

**To what extent was the Helsinki Accords of 1975 a victory
for the USSR?**

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Section 1: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This study will investigate the extent to which the Helsinki Accords of 1975 could be interpreted as a victory for the Soviet Union. The first source I have selected for detailed analysis is a survey drafted in 1977 by Max Ralis.¹ This source is particularly relevant to the investigation because it provides an overview of Soviet citizens' knowledge and attitudes regarding the Helsinki Accords. The second source I have selected for detailed analysis is a contemporary novel, *The Cold War* by John Lewis Gaddis.² It is particularly relevant as it seeks to provide a holistic interpretation of the entire conflict.

On the first source, valuable information can be gathered regarding how the Soviet government presented the Helsinki Accord to the domestic population and to what degree was it accepted by the people. It provides a reflection of the Soviet population's first reaction to the Helsinki Act. The opinions of the surveyees are not influenced by hindsight, making the source reliable and valuable. The source was presented at an academic conference, therefore, facts listed in the survey would have been subjected to peer review. Nevertheless, the source does contain limitations for this particular investigation. The author of the paper worked for Radio Free Europe, an American sponsored radio station, used as an anti- soviet propaganda tool in Eastern Europe, which means the author's viewpoint could be potentially biased. The survey was conducted upon only 301 Soviet citizens who travelled to the West. Not only is this a small

¹ Max Ralis, "Soviet Citizens and The Helsinki Agreement on Security and Cooperation in Europe: Awareness, Sources of Information, Attitudes," *The Sixth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences San Francisco*, (1977)

² John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War* (Penguin Group, 2005).

sample of data but due to Soviet travel restrictions, only individuals who are ideologically sound are allowed to leave the country. Therefore, the survey is not a reflection of the voice of the Soviet population. Finally, the paper was written in 1977, this limits the scope of investigation as it does not cover the long term influences of the Paris Peace Accords in 1980s when the Eastern bloc opposition emerged.

On the second source, its origin is extremely valuable to this investigation. Gaddis is a professor at Yale University and renowned expert on the Cold War. The book was published in 2006 which meant it had access to newly opened Soviet Archives. This access to a wider range of sources counters the limitations of the selected primary sources. The purpose of the source is to provide academic history of the entire Cold War period, allowing one to gain a holistic understanding of the long term impacts of the Helsinki Accords by making us of hindsight. Nonetheless, the source does contain limitations in relation to this investigation. The content of the book only covers Helsinki Accords briefly. The purpose of Gaddis' book is to provide a holistic overview of the Cold War for the general public, therefore, he does not delve into the specifics of the Accords within the book. Furthermore, Gaddis is a leading post-revisionist historian, his academic interpretation of the entire conflict may have coloured his interpretation of the impact of the Helsinki Accords. Gaddis effectively views the Cold War as an inevitable struggle between the two superpowers due to conflicting ideology.

Section 2: The Investigation

This investigation aims to explore the extent to which the Helsinki Accords of 1975 could be interpreted as a victory for the USSR. The Helsinki Accords of 1975 was a historical landmark in human rights legislation, consisting of three main sections, designed to enhance security and cooperation in Europe.³ In the immediate aftermath of the signing of the treaty, both Soviets and Americans thought this was a geopolitical and social victory for the USSR. However, historians whom were able to observe the runup of events till the collapse of the USSR would strongly object. In the long term, it had many unexpected consequences, such as the mobilisation of democratic movements in Eastern Europe.

When examining the view of the Soviet Union during the publishing of the Helsinki Accords, the act was seen by many as a geopolitical victory for the USSR because it gave them legitimacy over the Baltic States. The soviets believed Basket I would “recognize and guarantee their rights and perquisites as a superpower.”⁴ It granted recognition of post WWII borders as being inviolable, as well as de facto legitimacy towards Soviet hegemony in Eastern and Central Europe. Victor Sebestyen argued that the USSR “hailed the Helsinki Accords as a masterstroke of diplomacy.”⁵ The USSR hoped that this Act would prevent the West from interfering in internal politics in socialist countries, solidifying USSR rule in satellite states permanently. This

³ "International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - ohchr." Accessed February 2, 2017. <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx>.

⁴ James E. Cronin, *Global Rules: America, Britain and a Disordered World*. (Yale: Yale University Press, 2014.)

