

*Biases influencing Human Rights Narratives in the International Helsinki Federation for
Human Rights*

Visegrád Scholarship at the Open Society Archives

February 18 – April 19

My goal in applying to the Visegrád Scholarship at the Open Society Archivum was to begin research on a new academic project after the conclusion of my master's thesis in 2018. I envision using the materials gathered during my stay at the archive for my doctoral studies. Having completed my master's at the Central European University, I was both already aware of the holdings at the Open Society Archivum and excited to return to the familiar environment of Budapest. I am grateful for the encouragement of friends, colleagues, and professors at the Central European University who encouraged me to apply. The Visegrád Scholarship has allowed me to pursue new academic research into the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF), and given me an opportunity to have completed archival research before beginning the next stage of my academic career.

I was interested in conducting research on the archive holdings of the IHF as I believe the IHF has an important place in human rights history, and functions as a useful lens to investigate broader historiographical debates. Created to monitor compliance with the human rights provisions of the Helsinki Final Act and its follow-up documents, the IHF was a highly significant actor in human rights advocacy in the later half of the twentieth century. While the rhetoric human rights as a global moral force has become ubiquitous in the twenty-first century, human rights as a lens to conduct historical research is a remarkably recent development. This may seem shocking, but in comparison to the World Wars and the Cold War, human rights was “no more than a sideshow” for the narrative of the twentieth century developed by historians.¹ This narrative has begun to shift in

¹Mark Philip Bradley, *The World Reimagined: Americans and Human Rights*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 4.

A particularly poignant example of the lack of historical research into human rights is that the *American Historical Review* only in 1998 published an article with “human rights” in its title.

the past decade, human rights has become an increasingly important and highly productive topic for historians. An impressive amount of disagreement exists, however, about whether the 1940s or the 1970s were more important in producing the modern moral force of global human rights.² Does the decade of the creation of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), or the decade of the proliferation of human rights organizations, the Helsinki Accords, and President Jimmy Carter's human rights foreign policy agenda bear more weight? In essence then this research is part of an academic trend that sees the later half of the twentieth century as unexplainable without human rights, and the IHF is an important institution to study in regards to human rights.

The study of the Helsinki Accords and the IHF is not without precedent. From a political science perspective, Daniel C. Thomas's 2001 work, *The Helsinki Effect* argued that the Helsinki Final Act normalized human rights as a common dialogue for diplomats, dramatically changing how international relations functioned. He furthered argued that the IHF and other human rights organizations, through the promotion of human rights, created common values and a discourse for opposition parties to form in Central and Eastern Europe, leading to the destabilization of communism at the end of the 1980s.³ From the historian's perspective, Sarah B. Snyder's *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War*, published in 2011, largely agreed with Thomas, positing that the end of the Cold War should not be seen as the fall of the Berlin Wall or the other revolutionary moments of 1989, but rather the consensus on human rights values that had been

² While the previously cited *World Reimagined: Americans and Human Rights* by Mark Philip Bradley centers as others do on the 1940s and 1970s, others have argued that the 1960s and decolonization have been overlooked in an overly privileged Western perspective on human rights as in Steven L. B. Jensen's *The Making of International Human Rights: The 1960s, Decolonization, and the Reconstruction of Global Values*.

³ Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

reached that year between representatives of the East and West.⁴ These studies primarily focus on reactions to the IHF and its work. While important in establishing the IHF's relevance and importance, these studies reveal little in how the IHF operated, and how it changed from its inception through the end of the Cold War and how it adapted to changes in the field of human rights advocacy.

As a way to direct my search within the files of the IHF, I hypothesized that the IHF's structure and administrative apparatus played a significant role in shaping the type of narrative it produced. I was curious as to how self-aware the IHF was of their potential biases. Did they attempt to maintain objectivity beyond researching both Eastern and Western countries of capitalist and socialist forms of government? While broadly tasked with monitoring human rights abuses as understood through the UDHR, were certain categories of rights intentionally deemed more important for observation than others? If certain types of rights were privileged, why was this the case? I found that these questions were useful in maintaining a focus to my research, although they remain difficult to answer definitely at this stage of my work. This is the case as the IHF was not a static organization and it adapted over time to changing political conditions and its own growing capacities, especially after the end of the Cold War.

