September 1982 conference on this initiative in Lake Como, Italy.[55] By the second day of the conference, those assembled had agreed to form the IHF and to locate its headquarters in Vienna. The IHF announced its formation with eight national committees at a press conference in Madrid on November 9, 1982, and with the establishment of the IHF an informal Helsinki network transformed into a more formal Helsinki coalition. When it was first formed, the IHF members were Helsinki committees from Austria, Belgium, Canada, France, Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United States. Soon after its establishment, IHF efforts focused on forming Helsinki committees in countries such as West Germany, Finland, Spain, and Great Britain as well as seeking money to fund the umbrella group.[56] In these early stages, however, the IHF was often an organization in name only, as some committees were comprised of no more than a single concerned individual.[57] Initially it was deemed too dangerous for groups in Eastern Europe or Turkey to join officially; later the IHF came to include groups from Czechoslovakia, Denmark, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Poland, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia, among others. For the myriad of interest groups spread across CSCE countries, the IHF's founding created a means to connect with one another more easily while establishing a central organization to better guide the overarching network.

Helsinki Watch initiated the IHF to further a number of its goals against the backdrop of deteriorating American-Soviet relations. Helsinki Watch wanted to continue its reputation as an independent organization despite the increasingly close correlation between its objectives and the Reagan administration's policy toward the Soviet bloc. Neier believed establishing formal links

[55] Laber, *The Courage of Strangers*, 177-8.
[56] Meeting Minutes, 18-20 June 1983, IHF: Coordinating Committee Meeting – Oslo, 1983, Box 2, International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, Record Group 7, HRWR.
[57] Laber, *The Courage of Strangers*, 198-9.

to human rights groups in Western Europe would prevent Helsinki Watch from being "seen as a creature of the Reagan administration or solely as a group articulating publicly their concerns."[58] Neier writes about the IHF's creation,

> The disastrous human rights situation in the Soviet Union was not the only factor in making me propose that we form an international organization. I was also concerned about our effectiveness in the US Helsinki Watch in opposing Soviet abuses. At that point, it had been a little more than a year since Ronald Reagan had become the fortieth president of the United States, and relations between Washington and Moscow had hit an all-time low.[59]

To this end, the European-based IHF also offered an opportunity to influence Soviet and Eastern European leaders, as the USSR seemed increasingly focused on relations with Western European governments given the downturn in Soviet-American relations. According to Neier, "It seemed to me at that moment that if there were also Western European voices speaking out on violations in Soviet bloc countries, that would be more effective. If we did it alone, we would be dismissed because of the general antagonisms at the time."[60] Neier was worried that Helsinki Watch's criticisms of the Soviet human rights record would get lost in the hostile, anti-Soviet language originating from the White House: "Prior to the establishment of the IHF, we didn't have any links with groups in Western countries that were concerned with human rights in the Soviet countries. We were only a US group concerned with the Soviet bloc countries."[61] In Neier's view, the mission of the IHF was to "generate Western European pressure against Soviet human rights abuses," and over time this goal would be realized.[62]

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[58] Aryeh Neier Interview, 24 April 2008.
[59] Neier, *Taking Liberties*, 157.
[60] Aryeh Neier Interview, 24 April 2008.
[61] *Ibid*.
[62] Neier, *Taking Liberties*, 159. For example, in November 1982, representatives of the eight IHF national committees met with their countries' ambassadors to Madrid over dinner. Bulletin #5, 6 December 1982, USSR: International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, 1982-1987, Box 19, Country Files, Cathy Fitzpatrick Files, Record Group 7, HRWR.

