



WOULD YOU BELIEVE...

THE HELSINKI
ACCORDS CHANGED
THE WORLD?

*Advancing Global Human Rights
and, for Decades, Security in Europe*

PETER L.W. OSNOS

with HOLLY CARTNER
Former Executive Director of Helsinki Watch





Advance praise for
WOULD YOU BELIEVE . . . THE HELSINKI ACCORDS
CHANGED THE WORLD?

“How is it that an obscure Cold War agreement became the underlying force for a potent new movement—and helped end the Cold War itself? Peter Osnos and Holly Cartner reveal the fascinating story of this little-known history, which they witnessed firsthand. The Helsinki Final Act was a seed out of which a mighty oak grew.”

—**DAVID E. HOFFMAN**, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and author of *Give Me Liberty: The True Story of Oswaldo Payá and His Daring Quest for a Free Cuba*

“It is now almost fifty years since major states and nonprofit groups put human rights on the priority list for international debate and action. Governments agreed to new norms and regulations including rigorous requirements of accountability. Over the years, both public and private efforts based on the Helsinki Accords and led by Human Rights Watch have given power and force to those goals. This compelling and highly readable book tells the remarkable story of that transformation.”

—**JAMES F. HOGE, JR.**, former editor of *Foreign Affairs* and former chairman of Human Rights Watch

“This impressive book tells the story of the consequences—not immediately foreseen—of the Helsinki Accords. As people who have experienced this history deeply, Peter Osnos and Holly Cartner can vividly describe how and why Human Rights Watch achieved its stature based on decisions made in 1975. The narrative brings us back to a time when human rights and principled politics were center stage and when, despite the Cold War, international adversaries pursued some common ground.”

—**KAREN BARKEY**, Charles Theodore Kellogg and Bertie K. Hawver Kellogg Chair of Sociology and Religion, Bard College

“Peter Osnos and Holly Cartner draw on their deep personal connections to, and work with, the Helsinki Accords and Human Rights Watch to provide an impressively succinct and accessible account of why both matter so much. In a time of renewed crisis in Europe, they provide a valuable reminder of the importance of working for lasting peace and cooperation.”

—M. E. SAROTTE, author of *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate*

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PLATFORM

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PROLOGUE

IT HAS BEEN fifty years since diplomats from thirty-five European nations plus the United States and Canada first convened in Geneva and Helsinki for the purpose of devising, at long last, the post-World War II political, economic, and social structure for the continent. Europe had been bedeviled by territorial and ideological conflicts in the twentieth century; the devastation had been vast and borders rearranged by the ambitions of dictators, imperialists, and their generals.

In what was called the Helsinki Final Act or the Helsinki Accords, the thirty-five signatories at a summit meeting that ran from July 30 to August 1, 1975, agreed to the following principles, known as The Decalogue:

1. Sovereign equality, respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty.
2. Refraining from the threat or use of force.
3. Inviolability of frontiers.
4. Territorial integrity of states.
5. Peaceful settlement of disputes
6. Non-interference in internal affairs.

7. Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief.
8. Equal rights and self-determination of peoples.
9. Cooperation among states.
10. Fulfillment in good faith of obligations under international law.

Measuring history in eras, the Helsinki Accords defined a period of what in retrospect seems relative stability in Europe and among the allies and adversaries around the world. The Accords marked the high point of what was known as *détente*, the years in the 1970s when the superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—pursued agreements to ease security tensions and increase commerce and contacts. In the presidencies of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, that policy prevailed against those who believed that dealing with the Kremlin would inevitably end in disaster.

Détente ended—definitively—with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on December 24, 1979. This military incursion in South Asia showed that the Soviets did not consider borders—at least outside Europe—to be immutable, in contravention of the spirit of the Helsinki Accords. The invasion led to the U.S. Senate's refusal to ratify the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty and to an American boycott of the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, followed by the Soviet boycott of the Los Angeles Olympics four years later. Throughout the Cold War, there had been intermittent flareups around the world, interventions and interference by the superpowers or their surrogates, the repression of dissent, and expulsion of spies. Afghanistan was different, a pure instance of territorial aggression.

Suspensions were constant, but there were no direct military confrontations between the superpowers. A *modus vivendi* prevailed that enabled the two sides to pursue competing objectives without any real clashes. Mutual Assured Destruction was the preferred term for avoiding the ultimate nuclear combat and the collapse of civilization.

History records the inevitability of war over territory and power struggles as regimes and ideologies rise and fall. And yet efforts persist to restrain these impulses, including the failed League of Nations and the always tenuous but enduring United Nations. The Helsinki Final Act was one such effort, though without the force of a treaty ratified by the signatories. Nonetheless, for nearly five decades it codified a norm under which the inviolability of European borders was generally observed.

What could not be known in 1975 was that the Cold War was already more than half over. It would come to a symbolic close on December 25, 1991, when the flag of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was lowered at the Kremlin. The Soviet Union's constituent republics and the nations of the dissolving Warsaw Pact now made their choices as independent states of how they wished to be defined, as democracies, autocracies, or some newer version of state capitalism, socialism or even communism. In Europe, the concept of a common market evolved into a European Union, which was deemed the best means of assuring stability where there so often had not been.

