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Human rights activism and the end of the Cold War: a transnational history of the Helsinki network

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BOOK REVIEWS

Human rights activism and the end of the Cold War: a transnational history of the Helsinki network, by Sarah B. Snyder, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 293, US\$34.95 (hardback), ISBN-13 978-1107001053

Sarah Snyder makes an important contribution to the international history of the cold war by asserting that human rights played an integral role in ending the global conflict. Just as an earlier generation of historians debated the causes of the cold war, now two decades since its end and armed with new archival material, there is a similar scholarly conversation about the reasons for its demise. Some argue it was Ronald Reagan's shift from hard-line policies against the 'Evil Empire' to a more-nuanced programme of engagement and superpower summitry. Others point to Mikhail Gorbachev's efforts to reform the decrepit Soviet system, and still others focus attention on Eastern Europeans who courageously liberated themselves. Snyder successfully weaves these and other threads together to form a fresh interpretation that emphasises the centrality of human rights as the chief catalyst for the end of the cold war.

Making use of government documents, memoirs, interviews and media in Europe and the USA, Snyder convincingly shows that the Helsinki Final Act in 1975 inaugurated a transnational network of activists to monitor and promote human rights in Europe. She populates her narrative with diverse characters: politician Millicent Fenwick, statesman Arthur Goldberg, dissident Yuri Orlov, activist Jeri Laber, negotiator Max Kampelman, among others. Whereas earlier histories have taken a top-down approach to understanding bilateral relations, Snyder's sophisticated and detailed history balances the ways political elites interacted with dissidents and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Snyder reminds readers that one great irony of the cold war is that by lobbying for an international Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), the Soviets had a hand in their own downfall before the 1980s. Kremlin leaders had sought international recognition of the inviolability of Eastern European borders. After three years of negotiation, and at the urging of Western allies, President Gerald Ford signed the Helsinki Final Act over the objections of his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger. The gleeful Russians even published the full-text of the Act in *Pravda* and *Izvestia*. But dissidents and some American policymakers defined the Act differently and recognised an opportunity to develop a monitoring mechanism. Within weeks of each other, Moscow Helsinki Watch began co-ordinating activities with other NGOs throughout the Soviet empire and Ford signed a legislation establishing a commission to enforce compliance. The commission 'played a critical role', Snyder argues, 'connecting activists and policymakers across interests and national lines' (50). More generally, the work complements other studies that

demonstrate how people outside traditional institutions of power at times can carve out spaces to influence international relations.

Other histories have noted the differences between the foreign policies of American administrations, but when it comes to human rights policy towards Europe, Snyder finds a remarkable degree of continuity. Both Carter and Reagan were campaign critics of Helsinki, who ultimately understood that human rights discourse served the US interests. The bitter rivals did not always share the same moral perspective on human rights; Carter, nevertheless, established ‘an effective foundation’ for Reagan’s foreign policy towards the Soviet Union (111). As superpower relations deteriorated in the early 1980s, Snyder concludes, ‘the human rights network increased its influence “at times greater than states could exert”’ (126) by investigating and sharing information throughout Europe and the USA. Later, during the glory years of the Reagan–Gorbachev partnership, the president often used the cases of high-profile dissidents, such as that of Andrei Sakharov, to nudge Gorbachev towards reform. Motivated by a desire to halt the arms race and improve the domestic economy, Gorbachev resisted repression. In a sense, Gorbachev became an essential, albeit surprising, member of the network. Snyder’s great achievement is to navigate through a diverse and heavily bureaucratised humanitarian network to show how it coordinated its activities so effectively.

In an otherwise excellent history, some readers may note that the human rights movement of the 1970s appears disconnected from earlier efforts. There is only a passing mention of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and Amnesty International (established 1961), for example. Some may wonder whether the Helsinki era was part of a longer process in a human rights century. Nevertheless, Sarah Snyder certainly has helped to change the way we understand the final days of the cold war.

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NATO: the power of partnerships, edited by Hakan Edstrom, Janne Haaland Matlary and Magnus Petersson, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 208 pp., £57.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-230-27377-1

In its much awaited 2010 New Strategic Concept, NATO explicitly acknowledged the significance of its burgeoning network of global partnerships. With NATO’s recent intervention in Libya also highlighting the important role played by partner nations, the need for a detailed scholarly and theoretical insight into what these partnerships mean for the alliance – and for partner nations – is clear. This is precisely what *The Power of Partnerships* offers, and in doing so makes a much-needed contribution to the debate on NATO. The editors rightly acknowledge that this is an underdeveloped area of study, one in which many questions remain unanswered. The central question