My advisor at the Open Society Archivum, Csaba Szilágyi was very helpful in pointing me in the direction of Jeri Laber's autobiographical work *The Courage of Strangers*.⁵ As a founding member of Human Rights Watch, and an active participant in the human rights movement, Laber's work is an authoritative account of the development of the organizations and the networks that Thomas and Snyder reference in their studies. In relation to my research, Laber's account gives a personal view of how the IHF formed in 1982 in an attempt to organize the disparate constellation of independent

⁴ Sarah B. Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.

⁵ Jeri Laber, *The Courage of Strangers: Coming of Age with the Human Rights Movement*, (New York: Public Affairs), 2002

Helsinki Final Act monitor groups, its initial struggles, and growth into an effective institution that was awarded the Council of Europe's prize for Human Rights in 1989. Reading through the boxes of correspondence in the IHF's archive confirmed Laber's depiction of human rights advocacy during this period as functioning within highly interdependent organizations and personal relationships. Either through my own work, or a future scholar's, tracking how the IHF and other non-governmental agencies operated and developed their networks is a rich area to explore in historical research.

A major benefit of the Visegrád Scholarship at the Open Society Archivum is the archives' broader relationship with the Central European University community. During my stay at the archive I not only benefited from my interactions with my advisor, the archive's staff, and other scholars at the archive, but also from students and professors at the Central European University and the events that the university organized. Specifically for my topic, the March 12, 2019 lecture "Human Rights: Still a Reason for Hope?" was a way to frame my historical research in comparison to current issues in the field of human rights. The lecture was particularly interesting as the speakers Márta Pardavi, co-chair of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, and Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch are part of the continuing legacy of the IHF. As my research questions driving my investigation into the IHF revolved around biases toward certain types of rights, I found Roth's comments on why Human Rights Watch focuses on exposing violations of individual rights—rather than collective, or economic rights—particularly interesting. Roth characterized individual rights as core rights in Human Rights Watch's perspective and that in addition they were more narratively dramatic for the press, which is important in attempting to apply pressure on organizations and institutions with the means to stop human rights violations. I found this perspective was broadly shared in the documents of the IHF and is an interesting continuance of what advocacy groups both find morally important and institutionally effective in their work.

In turning towards some initial reactions to the archival material in relation to my research questions, I did find that IHF and its member committee were self-aware of bias within the organization. However, this did not necessarily relate to biases thought of as contrasting capitalist and socialist countries, but rather in an East-West divide. For example, in commenting on a strategic plan and a plan of action drafted centrally by the IHF in 2005, the Netherland Helsinki Committee (NHC) complained that:

“[T]he NHC noted that both documents hardly mention or address the human rights situation “West of Vienna.” We are aware of the fact that the IHF and its members in this part of the OSCE⁶ region have a different history in the region “East of Vienna.” On the other hand the IHF and all its member organizations acknowledged the importance of working against human rights violations in the whole OSCE region.”⁷

This document helps reveal tensions both between conceptions of East and West that were still present as late as 2005 (the organization dissolved in 2007), and between both the central organizing body (the IHF) and its member committees (such as the NHC). However, this document is only a brief glimpse into what could be described as the “Western gaze,” which the IHF could be accused of having. Complicating such a critique, however, is that local Helsinki Committees prepared reports published by the IHF. Furthermore, reading the document that the NHC criticizes reveals that the IHF was aware of Western violations of human rights, highlighting “increasing anti-terrorism activities in the established democracies of Western Europe and North America” as threats to the “realization of basic human rights and civil liberties.”⁸ While these documents do not give a definitive understanding of the changes in the tensions and biases within the IHF over the length of its existence, it does point to it being a productive line of inquiry in understanding the late Cold War

⁶ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

⁷ “Proposal by the Netherlands Helsinki Committee.” Records of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, HU OSA 318-0-1, Box 4, Open Society Archivum, Budapest, Hungary.

⁸ “A Two-Year Strategic Plan for the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights.” Records of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, HU OSA 318-0-1, Box 4, Open Society Archivum, Budapest, Hungary.

and its aftermath. Examining how human rights organizations have adapted to the ongoing War on Terror would be an additional way to examine the IHF's materials in relation to the recent past and other similar human rights institutions.