Importantly, the IHF was not comprised only of committees from NATO states, and in fact, in its formation, Helsinki Watch explicitly sought to draw neutral and non-aligned countries into the organization. In Laber's view, the IHF was established in large part as a means to reach out and influence the neutral and non-aligned delegations as they "held the balance" at the CSCE meetings.[63] The idea was that having member groups in the neutral and non-aligned states would be a way to influence those delegations and governments to support Helsinki Watch's policy objectives.[64]

As Helsinki Watch and the other existing IHF national committees worked on building their network of groups, the United States government became interested in facilitating and supporting Helsinki monitoring groups in Western Europe.[65] Governmental interest may have been connected with Kampelman's observation that Western European delegates at Madrid were under no public pressure to push Eastern governments on human rights, leading them to pursue less activist policies in the CSCE negotiations. He hoped "energizing European NGO's" might help pressure Western European delegations.[66]

Regrettably, at the same time that Western activists were succeeding in greater organization and coordination efforts, Eastern monitoring groups declined in influence, as NGOs such as the Moscow Helsinki Group had been severely depleted in strength and numbers by arrest, exile, and imprisonment. Citing the "cruel persecution" of Moscow Helsinki Group

[63] Diplomats from the neutral and non-aligned countries were often highly effective in bridging East-West differences during CSCE negotiations.
[64] Jeri Laber Interview, 29 April 2008. After the organization's formation, IHF member committees worked to exert pressure on CSCE delegates. In one example, Frantisek Janouch of the Swedish Helsinki Committee wrote to Danish, Swedish, and Dutch officials about Sakharov's case. Bodström to Janouch, 6 February 1984, USSR: Sakharov, Andrei May 1984, Box 49, Country Files, Cathy Fitzpatrick Files, Record Group 7, HRWR; Buwalda to Janouch, 24 January 1984, *ibid*; Rosenthal to Janouch, 26 January 1984; *ibid.*
[65] Kampelman to Laber, 5 August 1983, National Endowment for Democracy, 1983-1984, Box 49, Subject Files, New York Office Files, Record Group 7, HRWR.
[66] Helman to Laber, 10 January 1984, National Endowment for Democracy, 1983-1984, Box 49, General Files, New York Office Files, Record Group 7, HRWR.

members and in particular concerns about pending charges against a 75 year old group member, Sofia Kalistratova, the Group succumbed to government pressure and disbanded on September 6, 1982, announcing: "The Moscow Helsinki Group has been put into condition where further work is impossible…Under these conditions the group…has to cease its work."[67]

The establishment of the IHF marked a transition to a Helsinki coalition, to use Sanjeev Khagram, James Riker, and Kathryn Sikkink's term, which could pursue a common strategy.[68] Given their shared values and common opponents, the national committees of the IHF had the potential for collective action and effective transnational advocacy.[69] Coordination among the Helsinki groups that comprised the IHF made the organization's activism more effective as they organized fact-finding missions, publications of research reports, and fundraising. First, greater consultation prevented duplicative efforts. Second, the ability to compose an international delegation or to speak with a united, international voice heightened the IHF's influence with political leaders. Third, locating the IHF's headquarters in Vienna created much greater physical proximity between human rights activists and the countries they monitored. In the terminology of social movement scholars Kathryn Sikkink and Martha Finnemore, the IHF served as an "organizational platform" for those committed to human rights in the Soviet Union and Eastern

[67] Moscow Helsinki Group Document Number 195, 6 September 1982, USSR: Kalistratova, Sofia, 1982, Box 20, Country Files, Cathy Fitzpatrick Files, Record Group 7, HRWR; Statement on Closure of Moscow Helsinki Monitoring Group, 9 September 1982, USSR: Monitors, 1971-1979-1983, Box 26, *ibid;* Paul Goldberg, *The Final Act: The Dramatic, Revealing Story of the Moscow Helsinki Watch Group* (New York: Morrow, 1988), 278; and Laber, *The Courage of Strangers*, 182-3. Soviet officials regarded Bonner and Kalistratova's claims that they were subject to "unceasing persecution" to be a slanderous allegation. Central Committee Memorandum, 12 September 1982, Russian and Eastern European Archive Document Database- Russian Archives Document Database (REEADD-RADD) Collection, National Security Archive, Washington, District of Columbia.

[68] Sanjeev Khagram, James V. Riker, and Kathryn Sikkink, "From Santiago to Seattle," in Sanjeev Khagram, James V. Riker, and Kathryn Sikkink, ed. *Restructuring World Politics: Transnational Social Movements, Networks, and Norms* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 7.

[69] Kathryn Sikkink, "Human Rights, Principled Issue-Networks, and Sovereignty in Latin America," *International* Organization 47 (1993): 416; and Sidney Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 6.

