



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

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Russia

Soviet Diplomacy and Politics on Human Rights 1945-1975

Topic of Research:

I am looking at how the Soviet Union influenced contemporary ideas of human rights, both through official treaties and declarations and through domestic and international propaganda. Secondly, my research looks at what role Soviet and international ideas regarding human rights played in forming domestic policies.

Relevance and Contribution to the Field:

Through the IREX/IARO, my research has revealed several aspects of Soviet diplomacy on human rights. From a policy perspective, many in Russia including government officials have recently depicted contemporary human rights agreements as foreign to Russia. They have said that these concepts are "West European" ideas that do not reflect Russian voices or culture. In fact, Russians, as part of the Soviet Union, actively shaped contemporary ideas regarding human rights, both in drafting conventions and treaties and in promoting the concepts through international rhetoric. As such the ideas and conventions are not a foreign ideology imposed on the country by Western governments; the concepts were also molded by Soviets, who used a combination of Marxist-Leninist and pre-revolutionary Russian ideologies to bring the new international concepts closer to their own ideas.

My research has also problematized ideas about Soviet-East European relations. Other historians have suggested that the Soviet Union controlled the East European bloc's

diplomacy during the Cold War, but this concept does not hold true for human rights diplomacy and perhaps not low politics in general. East European countries maintained some autonomy in developing their human rights diplomatic agendas. At times, these countries tutored the Soviet Union in their actions within certain spheres, such as international non-governmental organizations.

Finally, my research will help contextualize both dissident and human rights histories. Most dissident historians focus on dissident efforts to reform or overthrow the Soviet Union using human rights concepts. The dissidents often worked initially tried to work with the state, trying to reform its human rights politics. That said, the dissidents and their historians have overlooked the state as a producer, albeit hypocritically, of human rights ideology. Furthermore, current histories of human rights have ignored the role of the Soviet Union in shaping these rights. As more and more countries denounce human rights as a product of Western capitalism, the role of alternative voices highlights the universality of human rights as way to frame internal and international policies.

Methodology

My research has been based primarily on Russian archival material, supplemented with information from the United Nations and published sources. I was able to gain access to recently declassified material at the Soviet Foreign Ministry Archive (AVPR RF) to trace changes in Soviet diplomacy. The State Archive of the Russian Federation (GA RF), which holds the archives for the Soviet Committee for Solidarity with the Countries of Asia and Africa (SKSSAA), the Soviet Association for the United Nations Organization (ASOON), the Soviet Committee for UNESCO, has been valuable in evaluating informal international diplomacy regarding human rights. GA RF also provided access to the Ministry of Justice archives, which shed light on Soviet internal policies regarding human rights questions as well as the interaction between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Justice on relevant treaties. Finally, I used the Russian Archive for Contemporary History (RGANI) and the Russian Archive for Socio-Economic History (RGASPI) to ascertain Communist Party—both leadership and the rank-and-file member—views towards the nascent human rights ideology.

Summary of research findings:

Due to the multiplicity of sources and archives, I am still developing a coherent conclusion regarding my research. Of particular interest, the Soviet government developed faux-non-governmental organizations to capitalize on the nascent international NGO movement, such as the Soviet Committee for Solidarity with the Countries of Asia and Africa (SKSSAA). This group was the international face of the “Affirmative Action Empire” in that most members were cultural, political and party elites from Siberian, Caucasian and Central Asian minorities. SKSSAA members met with government and cultural leaders as well as non-governmental officials from Asia and Africa from the late 1950s until the collapse of the USSR. Through these connections, the Soviet Union lobbied the developing world by focusing on its republics’ own ethnic status and the development that those republics experienced since the October Revolution. For my research, this group best highlighted the difference in how the Soviet Union used human rights concepts in speaking to various audiences. Within SKSSAA and in publications targeting the newly independent countries, the Soviets stressed only two human rights, namely the right of self-determination and the right to be treated equally, regardless of ethnicity or race.

While the SKSSAA focused on only a severely limited concept of human rights, the diplomats, journalists and academics outside of SKSSAA, particularly those discussing the United Nations, broadened their human rights conceptions. When addressing the developed world, these Soviets discussed participation on the government, freedom of the press, education and other more “Western” ideas of rights. In fact, the Soviet delegates to the negotiations on the convention on freedom of information (a convention which was never codified) often sided with France on the limitation and role of censorship. The Soviet limitations to freedom of assembly resembled those, at least rhetorically, of many West European governments’. Human rights historians have portrayed the Soviet stance as mirroring that of Marx and opposing the liberal concept held in Western Europe. Instead, the Soviet diplomacy on human rights was far more nuanced, and often coincided with the ideas held in Western Europe, which clashed with US conceptions.

