

Crossing the Curtain: British Activists and the Echoes of Soviet Dissent in Contemporary

Russian Human Rights Activism

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Amidst recent discussions on the role of human rights in international relations during the Cold War (Jensen 2016; Hoffman 2011; Keys 2014; Moyn 2010), the important influence of domestic activist campaigns is sometimes overlooked. Snyder (2011, 2018), Tulli (2020), and Søndergaard (2020) have made important interventions assessing the impact of domestic campaigns on US foreign policy, but similar attention to the British context has been relatively limited (Hurst 2016a). Given the centrality of human rights issues to the Soviet policy of the British government in this period (Grealy, 2020), this is notable. The persecution of political dissidents in the Soviet Union is well known (Boobbyer 2005; Hornsby 2013; Horvath 2005), but more needs to be done to further understand the role of international activists in supporting these individuals. A broad network of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) based in Britain played a significant role in informing the world about Soviet human rights violations (Hurst 2016a), in much the same way that their contemporary counterparts attempt to hold the Russian authorities to account. Understanding this network offers the opportunity to critically assess how human rights promotion worked during the Cold War, presenting a historic case study to consider how transnational advocacy networks models by scholars such as Keck and Sikkink work in practice. Their 'boomerang model' (1998, 13) sets out how political dissidents are blocked from effectively petitioning their own government due to persecution and censorship. Dissidents instead share information with a global network of activists, who in turn used this material to pressure governments and international stakeholders – creating a 'boomerang' of political pressure across borders. Assessing how this model worked in Soviet and post-Soviet contexts opens the space to explore how contemporary activism has echoes from its Cold War counterparts, and to highlight the important role that British activists play in this network.

This article identifies parallels between human rights issues in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, drawing on historic case studies to offer contextual insight to contemporary issues. Soviet dissidents and the activists in Britain who supported them adopted a number of strategies that, although applied in a different context, are invaluable for contemporary activists and policymakers to consider in their own efforts. Verifiable and accurate information, established trust in the expertise of activists and NGOs, and the influence that knowledge can have on policymakers are important tools in both historic and contemporary activism. By drawing explicit links between the historical case study of British activism in support of Soviet dissidents (Hurst 2016a) with human rights issues in post-Soviet Russia (Bennetts 2014, Bullough 2014, Gessen 2014, Pomerantsev 2015) this article offers an original contribution to the literature. In the context of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces, these parallels offer insight into the way in which reports of human rights abuses can be critically assessed, and the effectiveness of strategies to support persecuted activists. Emphasising the echoes of Soviet human rights issues in contemporary Russia draws together elements of the literature that are sometimes held apart, whilst highlighting the overlooked, but important role of British NGOs in this space. In doing so, this article addresses a number of broad themes that go beyond the scope of an article of this length, such as the impact of human rights on the Cold War itself (Snyder 2011, Morgan 2018) or the efforts by NGOs in countries beyond Britain (Christofferson 2004, Peterson 2011) as each of these areas has a voluminous and expanding literature, especially from a US perspective. Similarly, this article does not seek to specifically explore human rights issues in the Soviet Union or post-Soviet Russia – an important, and developing area of scholarship in its own right. Instead, this article focuses on the British perspective on this issue, and the value that exists in comparing historic instances of activism in the Cold War with contemporary human rights concerns.

The historic case studies in this article focus predominantly on the period between 1965, which saw the birth of the broadly defined Soviet dissident movement, and 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms fundamentally reshaped the nature of Soviet rule. This 'long 1970s' was a

'breakthrough' moment in the history of human rights – a period when the concept gained significant traction in international relations (Eckel and Moyn 2013). This period also saw Soviet dissidents increasingly use the language of human rights (Nathans 2014). In Britain, NGOs became increasingly influential over the direction of domestic and foreign policy in the latter half of the twentieth century, and the British public increasingly trusted experts over politicians (Hilton et. al. 2013) – a transition that had a marked effect on political life. These three overlapping developments are mutually informative in the context of the British response to Soviet human rights violations. The recognised expertise that NGOs in Britain obtained on this issue, and the reliability of the information that they distributed, came to shape the broader response to the Soviet Union from the government and other official bodies. This was integral to the successes of these campaigns, something that has echoes in the efforts of human rights NGOs in the post-Soviet landscape.