In addition to the internal factors surrounding issues of bias the IHF potentially struggled with between the central organization and its affiliates, the IHF faced external pressure that affected its core operation and tangentially could have had an effect on the emphasis the IHF placed on certain types of rights. Beyond the manner in which the IHF was forced to dissolve –embezzlement by its financial officer– funding was an existential problem for the entirety of the IHF existence. The organization was always reliant on outside funding. This exposed the IHF to pressure from its donors, which was not insignificant. As one example, the Ford Foundation wrote in 1992 to the IHF offering to continue financial support on the condition of the appointment of a new chief executive officer.⁹ This pressure and financial incentive was part of what led the IHF to bring Aaron Rhodes into the organization, who led the IHF for the rest of its existence. Considering the small staff of the IHF and the tightly interrelated network the IHF operated and functioned within, this personal change had a significant impact on the IHF. In addition to examining other sources of direct funding provided by such organizations as the Ford Foundation, it is worth analyzing the external grants the IHF pursued from the United Nations, the European Union, and other organizations in order to consider whether that the pursuit of this funding reveals something about the IHF's biases.

A further strain of inquiry related to potential biases is on the level of the national Helsinki committees themselves. Earlier in the report, I considered the possibility of a general East-West bias and tension between the central organization of the IHF and the member committees as a whole.

⁹ Letter of 2 November 1992 from Ford Foundation to the IHF. Records of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, HU OSA 318-0-3, Box 7, Open Society Archivum, Budapest, Hungary.

However, each committee itself is a viable topic of study. The extremely small staff of some committees, which were sometimes only one-person organizations, opens up the possibility of personal biases. In another area related to the individual committees, ethnic and national tension was sometimes a flashpoint between committees and the central IHF, as evidenced in a trial of ethnic Greeks in Albania in 1992.¹⁰ The story of this trial itself would be an interesting topic to develop, but could also be situated within my current investigation into biases in human rights advocacy.

Beyond the lens of bias that I used in looking at the archive materials of the IHF, I believe the studying of the IHF's organization and relationship with other non-governmental organizations would be interesting from the prospective of technological change. Outside of the political change that the IHF witnessed during its existence from 1982 to 2007, the IHF functioned during a period of transition for communication technology. Within the archival documents, computers, and telegraphs, letters steadily replace typewriters, and emails eventually replace by faxes. As international organizations become more digitized, the reconstruction of the analog networks of organizations such as the IHF become a more interesting topic of historical inquiry. One problem I encountered in archive, was that as the IHF increasingly relied on email and fax, important attachments were often not saved in correspondence material. While their missing documents in earlier fax and regular mail correspondence, my anecdotal experience was that the occurrence of missing materials increased with new technology. It is unclear however if technology itself, or rather a change in filing procedure at the IHF affected this change.

My time at the Open Society Archivum has been extremely beneficial in helping me develop my research. I hoped that examining the IHF would help me develop a potential research project for

¹⁰ Public Statement of 22 August 1992 by the Albanian Helsinki Committee. Records of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, HU OSA 318-0-6, Box 54, Open Society Archivum, Budapest, Hungary.

Letter of 12 August 1992 from Aaron Rhodes to Albanian Helsinki Committee, Records of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, HU OSA 318-0-6, Box 54, Open Society Archivum, Budapest, Hungary.

my doctoral studies by asking questions regarding the organization's potential biases. I believe that I now have multiple new areas to explore in relation to human rights history and the IHF specifically. I see my investigation and the OSA's current reflexive research program on investigating Cold War experts and monitoring agencies as being highly relevant to ongoing debates within academia as to the importance of human rights advocacy to the end of the Cold War. However, The IHF played an important role in making and shaping the conception of human rights as a global phenomenon after the Cold War as well. Examining how the IHF reenvisioned itself after the Cold War and adapted to major human rights challenges of the 1990s and 2000s remain a fertile area for study and analyze.

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Archival Material Consulted at Box Level during Research Stay
HU OSA 318 Records of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights

Administrative Files

HU OSA 318-0-1 Box 1
HU OSA 318-0-1 Box 2
HU OSA 318-0-1 Box 3
HU OSA 318-0-1 Box 4
HU OSA 318-0-1 Box 6
HU OSA 318-0-1 Box 7
HU OSA 318-0-1 Box 8
HU OSA 318-0-1 Box 9

Correspondence and Memoranda

HU OSA 318-0-3 Box 1
HU OSA 318-0-3 Box 2
HU OSA 318-0-3 Box 3
HU OSA 318-0-3 Box 4
HU OSA 318-0-3 Box 5
HU OSA 318-0-3 Box 6
HU OSA 318-0-3 Box 7
HU OSA 318-0-3 Box 8
HU OSA 318-0-3 Box 9
HU OSA 318-0-3 Box 10

Project Files

HU OSA 318-0-6 Box 52
HU OSA 318-0-6 Box 53
HU OSA 318-0-6 Box 54