

---

Rethinking the “Helsinki Effect”:  
International Networks and the End of the Cold War

Sarah Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War. A Transnational History of the Helsinki Process*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 293 pp. \$68.00 (Hardback).

There is a burgeoning scholarly literature on the Helsinki process, but Sarah Snyder’s ambitious new book is an original contribution on two levels. First, she makes the case for the role of transnational human rights networks. Her central contention is that the “international Helsinki network,” an informal alliance of Eastern bloc dissidents, Western nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and U.S. governmental structures, played a crucial role in provoking Gorbachev’s reforms and the dissolution of Soviet-style communism. By restoring human agency to the Helsinki process, this argument represents a significance advance on Daniel C. Thomas’ study of the “Helsinki Effect,” which celebrates the triumph of norms, not people. Thomas reduces the human rights campaigns of East European dissidents to a by-product of the principles enshrined in the Final Act.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Snyder seeks to demonstrate that the Helsinki process became an emancipatory force less because of the terms of its founding document than because of the efforts of real people, the activists who worked tirelessly to publicize the sufferings of prisoners of conscience and the diplomats who took up their cases (p. 245).

Snyder’s second claim to originality lies in the depth of her research. No other work on this subject employs such a wide range of archival sources. She has trawled through no less than fifty separate archival collections, which range from recently declassified U.S. government documents to the records of the International Helsinki Federation and the personal papers of politicians and diplomats involved in the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). In the course of this herculean labor, she uncovered a wealth of internal memos, policy-making documents, and correspondence, which considerably advance our understanding of the bureaucratic processes that shaped the emergence of human rights as a concern of U.S. diplomacy. For many years to come, other researchers will be using her voluminous footnotes as a guide to these seams of information.

---

<sup>1</sup> Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect. International Norms, Human Rights and the Demise of Communism* (Princeton, NJ, 2001), 111.

Although her title suggests a focus on civil society, much of Snyder's book is about diplomatic history and affairs of state. Her vision of the Helsinki network is a mesh of activists "from below" and officials "from above," and it is her account of the latter that constitutes her major contribution to scholarship. Chapter 1 sheds new light on the backstage negotiations that produced the Helsinki Final Act. It reveals, for instance, how Kissinger connived with Soviet diplomats to formulate amendments, which were then formally proposed by Finland, "in order to avoid raising Western European suspicions." (p. 25). Chapter 2 is a detailed account of creation of a U.S. state structure, the joint executive-legislative Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (the "Helsinki Commission"), which Snyder treats as an "essential component" of the Helsinki network. Chapter 4, which is subtitled "The United States Transforms the Helsinki Process," traces the formulation of the Carter administration's position on human rights and the historic clashes between U.S. ambassador Arthur Goldberg and Warsaw Pact diplomats at the Belgrade CSCE conference (1977–1978).

Snyder's treatment of civil society revolves around Helsinki Watch, the New York-based NGO, which cooperated closely with the Helsinki Commission and spurred the creation of the International Helsinki Federation, an umbrella organization of Helsinki monitoring groups (pp. 115–43). By contrast, East European dissidents are an intermittent presence in the narrative. Although Snyder gives due credit to the Moscow Helsinki Group (MHG) for "reframing" the Helsinki process (pp. 57–66) during 1976–1977, its subsequent activism, its prolific production of documents, and the plight of its members in the Gulag receive superficial treatment. She claims that the Moscow Helsinki Group (MHG) "successfully translated Soviet citizens' suffering into personal, evocative stories for an international audience," but fails to provide examples of this process. While celebrating the Carter administration's pioneering role in the CSCE, she ignores the MHG's criticism of its wavering on human rights (MHG Document 74).<sup>2</sup> Snyder makes little or no reference to such important members of the MHG as Ivan Kovalev, Tat'yana Osipova, Viktor Nekipelov, and Sofia Kallistratova. Anatolii Marchenko's heroic challenge in 1986 to the delegates at the Vienna CSCE conference, which was smuggled out of Chistopol prison and published in the *New York Times*, is mentioned in passing. But there is no reflection on what that episode tells us about the "Helsinki network" as a set of channels that could transmit information from a Helsinki's monitor's isolation cell in a high-security facility deep in a totalitarian state out into the public arenas of the Western world. Despite the dissidents' rhetorical commitment to acting publicly, much of their activism took place in the shadows. This clandestine branch of the "Helsinki network" receives little acknowledgement in Snyder's book.

2. Dokument No.74, in *Dokumenty Moskovskoi Khef'sinskoi Gruppy 1976-1982* (Moscow, 2006), 324–26.

The treatment of dissidence in East Central Europe is even shallower. Snyder treats Czechoslovakia's Charter 77 and Poland's KOR-KSS as Helsinki monitoring groups (pp. 67–69), though at the outset they made far less systematic use of the Helsinki Final Act than their Soviet counterparts. Later, the CSCE became a central theme in the dialogue between East Central European dissidents and the West European peace movement, which began with the Prague Appeal (1985) and culminated in the establishment of the Helsinki Citizen's Assembly (1990). Snyder ignores this other "Helsinki network," which undoubtedly left its mark on the civic mobilization that shaped the course of 1989.<sup>3</sup>

I found very few errors in this densely researched book, but Snyder is incorrect to claim that the historic demonstration on Moscow's Pushkin Square on December 5, 1965 commemorated the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (p. 53). In fact, the protesters were marking Constitution Day, the anniversary of the Stalin constitution, as a way of suggesting to the authorities that they might deign to adhere to their own laws.

This is not a book that makes for easy reading. Many of its most interesting facts and observations are lost in the small print of footnotes that are crowded with archival reference data. But those who make the effort will be rewarded with new insights and new information about the contribution of human rights activism to the demise of totalitarianism in Eastern Europe.

---

3. See Padraic Kenney, *Carnival of Revolution* (Princeton, NJ, 2002), 91–120.