Amnesty International

Since its 1961 foundation, the London-based Amnesty International has come to be globally influential on human rights issues, receiving a Nobel Peace Prize in 1977 in recognition of its efforts. Its definition of 'Prisoners of Conscience' is ubiquitous in human rights circles, as are its letter writing campaigns, which mobilise local Amnesty groups with practical efforts to support the persecuted. Amnesty's researchers have produced numerous human rights reports (1975, 1980), annual surveys on the status of human rights internationally, and 'urgent action' press releases for specific violations. These publications have cemented its reputation as an international authority on human rights, something bolstered by a devoted membership and a strong institutional ethos, described by Hopgood (2006, 18) as a 'secular religion'. Amnesty's institutional power lies in the combination of its expertise and the devotion of its supporters, something that offers it much influence. Despite this prominent position, scholarship on Amnesty's history has been remarkably limited. Buchanan (2002, 2004, 2020) has highlighted how the construction of Amnesty's powerful institutional ethos has allowed controversial moments in its history to fall from public view, protecting the organisation's reputation. In the Soviet context, Miedema's focus on Amnesty's Eastern European campaigns

(2019a) demonstrates that its desire to remain politically impartial was unworkable in practice. Whilst claimed impartiality offered Amnesty protection from accusations that it was politically involved in the Cold War, focusing instead on the moral issue of protecting human rights, its efforts in the Soviet bloc were more complex (Hurst 2016a, 147-178). This can be seen in its support for the *samizdat* (self-published) journal the *Chronicle of Current Events* (1968-1982).

The *Chronicle* collated reports of Soviet human rights violations, and circulated them domestically amongst dissidents and internationally via an underground network. This offered a rich source of material on the persecution of dissidents, which was much needed given attempts to suppress this information by the Soviet authorities. The *Chronicle* gained credibility in comparison to other *samizdat* material due to the anonymity of its editors and its objective tone. By dispassionately focusing on information instead of a polemical commentary, criticism of its contents could focus only on the facts presented. The efforts of the Soviet authorities to persecute its editors and prevent the *Chronicle* from circulating highlights the sensitivity of this material for the regime (Boobbyer 2005, 84-86; Hurst 2016, 156-157).

Early editions of the *Chronicle* were translated into English and circulated amongst activists by the British academic Peter Reddaway, who was supported in this endeavour by likeminded individuals. Reddaway (2020) had connections with students, journalists and diplomats who travelled to the Soviet bloc, collected *samizdat* pieces such as the *Chronicle*, and delivered them to him in London. Reddaway compiled information from early editions of the *Chronicle* into *Uncensored Russia* (1972), a thematically focused collection on Soviet human rights issues. Amnesty recognised the value of this material, and subsequently published their own translations of the *Chronicle* from 1971 to 1984 with the support of Reddaway and other like-minded activists. These translations were important for a variety of reasons. They offered up-to-date material about the Soviet Union that could be trusted in a context when information was either difficult to source or questionable in terms of complete accuracy. This trust was built on its connection with Amnesty, something that lent

the material credibility. This in turn facilitated activism from local Amnesty branches and other concerned individuals, who used this material in their campaigning efforts. Supporting translations of the *Chronicle* as an Amnesty publication also offered an institutional endorsement of their contents, drawing on Amnesty's reputation to bolster its reliability. As the *Chronicle* was smuggled out of the Soviet Union, its contents were largely unverifiable. Its affiliation to Amnesty gave it authority, something much-welcomed by those already convinced of its value. Whilst this affiliation was valuable, Amnesty recognised that it was also problematic, with concerns that the organisation could be accused of 'playing politics' by publishing overtly anti-Soviet material. To balance this, attempts were made to find a similar publication in a right-wing regime for Amnesty to support, but to no avail (Hurst 2016a, 163). Following these unsuccessful efforts, Amnesty tried to find a new publisher to offer it distance from the *Chronicle*. Writers and Scholars International, the publishers of *Index on Censorship*, agreed to publish later translations of the *Chronicle*, but insisted on maintaining the link to Amnesty, reiterating the value of this affiliation and undermining Amnesty's efforts here (Hurst 2016a, 172-174).

Although drawing a direct link between the *Chronicle* and British policy towards the Soviet Union is difficult, it is clear that its English translations gave the British press substantial information to report Soviet human rights issues. This kept the issue of Soviet persecution in British public consciousness and as an important issue on the political agenda. Amnesty's support for the *Chronicle* highlights the challenges faced by the organisation during the Cold War. In order to effectively promote human rights issues, Amnesty sought to be politically impartial (Hurst 2016a; Miedema 2019b). However, Amnesty needed to be affiliated to the *Chronicle* to effectively endorse and legitimise it. Amnesty's need to be both close to and apart from this material demonstrates the inherent contradiction of this approach, something that typifies its Soviet campaigns.

In the post-Soviet era, these contradictions have resurfaced, perhaps most notably in Amnesty's support for the political activist Alexei Navalny. Navalny's efforts to highlight political

corruption in Russia have captured international attention, and he has become a thorn in the side of Vladimir Putin's government. As a result, Navalny has been frequently persecuted by the Russian state including harassment, legal challenges to end his political campaigns, and being poisoned with *novichok*, a chemical agent synonymous with the Russian state's efforts to attack its enemies. At the time of writing, Navalny is detained in a Russian penal colony after being found guilty of fraud and corruption. In response to his sentencing, Navalny noted 'If the prison term is the price of my human right to say things that need to be said ... then they can ask for 113 years. I will not renounce my words or deeds', echoing the rhetoric of political dissidents in the Soviet Union, and their desire to uphold truth (Guardian 2022).