While the United Nations played the fundamental role in formalizing concepts around human rights, the Soviet chapter of the World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA) was the central official actor for disseminating human rights ideas within the Soviet Union. The WFUNA is an international organization that links different NGO chapters from around the world to promote the ideas and mission of the United Nations. In the late 1950s, the Soviet Union founded a local chapter (ASOON) and joined the international organization, as a way to garner support for its policies outside of traditional diplomatic channels. Although WFUNA is technically composed of state NGOs, the Soviet chapter was far from non-governmental; its delegates received negotiating orders from the Politburo which were drafted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The representatives worked as part of a coordinated state effort regarding the diplomacy of human rights.

While behavior at international conferences was dictated by both the Communist Party and the Ministry, ASOON received no direction from the government on how to fulfill the Association’s responsibilities domestically. As a member of the WFUNA, the Soviet Association was required to complete an annual report on its efforts to promote various ideas of the United Nations within the USSR. Through these reports, the WFUNA compelled the ASOON to annually celebrate International Human Rights Day, which marks the passage (and Soviet abstention from) the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As part of the effort to complete the annual reports, the Soviet faux NGO convened conferences, published books and held art competitions throughout the country on international human rights ideas. In fact, ASOON seems to have been the main official source of international human rights ideas within the Soviet Union. As the WFUNA annual report provided the impetus for human rights education of Soviet citizens, changes at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs led to a greater discussion of human rights within the Soviet bureaucracy. Under Stalin, the Ministry either ignored UN requests for information on human rights or answered these requests in isolation from other agencies. Similarly, it devised the Soviet policy on human rights without considering the implications of the treaties and propaganda for other ministries. As such the Universal Declaration remained unknown outside of a small circle of bureaucrats. As Khrushchev came to power, though, the Ministry devised its policies in communication with other ministries. This reveals a major change in Soviet foreign policy making, which has not been discussed by previous Cold War historians, who have focused only on security decision. The Ministry of Foreign Relations forwarded United Nations requests for information to the relevant agencies. For example, a UN question regarding

children's rights was forwarded to the Ministry of Health as well as the Ministry of Education. Importantly, these requests were not forwarded on their own, but with copies of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as drafts of future human rights texts. Through this, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs not only disseminated human rights documents, but was requesting other government officials to consider their policies in terms of human rights.

As mentioned above, Soviet human rights diplomacy also revealed heretofore overlooked aspects of Soviet relations with the other Warsaw Pact states. Particularly under Khrushchev, these countries held achieved levels of influence in devising human rights diplomacy. The German Democratic Republic's Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized and led the meetings at which the Communist bloc devised a unified policy towards UNESCO, which included human rights issues. Within WFUNA, states like Poland advised the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs on how best to work with non-Warsaw Pact states within an NGO environment. The Soviets did not consistently dictate diplomatic programs and goals to Eastern Europe. Instead, East European states had certain parameters within which they could even assume leadership positions over the Soviet Union in devising a unified Warsaw bloc stance.

Suggestions for future research:

I hope to expand my project to include research to better capture the international effects of Soviet human rights diplomacy. In particular, I plan to continue my work at the United Nations Archive in Geneva in June 2008 to explore how the Soviets influenced United Nations human rights proposals and policies. I will also be including archival publications from the United States, the United Kingdom and France to measure Soviet impact on their human rights policies and the perceived Soviet impact on the developing world regarding this issue. My research to date has revealed Soviet goals within the human rights debates and efforts to achieve them, but in order to measure their success I must search outside the Soviet archives.

Particularly as more archival records become declassified, research on official human rights discourse and policies should be expanded not only to the Helsinki Accords, but also to 1977. Dissident researchers such as D. Thomas have indicated that the Helsinki Accords (1975), which bound the Soviet Union to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, changed the role human rights discourse played within the Soviet Union, leading to the triumph of the dissident movement and the dominance of more "Western" ideas regarding human rights over Soviet ideology. While quite probable, the Soviet state in these narratives is portrayed solely as an obstacle, with no agency in human rights discussions. Furthermore, the standard depiction of the battle between dissidents and officials ignores the fact that the dissidents were using terms similar to those of the officials—"human rights," "freedom of information," "freedom of assembly." These were not solely the weapons of the dissidents, they were also the tools of the officials. After Helsinki, though, the 1977 Soviet constitution greatly expanded the rights and obligations of its citizens. Although its origins were not explicitly stated, the constitution included the rights enumerated not only the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), but also the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966).

Recommendations for US Policy:

My research shows that even hypocritical propaganda and participation in human rights discourse can have long-term effects on policies. The Soviets may have been insincere in their negotiations, but the propaganda surrounding the ideas provided the legitimacy needed to make the ideas strong weapons against the Soviet state. Furthermore, Russians have recently link of “human rights” exclusively negative freedoms (freedom from censorship, freedom from arbitrary arrest) in recent polls. This is a development that has happened only in the last couple of decades. That said, human rights in the Soviet context was not limited to economic rights, but did include highly limited political rights and freedoms, at least rhetorically. The Soviets did not, as many Americans and even Marxists do, divide rights into positive and negative rights, but viewed them in a hierarchy. The language of a rights hierarchy would better resonate with those fighting for human rights in Russia today and focus the debate on priorities within human rights and away from whether the concept is alien.