⁵ Victor Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire*. (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2009)

makes it easier for the Soviets to end future “potential Prague Springs.”⁶ In the short term, there seemed to be a lack of consequence. Brezhnev strongly believed that the USSR had the freedom and discretion to interpret the legislation they sign. Minister of Foreign Affairs, Gromyko famously stated, “We will be masters of our own house.”⁷ From their perspective, the rights listed in the accords were already overtly guaranteed in the Soviet constitution and its satellite countries. Whether this was carried into effect was another question. The Soviets appeared to concede by agreeing to Basket III but they publically admitted non compliance with the treaty from the start.⁸

Sources within the American State Department and political circles agreed with the notion that the Helsinki Act was a soviet victory. Americans criticized Ford and Kissinger over the Helsinki Accords, it was seen as a tacit acceptance of the USSR’s domination in Eastern Europe and a failure to hardline communists. Helmut Sonnenfeldt, Kissinger’s Aide, was mentioned on record, the Ford administration hoped to bring an end to the “inorganic and unnatural relationship between USSR and Eastern Europe.”⁹ However, this is a candidate recorded comment, it is a reflection of Kissinger’s attitudes towards Helsinki Accords and not of the American foreign policy establishment. Daniel C. Thomas argues that the Act was seen by Americans as being “a concession to Soviet totalitarianism and regional hegemony.”¹⁰ It was published on the New York Times that “nothing signed in Helsinki will in any way save

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ J.P.D. Dunbabin, *The Cold War*. (Taylor & Francis, 2008)

⁸ Ralis, “Soviet Citizens and The Helsinki Agreement on Security and Cooperation in Europe: Awareness, Sources of Information, Attitudes.”

⁹ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Touchstone, 2000).

¹⁰ Daniel C. Thomas, “The Helsinki accords and political change in Eastern Europe,” *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (Cambridge University Press, 1999)

courageous free thinkers in the Soviet empire from prosecution or inhumane treatment.”¹¹ It was believed that human rights situation in the USSR only improved by 2% after the implementation of the Helsinki Act.¹² However, both primary documents only reflect the immediate opinion of the public. It is not sufficient to use these sources to identify whether the Helsinki Act was a Soviet victory in the long term. As such, the Helsinki Act was initially interpreted by many as Soviet victory. They underestimated the potential of the Helsinki Act and its socio-political effects in Eastern Europe and the USSR.

Historians who have access to hindsight, observed the events which unfolded in 1980s and countered previous interpretations of the Helsinki Act being a Soviet victory. The treaty initially began as an effort by the Kremlin to legitimize Soviet control in Eastern Europe, instead, “the Helsinki process became the basis for legitimising opposition to Soviet rule.”¹³ Helsinki became a “legal and moral trap.”¹⁴ They were now opened to being judged through “universal principles of justice, rooted in international law, independent of Marxist Leninist ideology.”¹⁵ However, Gaddis placed too much emphasis on Basket III of the Act as an intended trap by the Allies. After detailed analysis of primary documents, such sentiments were not reflected. “The effects were indirect and very much unanticipated.”¹⁶ Western private organisations, such as Amnesty International, began exploring the potential of the Helsinki Act as a legitimate legal framework for the furthering of human rights. The establishment of the CSCE and increasing

¹¹ *New York Times*, August 1, 1975.

¹² Ralis, “Soviet Citizens and The Helsinki Agreement on Security and Cooperation in Europe: Awareness, Sources of Information, Attitudes.”

¹³ Gaddis, *The Cold War*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Cronin, *Global Rules*.

congressional participation further pressurized the USSR and Eastern regimes to comply with the Helsinki Act. During Congresswoman Fenwick's diplomatic trip to the USSR and Romania in 1975, private citizens strongly emphasised for the need for the West to transform the enforcement of the Helsinki Act into reality.¹⁷ However, Fenwick was probably given selective access to vocal, liberal leaning minority groups of private citizens. Due to the highly managed nature of state visits, any opinions she was exposed to at the time is highly unlikely to have been representative of the Romanian people. Historians such as Daniel C. Thomas furthered the argument by proposing that the societal effects of the Helsinki Act played a role in the demise of the USSR. Anatoly Dobrynin argued that the Helsinki Accords "were a nail in the coffin of Communism"¹⁸ Therefore, the Helsinki Accords could be seen as a tremendous political loss for the USSR. They lost sovereign control over the definition of human rights and geopolitical sovereignty. This was far from achieving their stated aims of securing sovereign control over the inner and outer Empire.