Navalny's case has dominated discussions about political protest and human rights in contemporary Russia, typifying the nature of Putin's leadership and its willingness to suppress opposition. Amnesty's approach to Navalny highlights the tensions in its campaigning efforts in Russia, and the terminology it uses to describe those it supports – tensions that have clear echoes from their earlier Soviet campaigns. Amnesty initially adopted Navalny as a 'Prisoner of Conscience', but withdrew this after discovering that he had made 'comments which may have amounted to advocacy of hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, violence or hostility' in the mid-2000s, concerned that supporting Navalny would violate its policy of not endorsing those who advocate the use of violence (Amnesty 2021a). Due in part to this decision, the Russian authorities redoubled their persecution of Navalny, something that Amnesty described as 'the height of hypocrisy'. This in turn led to an internal review, and in May 2021 Amnesty re-designated Navalny as a Prisoner of Conscience (Amnesty 2021b).

At face value, the terminology used to describe Navalny might seem trivial, especially in the context of the persecution he has faced from the Russian authorities. However, endorsement from influential NGOs like Amnesty can have a significant impact on the treatment of persecuted individuals. Amnesty's reputation offered Navalny global publicity and an element of protection

from the worst abuses. Russian officials are doubtless aware that any persecution of Navalny will be reported internationally, and subsequently placed on the political agenda. This awareness exerts pressure on those involved in these abuses, especially following the passing of so-called Magnitsky Acts in a variety of nations, which put economic and political sanctions on individuals involved in human rights violations, freezing their assets and restricting their ability to travel. Magnitsky Acts, named after Sergei Magnitsky, a Russian lawyer persecuted for his investigations into state corruption, are an example of how campaigns against oppression can translate into real-world consequences for state officials and reshape diplomatic relations between nations (Browder 2015). Amnesty's adoption of Navalny and other prisoners of conscience in Russia goes beyond semantics. It offers a channel through which international pressure can be exerted on the Russian authorities, and potentially a protective element for political dissidents. The nuances of Amnesty's support for contemporary prisoners of conscience and the inherent contradictions of its desire to be politically impartial are echoes from its history, where support for individuals like Nelson Mandela (Buchanan 2020, 128) and publications like the *Chronicle* were similarly complex.

Psychiatry

During the Cold War, Britain was home to prominent campaigns on specific human rights issues in the Soviet Union, in particular the political abuse of psychiatry and the persecution of religious believers. British NGOs that formed in response to these issues shaped the international debate surrounding them through the expertise that they developed, and the translation and distribution of materials collected from behind the iron curtain. The campaign to stop the Soviet abuse of psychiatry was especially notable in Britain. Psychiatry is unique amongst medical disciplines in its ability to detain individuals against their will to treat them for medical conditions that are often impossible to diagnose physiologically. This opens up the potential for abuse by diagnosing, treating, and detaining individuals with questionable medical justification (Van Voren

2013). Due to this coercive potential, psychiatry itself has come under significant criticism (Foucault 1989a, 1989b; Szasz 1962).

The Soviet abuse of psychiatry removed individual dissidents from conventional judicial processes, bypassing adherence to the rule of law. Those detained in this fashion were not given the platform of a public court case to criticise the regime in defence speeches, and were left with the stigma of a psychiatric diagnosis, casting doubt on their mental stability. Many were diagnosed with 'sluggish schizophrenia', a condition whose diagnosis and treatment were pioneered by psychiatrists at Moscow's Serbsky Institute. The legitimacy of this condition has come under question. A systematic review of Soviet articles on this condition noted that its diagnostic criteria meant that 'anyone with any spark of social concern can be defined as 'mad'' (Merskey and Shafran 1986, 254).

Reported cases of psychiatric abuse in the Soviet Union were complex to address. Not only was independent and verifiable information on the diagnosis and treatment of patients impossible to obtain, but Soviet psychiatrists made repeated claims to be at the forefront of psychiatry, identifying disorders that their Western counterparts were unable to (Serenko, 1971). During the 1970s, British NGOs concerned about these abuses lobbied professional and political bodies to act. The Working Group on the Internment of Mental Hospitals was perhaps the most notable of these, made up of psychiatrists, medical practitioners, and academics. This group was formed after the dissident Vladimir Bukovsky obtained medical records of six dissidents who had been detained in psychiatric institutions, and sent them to the West alongside a call for psychiatrists to consider the validity of their diagnoses (Bloch and Reddaway 1977, 79-84). These records were valuable as, much like the *Chronicle*, they offered evidence through which suspected abuses could be evaluated. Members of the Working Group used their connections to draw attention to this material, publishing letters in national newspapers (Jenner 1971) and specialist journals such as the *British Journal of Psychiatry* (Richter 1971). They also produced pamphlets on the Soviet abuses alongside lengthier reports which offered extensive details on this malpractice (Mee 1976). These publications

consolidated the information that this group collated on Soviet abuses, and offered a vehicle to influence medical practitioners and the wider public on this issue.