Europe.[70] Greater cohesion among the disparate NGOs interested in the Helsinki process enabled them to advance their agenda more effectively, as would be seen in later CSCE meetings and in the Helsinki process as whole.

Connections between the policymakers and activists who made up the Helsinki coalition were vital to the efficacy of the Helsinki process as they offered the opportunity to influence CSCE negotiations more directly. Yet, at the same time Helsinki Watch was succeeding in gaining influence with Western and neutral policymakers, it faced continued frustration in shaping Eastern human rights practices. According to Neier,

> The great challenge was, were you knocking your head against the wall? Did anybody really see the possibility of significant change in the Soviet bloc countries…In general, there was a feeling of pessimism about ever having any significant impact on what was going on in the Soviet bloc countries. It was difficult to sustain a human rights effort in the face of that general pessimism.[71]

Working for years to free Helsinki monitors largely without success wore on the emotions of Helsinki Watch staff members, but the group remained resolute: "We are sometimes asked how we can continue to work when so many of the individuals we seek to help remain in prison cells under harassment, when policies that we seek to change become more repressive rather than less. The answer, simply stated, is 'How can we stop?'"[72]

As the years passed, however, Western NGOs such as Helsinki Watch and the IHF were able to contribute positively to political and social changes in Eastern Europe. Leaders of revolutionary movements in Eastern Europe such as Vaclav Havel have explicitly highlighted the activities of organizations such as Helsinki Watch in enabling change. Speaking to Helsinki

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[70] Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization* 52:4 (Autumn 1998): 899.
[71] Aryeh Neier Interview, 24 April 2008.
[72] Helsinki Watch, A Report from Helsinki Watch: Annual Report, 1983, Helsinki Watch – Annual Report, 1983, Box 1, Subject Files, Cathy Fitzpatrick Files, Record Group 7, HRWR.

Watch in February 1990 during his first visit to the United States as president of Czechoslovakia, Havel said, "I feel that I'm here as a friend among friends. I know very well what you did for us, and perhaps without you, our revolution would not be."[73] In addition, the Czechoslovak and Czech Helsinki Committee unanimously elected Laber an honorary member: "We all highly appreciate your friendly and understanding approach to our situation in the difficult situation of the years 1987-1989, when you courageously supported our first steps to found, on the basis of Charter 77, our Helsinki Committee."[74]

Establishment of the IHF connected Helsinki Watch and other national committees to one another and also to a burgeoning human rights movement. Helsinki Watch and other NGOs participated in the development of an international human rights movement, providing one model for other human rights groups to follow. Indeed, one of the greatest accomplishments of Helsinki activists was enhancing the reputation of non-governmental human rights advocacy by developing a movement that had, in Laber's words, "visibility, respect, and a message that became commonplace."[75] This human rights movement secured international legitimacy for the idea that governments' treatment of their own people is subject to international criticism and comment in part by changing ideas of national interest.[76] The Helsinki network was a key element of this broader, international movement, working to advance human rights at the same time as those fighting against apartheid in South Africa and those campaigning for human rights

[73] Laber, *The Courage of Strangers*, 349; and William I. Hitchcock, *The Struggle for Europe: The Turbulent History of a Divided Continent, 1945 to the Present* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 347.
[74] Kadlecova, et. al. to Laber, 23 December 1992, Member Committees – Czechoslovakia, 1988-1996, Box 5, Files on the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, Group 7, HRWR.
[75] Jeri Laber Interview, 29 April 2008.
[76] Richard Falk, "The Infancy of Global Civil Society," in Geir Lundestad and Odd Arne Westad, ed. *Beyond the Cold War: New Dimensions in International Relations* (New York: Scandinavian University Press, 1993), 227; and Kathryn Sikkink, *Mixed Signals: U.S. Human Rights Policy and Latin America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 20.

in Latin America and China.[77] Preliminary evidence suggests different human rights movements learned from one another and heightened protections of human rights overall in the years that followed.

[77] Audie Klotz, *Norms in International Relations: The Struggle Against Apartheid* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders;* and Rosemary Foot, *Rights Beyond Borders: The Global Community and the Struggle over Human Rights in China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).