The era of Helsinki lived on until February 24, 2022, when the Russian army invaded Ukraine with the proclaimed purpose of overthrowing the government there and, in effect, once again become the ruler of this nation of forty-four

million people. Vladimir Putin's declaration that he would take over another sovereign nation marked the first time in seven decades that anything on that scale had happened in Europe, dwarfing Russia's incursion eight years earlier into the Donbass region and the Crimean peninsula. Putin had justified these prior actions by citing the regions' associations with "Mother" Russia in Slavic language, Orthodox Christianity, and family ties. In the post-Soviet period, as NATO expanded its membership to countries surrounding Russia, Putin put forward a *mélange* of grievances around security and his version of national histories as the reasons for the violence he unleashed. Whatever his imagined justifications, by invading Ukraine and seeking the reestablishment of Russian hegemony over its former empire, Putin was in violation of every one of the ten pledges in the Decalogue.

The Final Act itself consisted of what became known as "Baskets." The first dealt with the security issues that were pressed by the Soviets, including the inviolability of borders. The Kremlin wanted what amounted to a formal division of Europe based on the lands, frontiers, and water access established when World War II ended in 1945. The division of Germany into East and West with the divided city of Berlin at its core and sectors controlled by the Soviets, British, French, and Americans was inevitably the most sensitive issue. The prospect of the eventual reunification of Germany made these the provisions that required nuances of language that were going to be tested, one way or another and they were.

What became clear in 2022 was that the elements making up Basket One no longer applied, at least for Putin. The European and U.S. organizations created to monitor the accords—the Organization on Security and Cooperation in

Europe, and the U.S. Helsinki Commission (composed of congressional and executive branch personnel as well as non-profit human rights groups)—were again invoking what had been determined in security guarantees. In 1975, the possibility of NATO expansion at the scale it happened could not have been anticipated.

Baskets Two and Four were not especially controversial. Basket Two dealt with economic and scientific cooperation, and Basket Four established a follow-up structure for monitoring compliance with the Accords, a provision insisted upon by the Western democracies.

It was Basket Three that was the most original and became—unexpectedly—the one with the most impact.

Included were all the issues on exchanges of people, information and culture and respect for the freedoms that defined human rights, including the ability of individuals to express themselves on matters of politics, religion, and speech. The Soviets, who had initiated the call for a European Security Conference as far back as the 1950s expected Basket Three to have minimal effects on their authoritarian rule in the Warsaw Pact nations. Instead, starting with a very small group of democratic activists in Moscow and spreading across the region and into the United States, respect for human rights as guaranteed in the Final Act became an organizing principle for dissent that would eventually become a significant factor in the implosion of Communist rule.

An historic irony is how little was expected from the Helsinki Accords from the outset of the negotiations in 1973. In particular, Henry Kissinger, Nixon and Ford's formidable national security adviser and secretary of state, was dismissive, telling Ford when he assumed office, "We never wanted it,

but we went along with the Europeans . . . It is meaningless . . . It is just a grandstand play to the left.” As the negotiations concluded, Ford was urged not to attend the summit. The influential *New York Times* columnist William Safire, for example, disparaged them before, during and even after they were signed, advocating that they be rescinded.

The Los Angeles Times’s Pulitzer Prize-winning political cartoonist Paul Conrad depicted the globe on the day before, the day of, and the day after the signing as completely unchanged. This was about as positive as the reaction was in the United States.

But in Moscow, a few months later, a group of dissidents, inspired by the great Soviet scientist and future Nobel Peace Prize recipient Andrei Sakharov and led by the physicist Yuri Orlov organized what they called the “Public Group to Promote Fulfillment of the Helsinki Accords in the USSR,” also known as the Moscow Helsinki Group, to monitor the Kremlin’s compliance with the Accords’ commitments. In time, the Soviet government harassed every member of the group; exiled Sakharov and his wife, Yelena Bonner, far from Moscow; jailed Orlov and Anatoly (Natan) Sharansky, another founding member; and made it impossible for the group to function.

Elsewhere in the Soviet bloc, small groups were organized and also harassed. In response, in 1978 Helsinki Watch was established in New York by four people of reputation and distinction, Robert L. Bernstein, chair of Random House; Orville Schell, a prominent lawyer; Aryeh Neier, a leading civil liberties activist; and Jeri Laber, who was to become the organization’s executive director. The initial funding came from the Ford Foundation.

Now, a half-century since the origins of the Helsinki process, the concept of human rights monitoring is an established fact the world over. Helsinki Watch and its successors in the United States, the Americas, Asia, Africa, the Middle East and later groups monitoring the rights of women, children, and others were combined in 1988 into a new umbrella organization called Human Rights Watch. Based in New York, with offices and representatives worldwide, a budget of about \$100 million a year, a staff of six hundred and an endowment of around \$150 million, HRW is the most important human rights non-governmental organization in history. Its investigations, reports, and advocacy are a recognized and greatly admired gauge of the full range of political, economic, and social issues encompassed by our twenty-first-century understanding of human rights.