The Working Group sought to influence the Royal College of Psychiatrists, the prestigious learned body that represents psychiatry in Britain which has particular international clout, to engage with this issue after years of relative inaction. Indeed, relations between British and Soviet psychiatry actually improved in the early-1970s despite the reports of abuse (Hurst 2016a, 36-41). By the late-1970s it was increasingly clear that psychiatry was being used coercively and despite efforts by the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) to maintain cordial relations with the Soviet All Union Society of Neuropathologists and Psychiatrists (AUSNP), information circulated by NGOs such as the Working Group meant that the issue could not be ignored. At its 1977 world congress, the WPA agreed a set of ethical guidelines regarding psychiatry in the Declaration of Hawaii and narrowly passed a resolution condemning the Soviet practices (Kastrup 2002; Hurst 2016a, 57-60). This shift was driven by psychiatrists concerned for human rights issues, including those from the Royal College who co-sponsored the WPA resolution condemning Soviet practices.

In response to these developments, the Royal College formed a Special Committee on the Political Abuse of Psychiatry (SCPAP) in June 1978 to investigate reports of abuse, and to develop policy on this matter (Hurst 2016a, 60). The committee was comprised of psychiatrists concerned about malpractice, including members of the Working Group such as Sidney Bloch, who co-authored several books on Soviet psychiatric abuse with Peter Reddaway (1977; 1984), and Gery Low-Beer, who had letters about these abuses published in the British press (Low-Beer, 1973). Bloch and Low-Beer brought information from the Working Group to the SCPAP, and used it to shape the direction of this committee. Whilst subtle, this influence was notable, as the output of the Royal College on the Soviet Union was often drafted by members of this committee (Hurst 2016a, 73-78).

By the early-1980s, information on Soviet psychiatric abuse continued to be circulated internationally via activist networks, which offered the Royal College and the WPA evidence about

the Soviet abuses. This information was used to exert pressure on the Soviet authorities, which became so acute in the months leading up to the 1983 WPA world congress that the AUSNP withdrew from the international organisation to prevent an embarrassing public expulsion (Rich 1983). Without this information, these institutions would have been unable to hold their Soviet counterparts to account, and it is unlikely that the Soviets would have been forced into this awkward situation. This was a moment when a concern for human rights steered international diplomacy in a tense period of Cold War relations, subtly fuelled by the efforts of British activists and the organisations they influenced.

The collapse of the Soviet Union did not end concerns about the political abuse of psychiatry, and reports of these unethical practices have resurfaced in post-Soviet Russia. In 2007 the activist Larisa Arap was involuntarily detained for a psychiatric evaluation and 'treated' following the publication of an article in which she was interviewed about her concerns of abuses in psychiatric institutions (Novikova 2007). Reports about her detention in the British press explicitly noted that her case had 'echoes of the Soviet era' (BBC 2007). These concerns resurfaced following the Bolotnaya Square protests in May 2012, when the political activist Mikhail Kosenko was alleged to have assaulted a police officer. In the subsequent trial, witnesses to the events, including the alleged victim, did not recognise Kosenko. The only witness to identify him was questioned in a closed session, raising questions about the legitimacy of this evidence (Yaffa 2013). Despite these doubts, the prosecution argued that Kosenko was 'mentally incompetent', and requested that he be detained in a psychiatric institution. Psychiatrists from the Serbsky Institute diagnosed him with paranoid schizophrenia, and recommended confining him for treatment. Yuri Savchenko, the head of Russia's Independent Psychiatric Association, argued that Kosenko's case was 'emblematic of the use of psychiatry for political purposes' (Human Rights Watch 2014). Amnesty adopted Kosenko as a Prisoner of Conscience, arguing that this sentence was a 'Soviet-era tactic designed to crush dissent' and that his 'only transgression was to speak his mind' (Amnesty International UK 2014).

