

---

## BOOK REVIEW

---

*Sarah B. Snyder, Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War, Cambridge: CUP, 2011.*

*Arie Bloed*<sup>1</sup>

Very often the discussion among scholars has been whether the Helsinki Final Act (HFA) and the CSCE process have played a (decisive) role in ending the Cold War and the collapse of communism. Or it has also been argued that HFA standards (in particular the famous 7th principle on the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms) have played a key role in this area. In this book the author does not argue that the CSCE played a role (of course, it did), but rather that human rights advocacy also played an important role in bringing the Cold War to an end. She eloquently demonstrates that what she calls ‘Helsinki activism’ or ‘human rights activism’ grew increasingly effective as the movement gained supporters who would include compliance with the HFA in high-level diplomacy.

Sarah Snyder has produced a well-written and fascinating book, highlighting in a very systematic and well-documented way the importance of the transnational civil society movement. The present reviewer read it with more than average interest, having himself participated in and contributed to this movement at the time (e.g. through the establishment of the Netherlands Helsinki Committee in the 1980s).

It is almost ironic to read that the first countries where monitoring systems were set up were the USA and the USSR, although in a very different way. In the US Congressmen initiated the establishment of the now well-known Congressional Commission on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) which was set up in order to provide systematic monitoring of the human rights situation in the then socialist countries. The book describes the obstacles which the initiators had to overcome both in the State Department and in the White House which were not pleased with this intermingling of parliamentarians in the still exclusive foreign policy field. Almost at the same time as when the CSCE was established, in Moscow a group of leading dissidents also took the initiative to monitor the implementation of the human rights clauses of the HFA in the USSR, much to the disdain of the Soviet authorities. The author correctly points out that it was the activity of exactly such groups (Moscow Helsinki Group,

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Arie Bloed is editor-in-chief of *Security and Human Rights*

Charter 77 etc.) that basically made the third basket of the HFA work. What seemed impossible in 1975 was realized within two or three years by a small group of courageous dissidents: keeping the socialist bloc accountable.

It set off a process which resulted in the remarkable phenomenon that human rights groups became 'the 36th player' in the CSCE process, together with the 35 CSCE participating states (p. 97). This book focuses exclusively on the role of this 36th player and offers fascinating reading.

Understandably, most attention is paid to the enormously important role of the US Helsinki Watch, including its important role in setting up the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF) in 1982, but this resulted in some neglect for the role of citizen movements in Western European states. The Norwegian HC has also been an important player and it would have been interesting to read an assessment of the impact which the Norwegian HC and other committees had on the human rights developments in the former East bloc.

It is also obvious that the strict focus of this study on the role of human rights activism in bringing an end to the Cold War might sometimes have resulted in a slight overestimation of the role of the Helsinki groups in the process of change in the Soviet Union under Gorbachev. It is obvious, for instance, that the Soviets during the Vienna Follow-up Meeting (1986-1989) played the human rights NGO card in order to garnish support for their highly controversial human rights proposals among the Western CSCE states. So the fact that Moscow invited the US Helsinki Watch and the Congressional CSCE to Moscow to create more support in the West cannot automatically be interpreted in the sense that the Soviet proposal for a human rights conference in Moscow was the result of the 'direct or indirect influence' of these organizations (p. 174). Of course, such NGOs did play a role, but there were many more factors which influenced the position of the Soviet authorities at the time. The Soviet proposal for a CSCE Human Rights conference in Moscow actually came as a huge surprise and remained a very hot potato for a very long time among Western delegations. As a matter of fact, there was also disagreement among the civil society movement about how to assess this proposal: a trick, a plot, or a sign of real change? Did the Soviets decide that to attack is the best defence? The author also correctly observes in the same chapter that part of the explanation for the change in Soviet attitudes was the fact that the new leaders in Moscow had come to their own conclusion that they needed a change in their human rights policies as 'an indispensable prerequisite for the country's development' (p. 216). In other words: the impact of human rights organizations in the CSCE process and in setting the international standards concerning human rights should not be underestimated, but should always be seen as one of the factors influencing policies.

The author describes how 'Helsinki activism' has been important in influencing the authorities in Western countries in raising awareness about the appalling situation in the Eastern bloc. Influencing the communist bloc was done first and foremost by the consistent emphasis by Western countries, often led by

the US, on the need to strictly implement human rights standards. The Western countries were definitely strongly influenced by the civil society monitoring groups as these groups already had access to information about human rights abuses which the governmental agencies in the West did not have. Although one may have slightly different opinions about the assessment of the real impact of Helsinki activism both now and then, the author always remains honest and direct in informing the reader that different opinions exist and that she has chosen one on the basis of certain reasons, allowing the reader to make up his own mind.

All in all she convincingly proves the impact and influence of the mushrooming civil society in the CSCE area on the breathtaking developments concerning human rights in the former Soviet bloc and its role in ending the Cold War. This publication is a real achievement and has to be warmly welcomed as a valuable addition to the still growing literature on the topic. The author has conducted very detailed research work, resulting in an impressive and easily readable book.