The Helsinki Accords have retained their power even in our changing times. When they were signed in 1975, the world was well into the nuclear age, but the development of universal digital networks was in its infancy. The twentieth century was shaped by the telephone, the automobile, the airplane, radio and television, forays into space, and world wars. In summary, these were analog: tangible means and messaging as opposed to digital, which is almost entirely on screens.

Technical progress—the sweeping digital revolution of the 21st century, the internet, crypto culture, and the like—were imagined a half century ago but played little part in international relations. Information was distributed in the time-honored platforms of print and broadcast. The 2022 war in Ukraine shows the impact that digital images and reports can have on conflicts, by providing to the broad public an instant-by-instant understanding of what is happening. That

is why the Russian government is waging a war on internal dissent and media as intense as it has waged in Ukraine itself.

Modern war is fought on the ground, in the air, and on screens, in which perceptions challenge reality for impact. The Helsinki Accords were reached in another century, but its provisions on information distribution and global standards for human rights have become ever more important because they are so much more entrenched and visible in our ways of life.

As for military conflicts, in the 1970s, there were guerrilla insurgencies, anti-colonialist forces, and territorial disputes, mainly in post-colonial Africa and the Middle East. But the concept of today's cross-border, non-governmental terrorist organizations, especially Muslim extremists, was yet to fully emerge as shaping the balance of power among nations. By contrast, in Ukraine, Vladimir Putin has unleashed a war much like those of the past: an act of aggression against a weaker neighbor. And yet its progress is measured against Helsinki's principles of human rights: How Basket Three provisions should enable people everywhere to live a life they choose and not one that is imposed on them.



The subject of this book is the trajectory of the Final Act, primarily Basket Three, with the emergence of the Helsinki Watch committees and the development of human rights monitoring so thorough that advocacy for changes in policy and practice were taken more seriously by governments, the media, and civil society than ever before.

The security provisions in Basket One have been the focus of multiple books around NATO enlargement and

the growing recognition of Russia's—especially Vladimir Putin's—insistence that it is now surrounded by adversaries, returning Europe to the geography that prevailed before World War II. Basket One sought to settle boundaries.

What has happened to Basket Three has standing in the annals of diplomatic unexpected consequences. This saga is of courage, determination, and the ability of a small number of people—civilians—to bring about genuine progress, against the odds.

The book is divided into chapters written by Peter Osnos and by Holly Cartner. Osnos wrote about the Helsinki process and its consequences for *The Washington Post* as a correspondent in Moscow and became a long-term board member of Human Rights Watch. His wife, Susan Sherer Osnos, was the first press director of Helsinki Watch in New York and her father, Ambassador Albert W. Sherer, led the American delegation to the negotiations. Cartner, a human rights lawyer who was director of the Europe and Central Asia Division of Human Rights Watch, will write about the activities of Helsinki Watch and the people on whose behalf it was working across the former Soviet bloc through its first decade and a half. In Poland, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria between 1975 and 1991, groups and movements played instrumental roles in transforming those societies, notably Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia (from which the playwright Vaclav Havel rose to become the country's first democratically elected president) and Solidarity in Poland (which turned a workers' union into the country's main political force, with Lech Walesa as its leader). In the other countries of the Soviet bloc, dissidents emerged, challenged the states, were repressed, but ultimately prevailed in upending their communist regimes.

There will be a final section on the development of Human Rights Watch through the present day with a forecast of what the future may bring, from the standpoint of a long-time board member and a senior staff person. And the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe has become an arbiter in the Ukraine war and its aftermath along with the United Nations, the European Union, and NATO, reflecting its endurance as an institution. The Helsinki Accords have not determined the outcome of events a half century after they were signed, but their influence has been significant in establishing internationally accepted norms for state action.

The pursuit of higher human rights standards can never be completed, because it involves all the strengths of human nature that make change possible and all the weaknesses that prevent change from happening.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

PETER L. W. OSNOS was born in Bombay (now Mumbai) India on October 13, 1943. He arrived in Los Angeles by ship with his parents and brother in February 1944. He was raised in New York and attended high school in Connecticut, college at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts and graduate school at Columbia University. He worked as an assistant to the journalist I.F. Stone and joined The Washington Post in 1966. At the Post, Osnos served as a correspondent in Vietnam, the Soviet Union and London. He was also the national and foreign editor. In 1984, Osnos joined Random House as a senior editor and later associate publisher as well as publisher of the Times Books imprint. In 1997, he founded PublicAffairs in partnership with the Perseus Books Group and served as publisher and editor at large until 2020. He was the founder of the Caravan Project on the development of digital and audio publishing, author of a weekly media column called Platform which was hosted by The Century Foundation and appeared on theatlantic.com and in 2020, launched Platform Books LLC with his wife, Susan Sherer Osnos. The first book was “An Especially Good View: Watching History Happen” released in May, 2021. It is Osnos’ memoir, distributed by

Two Rivers/Ingram. He is also the editor of “George Soros: A Life in Full” (Platform Books/Harvard Business Review Press, 2022). He is the father of two children, Evan Osnos and Katherine Sanford, and grandfather of five. He and his wife now live in New York City and Lakeside, Michigan.



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