Perhaps the most visceral concerns about psychiatric abuse in post-Soviet Russia came from the performance artist Petr Pavlensky. Pavlensky is known for his shocking public protests, such as his November 2013 piece 'Fixation', in which he nailed his scrotum to Moscow's Red Square as a 'metaphor for the apathy, political indifference and fatalism of modern Russian society' (Walker, 2014). Pavlensky's provocative style, which has also included wrapping himself in barbed wire and sewing his lips shut, was effective in attracting media attention. Whilst his methods are shocking, the causes that he campaigns for show striking resemblance to his Soviet predecessors, such as the abuse of psychiatry. In October 2014, Pavlensky performed 'Segregation', climbing on to the roof of the Serbsky Institute and cutting part of his ear off with a knife, noting that this represented the damage caused by 'returning to the use of psychiatry for political goals' (Walker, 2014). Pavlensky was detained and psychiatrically evaluated following this protest, and found to be sane. Following a subsequent protest in November 2015, where he set fire to the front doors of the Lubyanka (the headquarters of the Federal Security Services, and formally of the Soviet KGB), Pavlensky was examined in the Serbsky and denied access to his lawyers. In response to this, Amnesty (2016) drew attention to the 'historical significance' of both the Serbsky and the Lubyanka, noting that 'the hospital claims to have overcome its Soviet past'.

The targets and locations of Pavlensky's protests echo dissidents from the Soviet era, and his methods also show similarity in ambition. Gessen (2015) has noted that Pavlensky is 'a sort of absurdist descendant of Soviet dissidents, who demanded that the state follow its own constitution'. His desire to draw the attention of the international media to this issue, whilst more shocking in style, has echoes of Bukovsky's earlier efforts to gain global attention. Pavlensky also utilised the distribution of information as an important part of his efforts, including releasing detailed transcripts of his interrogations (Snob2014). Arap and Kosenko's cases also carry these echoes, both in the way in which these individuals sought to utilise verifiable information – either in the form of sharing concerns with journalists or in testimony to highlight the inaccuracy of prosecution – and in the nature of their persecution in order to silence their dissenting views.

The challenges of obtaining accurate information about cases of psychiatric abuse remain in the post-Soviet era. Human rights groups such as Amnesty and Human Rights Watch continue to fulfil the role that NGOs did in the Soviet era. The Royal College of Psychiatrists maintain an interest in this issue, publishing articles on the reported abuses (Van Voren 2016) and retaining a Special Committee on Human Rights. The efforts of the Working Group are also still present. After a number of mergers and name changes, the legacy of this organisation continues in the Federation Global Initiative on Psychiatry (FGIP). In September 2021, FGIP released *The Return of Political Abuse of Psychiatry in Russia*, a report that lists a number of cases of abuse directly comparable to its predecessor's earlier publications during the Cold War. Whilst the context is different in the post-Soviet landscape, the important role that these NGOs play in circulating information remains.

Belief

As an avowedly atheistic state, the Soviet Union persecuted religious believers from its foundation in the 1920s, a policy that continued throughout its existence with the exception of a short period of religious freedom during the Second World War (Merritt Miner 2003). In the post-war era, the assault on religious belief returned, especially under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev (Ellis 1986). Due to this, freedom of belief occupies a contested space in the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts. Much like psychiatric abuse, individuals in Britain concerned about this persecution led campaigns to document and raise awareness of these human rights violations. The Anglican clergyman Michael Bourdeaux was prominent in these efforts, dedicating his life to this cause after witnessing persecution first-hand on a 1959 British Council student exchange in Moscow. Bourdeaux's efforts were channelled through Keston College, a research institution that monitored religious belief in communist lands (Bourdeaux, 2019; Hurst 2016a; Robertson 1984).

Much like Amnesty and the Working Group, information was central to Keston's efforts. *Samizdat* on religious life was obtained by Keston's researchers through a variety of channels, forming a significant archive of religious life under Soviet rule which has become an invaluable

resource for historians (deGraffenried and Knox 2019). Keston's researchers used this archive in a range of publications, including a book series covering prominent believers targeted for persecution (Howard-Johnston and Bourdeaux 1972, and Rodgers 1987), translated autobiographies by individuals such as Georgi Vins (1976), and broader analyses of religious life in the Soviet Union (Bourdeaux 1983). Keston also produced an academic journal *Religion in Communist Lands* (which later became *Religion, State and Society*), and *Keston News Service*, a regular bulletin aimed at journalists and policymakers (Hurst 2016a, 126-128). Through these publications, Keston's researchers consolidated their expertise on religious issues in the Soviet bloc. Bourdeaux's reputation became particularly notable in this space, especially following his receipt of the Templeton Prize in 1984.

Whilst those affiliated with Keston were sometimes criticised for their perceived anti-Soviet approach, their influence on British policymakers was significant. Bourdeaux was personally selected by Margaret Thatcher to attend a foreign policy seminar at Chequers in September 1983. In her memoirs Thatcher notes that this event was to 'provide me with the information on which to shape policy towards the Soviet Union'. Bourdeaux was chosen by Thatcher due to her insistence that she wanted 'people who have really studied Russia' to offer their insight, not the perfunctory view of civil servants in the Foreign Office (Thatcher 1995, 452). Bourdeaux's expertise offered Thatcher a valuable insight, which fed into her broader foreign policy approach to the Soviet Union.