Not only were the Soviets held accountable by the international community but also by Russian civil societies and movements in Eastern Europe. Effectively, the Helsinki Act encouraged societal forces in Eastern Europe to challenge regimes which had "long monopolised social and political space."¹⁹ Progress in Eastern Europe was observed firstly in 1977, when Charter 77 was signed. The trial of the Czechoslovak rock band, Plastic People, encouraged intellectuals to produce a highly legalistic petition to turn criticisms of the treatment of the

¹⁷ Dante B. Fascell, "The Helsinki Accord: A Case Study," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, Vol. 442 (March, 1979)

¹⁸ Sebestyen. *Revolution 1989*.

¹⁹ Thomas, "The Helsinki accords and political change in Eastern Europe."

Plastic people into a concerted political attack on the regime. One might argue that the Plastic People existed on their own as a form of resistance but the Helsinki Act was the mechanism which catalysed the resistance, allowing it to become more overt and political. Progress was also observed in the USSR in May 1976, when the Moscow Helsinki Group was established. This further led to the establishment of *Public Group to Promote Observance of the Helsinki Accords* in other communist states. All of the groups above did not need to demand for new rights, they only had to claim freedoms which were already enshrined in legislation, giving activists more legitimacy and reason, forcing communist parties to be defensive. Whilst passive resistance always existed within the Eastern Bloc and the USSR, Miklos Haraszti proposed, “Helsinki gave us a stick we could beat the regime with constantly.”²⁰

Initially, both Soviets and Americans viewed the Helsinki Act as a Soviet Victory. The USSR thought they could extend geopolitical sovereignty in their inner and outer empires by securing postwar borders in Eastern Europe, whilst imposing sovereign control over the definition of human rights to avoid compromises the Act seemingly entailed. Ironically, unbeknown to the Soviets, in ratifying the Act, they lost sovereign control over the definition of human rights to both American activists and indigenous democratic actors. In the immediate aftermath of the ratification of the Helsinki Accords, neither the Americans or the Soviets had predicted such events. The Act itself acted as a catalyst to pressurizing the USSR to be held accountable for its human rights abuses, subjecting them to a universal and narrow definition of

²⁰ Ibid.

human rights. Ultimately, causing the USSR to lose sovereignty and control over their outer empire by giving legitimacy to indigenous democratic actors.

Section 3: The Reflection

During my exploration into the extent to which the Helsinki Accords of 1975 were a Soviet victory, I was able to cross reference sources using the triangulation method, to ensure the reliability of the sources. I used secondary sources to gain a holistic perspective upon the Helsinki Accords, with the use of hindsight. With the acquired knowledge from secondary sources, I referred to primary sources and explored whether the opinions expressed by political actors at the time of ratification, corresponded with later views of historians and individuals as time progressed. As such, I have come to understand that historical investigation is a continual negotiation between different sources, in order for historians to produce a narrative which appears to be the most accurate.

The investigation has also highlighted the historical challenges one may face when acquiring historical knowledge. Firstly, a historian's reliance on primary sources can pose as a problem. Primary sources could potentially be biased, due to its cultural and political context, it is also not processed or verified. For example, in the survey conducted by Max Ralis²¹, he worked at Radio Free Europe. This would mean the primary source might not provide a full picture of Soviet beliefs, as his interpretation of the collected data might be influenced by his passionate and fundamental political beliefs. Secondly, one may never gain objective knowledge from historical sources. When comparing primary and secondary sources, I became aware of the fact that even secondary sources are reliant on primary sources to gain knowledge. Given that the

²¹ Ralis, "Soviet Citizens and The Helsinki Agreement on Security and Cooperation in Europe: Awareness, Sources of Information, Attitudes."

primary sources I have come across are rather problematic, it illustrates the secondary sources are relatively more reliable. However, even then, secondary sources are only an attempt by an individual historian to come to an interpretation of what happened based on the accounts of highly unreliable primary sources.

Nonetheless, history revolves around personal interpretation and subjective knowledge. Historians will always be required to interpret primary sources in order to form their own judgement and opinion. However, one should never accept a historical source as it is. It is only after following a thorough consideration of the positionality of the source, that one can engage in historical enquiry. By taking into account as many external factors, being aware of the context, one can produce a more holistic conclusion. As such, historical investigation is not about seeking objective truth, it is a fluid and continual refinement of understanding.

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