Another aspect of Soviet religious persecution that caught international attention was the case of the *refuseniks* – Jews who sought to emigrate from the communist nation. This was often to reunite with families already settled abroad, but also to move to the recently founded Jewish nation of Israel. A desire to emigrate was considered by the Soviet authorities as a political act that challenged the very nature of the utopian socialist state. There were also concerns about a 'brain drain', as many *refuseniks* were highly qualified scientists, researchers and engineers. To address this, *refuseniks* were refused exit visas, often on the grounds that the individual in question had

access to state secrets – something that could be levied at any Soviet citizen due to the centrally controlled economy and compulsory national service. *Refuseniks* were often given no information about their application leaving many in a state of limbo – persecuted for their application to leave the Soviet Union, but with no information as to why they had been refused, or what could be done to address it (Panish 1981). This persecution included intimidation, significant demotions at work (i.e. from a research scientist to a cleaner in the same institution), and the persecution of family members, such as the removal of university places or restricted access to medical treatment. Whilst considered in the framework of religious persecution in this article, the targeted oppression of Jews can be also be seen in the context of Soviet policies targeting particular ethnic groupings (such as the Crimean Tatars) and broader anti-Semitism in Russia’s history.

The term *refusenik* was coined by Michael Sherbourne, a British schoolteacher who developed close connections with Soviet Jews through long-distance telephone calls. Sherbourne’s conversations were a lifeline for persecuted *refuseniks*, offering a route through which information on their plight could be shared with a broader activist network in Britain, Israel, and the United States (Hurst 2016a, 102-110, Beckerman 2010, 355-356). Amongst those who used this information was the Women’s Campaign for Soviet Jewry, who stand out in this network for their drive and effectiveness in drawing media attention to this issue through their playful demonstrations. These included presenting a visiting football team from Yerevan with a football inscribed with the names of 31 *refuseniks*, riding past the London offices of the Soviet airline *Aeroflot* on horseback impersonating Lady Godiva, and a mock funeral procession to the offices of the Soviet tourist agency *Intourist* (Gerlis 1996, 222-281).

Whilst the Women’s Campaign relied on provocative demonstrations to attract attention, reliable and accurate information was at the core of their activity. They were in regular correspondence with politicians, trade union leaders and journalists, offering information on the *refuseniks*, and lobbying for action on their behalf. Thatcher was a particular focus of the

organisation, not just as Prime Minister, but also as constituency MP for many members of the Women's Campaign. This relationship was clearly beneficial for the Women's Campaign, but was also courted by Thatcher. In August 1982 she asked the organisation to pass on any information they had about the *refusenik* Anatoly Shcharansky to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office with 'suitable discretion' (Hurst 2016a, 101). Thatcher was acutely aware of Shcharansky's case, and this information was doubtless useful in her later dealings with Mikhail Gorbachev. She notes discussing the *refusenik* issue with Gorbachev in her memoirs, dismissing his claim that '80 per cent of those who had expressed the wish to leave the Soviet Union had been able to do so' by stating 'this was not my information'. The *refusenik* issue was an important part of Thatcher's foreign policy, noting in her memoirs that 'the Soviets had to know that every time we met their treatment of the *refuseniks* would be thrown back at them' (Thatcher, 460). This highlights that for Thatcher, a relationship of trust with the Soviets could not be developed without a respect for human rights (Snyder 2011, 172). Her 'close interest in all human rights matters' positioned morality centrally in Britain's policy towards the Soviet Union. This was an effective way of diplomatically keeping the Soviet state on the back foot (Grealy 2020, 140), and an approach underpinned by the information provided by NGOs.

The collapse of the Soviet Union opened the space for belief to be shared more publicly, positioning religion in a markedly different space in post-Soviet Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church has come to occupy a 'prominent and privileged position' in post-Soviet Russia, and is often used in discussions of Russian national identity and as an ally to many leading political figures (Knox 2004). The close relationship between the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church in the post-Soviet years is one that has been fostered by President Putin and Patriarchs Alexei and Kirill (Garrard and Garrard 2008). Instead of the challenges of practicing religious life, criticising the Orthodox Church now comes with increased risks.

In 2012, the performance of a 'Punk Prayer' in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour by the Punk art collective Pussy Riot captured international attention. This Cathedral is a symbolic site

given its destruction in the Stalin era, and its rebuilding in the early post-Soviet years. The 'Punk Prayer' took aim at the relationship between the Kremlin and the Orthodox Church, proclaiming 'The Church sings the praises of rotten dictators' and 'Patriarch Gundyayev believes in Putin, Bitch, better believe in God instead' (Gessen 2014, 118). Following this event, three members of Pussy Riot were charged with 'hooliganism motivated by religious hatred', with Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova subsequently sentenced to two years in a prison colony (Elder 2012).

Pussy Riot quickly became a global talking point. Prominent British cultural figures such as Adele, Paul McCartney, Elton John and Stephen Fry (Amnesty 2013, Amnesty International UK 2012) offered their public support to Pussy Riot. This has echoes of the public support given to Soviet dissidents by cultural figures such as the playwright Tom Stoppard, the actor David Markham, and the musician Joan Baez in the 1970s and 1980s (Hurst 2016b). Foreign Office Minister Alistair Burt (2012) noted his concern at the Pussy Riot case, calling it a 'disproportionate response to an expression of political belief'. David Cameron raised the issue with Vladimir Putin during his visit to London during the 2012 Olympic Games. Despite Putin being allegedly 'not particularly responsive' to this discussion, raising concerns in this fashion offered the opportunity for this case to remain in public and political consciousness. John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International's Europe and Central Asia Director, called for Cameron to 'politely – but firmly – tell it like it is on the Pussy Riot case', and the Labour MP Denis McShane argued that the Olympic Games should not be used to promote 'British appeasement of Putin' (Mulholland 2012). Clear action on this issue was difficult to take by the British government, especially given the desire at the time to influence Russian policy regarding rising tensions in Syria. Nonetheless, there was significant pressure for British officials to raise this issue, doubtless due to the efforts of NGOs and public figures highlighting this case.

One religious group that has experienced persecution in both Soviet and post-Soviet Russia are the Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's Witnesses offered a particular challenge to the Soviet state as they openly refused to conform to the norms of Soviet society due to their religious beliefs. They

operated large underground printing presses to circulate religious literature, openly discussed their faith with complete strangers in an attempt to convert them, and kept substantial records of their activities. Due to this, they were persecuted by the Soviet authorities, becoming one of the largest categories of political prisoners in the post-Stalin Soviet Union (Baran 2014).

Despite the religious freedoms of the post-Soviet period, persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses has continued. On 20 April 2017, Russia's Supreme Court ruled that the Jehovah's Witnesses Administrative Centre, the central body of the religion in Russia, was an extremist organisation. This forced more than 100,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia to either renounce their religious beliefs, or be subject to criminal prosecution (Human Rights Watch 2017). This signalled a significant shift away from European human rights norms by the Russian authorities (Knox 2019), something with significant implications for religious pluralism and freedom of conscience.

The British government expressed its concern at these developments, noting in a statement to the OSCE Permanent Council in July 2020 that 'the increasing number of searches, as well as use of simultaneous large-scale home raids, creates the impression of an organised campaign of persecution against Jehovah's Witnesses'. This echoed the March 2020 comments from the Head of the UK Delegation to the OSCE, which made explicit reference to the value of information provided on this issue by 'respected NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and Forum 18', highlighting the influence that NGOs still have on British policymakers. In the post-Soviet landscape, different groups occupy the space previously filled by NGOs in the Cold War. Yet, some continuities remain. Forum 18 researchers such as Felix Corley and Geraldine Fagan previously worked for Keston, so whilst this NGO is no longer as active in this space, its legacies are tangible.

Conclusion

In December 2021, Russia's Supreme Court ordered the closure of International Memorial, an NGO focused on preserving the history of Soviet human rights violations. Memorial's closure

demonstrates how intertwined the history of Soviet oppression is with contemporary political concerns in Russia, with the organisation noting that ‘the history of political terror organised and driven by the state has not remained a matter of a purely academic interest in Russia. Instead, it is a heated issue of immediate concern’ (Memorial 2021). Its institutional reputation is built on its lineage from Soviet dissident groups and its expertise on historic human rights violations. This expertise allowed Memorial to comment on human rights issues with authority, something that was a clear concern for the Russian authorities. Perhaps as a result of this, NGOs like Memorial have been targeted as part of a wider drive against so-called ‘foreign agents’ (Rainsford 2021).

In a similar case of the past intertwining with the present, Amnesty noted in 2021 that ‘by confirming Navalny’s status as a Prisoner of Conscience, we are not endorsing his political programme, but are highlighting the urgent need for his rights’ (Amnesty 2021b), reiterating its institutional position of political impartiality. However, as the Cold War campaigns that it conducted on Soviet human rights issues demonstrate, the inherent contradictions in this statement make it challenging to sustain. Navalny’s case has echoes from Amnesty’s attempt to position their support for the *Chronicle* as apolitical – a noble ideal, but practically impossible in the political context.

In both of these cases, human rights violations in the Soviet and post-Soviet era are intertwined, with legacies of the Cold War era echoing into the present. The evolving way in which the history of Soviet oppression is understood is enmeshed with the changing understanding of human rights in contemporary Russia. Whilst they are not always identical, with the contemporary concerns for LGBT rights being a notable contrast (Amnesty International UK 2020), the overlaps between these two periods are striking.

When assessing human rights violations in Soviet or post-Soviet Russia, it is perhaps counterintuitive to focus on British activists. These activists were largely removed from direct persecution, limited in what they could know about events taking place behind the iron curtain, and based in a nation whose influence on the international order was relatively slight in comparison to

their counterparts in the US. However, their efforts bolstered the broader awareness of Soviet human rights violations, and without which it is unlikely that this issue would have been as politically prominent as it was. Something that in turn would have impacted on British policy towards the Soviet Union and the treatment of individual dissidents.

The efforts of these British activists offer a number of insights into contemporary Russian human rights issues, opening the space to understand the important role that activists and NGOs play. Their example demonstrates that verifiable and accurate information is integral to effective human rights activism, especially in the case of totalitarian regimes that readily sow mis-/disinformation. Where this information is not easily verifiable, the reputation and recognised expertise of NGOs becomes essential to endorse and promote material that might otherwise be overlooked. In the 1970s, NGOs working to highlight Soviet human rights violations shared a reliance on objective material in their efforts. The reputation of these organisations was based on the accuracy and reliability of their information and expertise, without which their campaigns would have faltered. Had these organisations been more polemical, they would not have developed the relationships with policymakers that they did, which would have significantly limited their influence. The impact of non-state actors on government policy has reinvigorated diplomatic history in recent years (Scott-Smith and Weisbrode, 2019) and offers particular value for understanding the response to human rights violations by governments and official bodies. The efforts of these British activists are integral to understanding Soviet human rights violations, something which doubtless has contemporary parallels.

Whilst technological innovations have fundamentally changed the way in which information can be shared internationally, reliability still plays an essential role in the contemporary landscape. Social media and the internet are powerful tools for sharing information (and misinformation) about human rights violations, but they are only powerful when they can be trusted to be accurate. Efforts to censor internet communications through the use of firewalls, legislation to prevent engagement

with international organisations, and pressure exerted on online platforms used by activists such as Telegram are clearly designed to disrupt this flow of information. The Soviet case demonstrates that even in the most pressing circumstances information can still 'cross the curtain', something that policymakers and activists need to be aware of in the event that these online channels become unusable. Indeed, there have been attempts to create a new *Chronicle* (2021) to document human rights issues in contemporary Russia, drawing on the reputation of its Soviet counterpart.

Regardless of the availability of this information, in order for NGOs to be even considered by the political elite, they need to establish their reputation. In Soviet human rights campaigns, this was often through the production of publications based on their collated information, offering some organisations recognition before human rights gained political traction in the 1970s breakthrough (Eckel and Moyn 2013). Efforts by NGOs that were all but ignored in the 1960s and early-1970s became front page news in the late-1970s and 1980s. The established expertise of these NGOs put them in an influential position when these human rights violations became politically important, allowing them to help shape official policy. Politicians such as Thatcher drew heavily on the expertise of these NGOs in preparing her approach to Gorbachev in the mid-1980s – a major turning point in the Cold War. The influence of these groups on British foreign policy in the Cold War was doubtless bolstered by the fact they were not going against the tide of government policy towards the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, their impact in shaping this direction can be clearly seen. The similarities in the post-Soviet era are clear, with NGOs such as Amnesty, FGIP and Forum 18 coming to the fore in moments when Russian human rights issues become politically important, filling the same space their Cold War predecessors once occupied.

Whilst this article has outlined the differing aspects of this activist activity in a segmented fashion, in reality this human rights network was deeply symbiotic. Loose connections between campaigns facilitated a ready flow of information between seemingly disparate organisations. The 'weak ties' (Granovetter 1973) that held this network together are challenging to identify, and even

harder to account for. They were, nevertheless, essential for this network to function effectively. An example of this is the role played by Peter Reddaway. Reddaway was a leading figure in the Working Group, a founding member of Keston College, and essential in Amnesty's publication of the *Chronicle*. Although these 'weak ties' can be identified in the Soviet context, social media and the internet makes identifying their contemporary counterparts more challenging. Reddaway's cross-fertilising role in the 1970s is now likely played by a civilian journalist or blogger who can use a wealth of information electronically from the comfort of their home. The amount of material and the speed at which it can be procured are now vastly different, but the important role of the coordinating figure remains. The investigations by Bellingcat journalists into the poisoning of Sergei Skripal may offer an example of how this coordinating role operates in the internet era (Higgins 2021). If policymakers can identify and critically utilise the expertise of these coordinating figures, they will be better informed and able to make better policy decisions.

British campaigns against Soviet human rights violations offer many lessons for contemporary policymakers, and how they can use the expertise of NGOs and activists to better understand and respond to reports of human rights violations in post-Soviet Russia. Whilst information 'crossing the curtain' has become objectively easier in the post-Cold War period, the underpinning reasons to trust it have not changed. Despite the much-quoted notion that experts no longer matter, reputable and trusted expertise remains integral for understanding and acting on reports of human rights violations.

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