

Report on Archival Research Visit to OSA

Agnieszka Kubal, Associate Professor, UCL

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INTRODUCTION

This research project aims to map the human rights movement in Poland during the 1970s and 1980s. The study focuses on clandestine organizations, public actors, and activist legal professionals who translated everyday abuses into human rights language, thereby creating an infrastructure of knowledge. By smuggling publications to 'the West,' these groups made the knowledge of these violations widespread within Polish society, effectively vernacularizing human rights concepts and ideas. This report details the outcomes of a research visit to the Open Society Archives (OSA) in Budapest, where I consulted a variety of materials to deepen the understanding of these dynamics.

ORIGINAL PLANS FOR RESEARCH

The original research plan involved utilizing the OSA to create a comprehensive picture of the transnational spread of human rights in and from Poland. This was intended to conceptualize and empirically expand on the 'boomerang' effect, a theory originally coined by Daniel Thomas. The aim was to consult OSA holdings related to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) materials concerning Poland, which were broadcast during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Specifically, the plan was to analyse scenarios of broadcasts, recordings, reports, and administrative records to gain insights into RFE's efforts to reach audiences behind the Iron Curtain. This would include examining the impact of these broadcasts on the Polish human rights movement and the broader transnational human rights discourse.

FILES CONSULTED

During my visit to the OSA, I consulted a wide array of materials, including:

- **Scenarios of RFE broadcasts:** Detailed plans and scripts for radio broadcasts directed at Polish audiences.
- **Scripts of broadcasts:** Actual recordings of broadcasts that were transmitted into Poland.
- **IHF materials:** Documents detailing the operations and strategies of International Helsinki Federation (including local offices).
- **Research materials produced by RFE staff:** Studies, reports, briefs, and analyses on political, social, and cultural developments in Eastern and Central Europe connected with human rights, including biographical files of dissidents.

- **Original files smuggled by local human rights activists to the West:** Transcripts, reports, research evidence of human rights abuse prepared by local Helsinki actors and shared with RFE journalists.
- **Samizdat materials:** Underground publications produced by the Helsinki network in Poland, human rights activists, and dissidents in Polish and English.

The above present a cross-section of files from:

- HU OSA 300-50 Polish Unit,
- HU OSA 300-55 Polish Underground Publications Unit
- HU OSA 300-85 Samizdat Archives
- HU OSA 300-120 Western Press Archives
- HU OSA 206-6 The International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights Movement

ACHIEVEMENTS

The research at OSA yielded significant insights and results, contributing substantially to the understanding of the human rights movement in Poland. The key findings are detailed below.

1. Discovery of Maria Jedynak's Case

A poignant vignette emerged through the story of Maria Jedynak, whose husband, a grassroots Solidarity dissident, was arrested and charged with treason. Her letter to the Minister of Internal Affairs was found in both Polish Helsinki Committee reports and original samizdat publications at OSA. This case exemplifies how ordinary citizens' experiences of repression were translated into the language of human rights. Maria Jedynak's letter, rich with personal anguish and appeals to justice, became a powerful document that human rights organizations used to highlight the broader issues of political repression and legal abuse in Poland.

2. Human Rights Mobilization Analysis

The research revealed the extensive efforts of human rights organizations in Poland, which operated both openly and clandestinely. The Polish Helsinki Committee, for example, meticulously coded abuses in human rights language, using international legal frameworks to frame their reports. These reports followed the structure of human rights documents like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), demonstrating a sophisticated approach to documenting and disseminating information on human rights violations. This strategy not only provided a structured method for reporting but also ensured that these reports could be easily understood and utilized by international bodies and media.

3. Role of RFE/RL in Vernacularizing Human Rights

RFE/RL played a critical role in popularizing human rights language in Poland. The broadcasts extensively covered reports on human rights abuses, contributing to the vernacularisation of human rights concepts. This was evidenced by the extensive referencing and discussion of Polish Helsinki Committee reports in RFE broadcasts, amplifying their impact on both local and international audiences. RFE's programming often included detailed accounts of human rights violations, interviews with activists, and discussions on the importance of human rights, making these concepts more accessible and understandable to the Polish public.

4. Professionalization of Human Rights Advocacy

The findings suggest that the professionalization of human rights advocacy in Poland began in the 1980s, rather than the 1990s as previously thought. The continuity in mobilizing human rights across 1989 indicates that human rights were not merely a legal 'transplant' in the region but had deep-rooted local origins. This professionalization is evident in the structured and strategic approaches adopted by human rights organizations, such as the Polish Helsinki Committee. These organizations not only documented abuses but also engaged in advocacy, legal assistance, and public education, laying the groundwork for a robust human rights movement.

5. Impact of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act

The 1975 Helsinki Final Act played a pivotal role in shaping the human rights discourse in Poland. The research highlighted how the Act's commitment to human rights was disseminated and utilized by Polish human rights lawyers and activists to legitimize their efforts and reports, further underscoring the transnational spread of human rights norms. The Helsinki Final Act provided a framework and a source of legitimacy for local human rights efforts, enabling activists to frame their struggles within a broader international context. This international backing was crucial for the credibility and effectiveness of their work.

DETAILED FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

RFE/RL Broadcasts: Content and Impact

The scenarios and recordings of RFE broadcasts were particularly illuminating. These broadcasts often included detailed reports on human rights abuses, interviews with dissidents and human rights activists, and discussions on international human rights norms and conventions. The impact of these broadcasts was multifaceted:

- **Raising Awareness:** The broadcasts helped raise awareness about human rights abuses among the Polish public. By providing information that was otherwise censored or underreported in local media, RFE played a crucial role in informing the public about the extent and nature of government repression.

- **Mobilizing Action:** The broadcasts also served as a call to action, encouraging listeners to become involved in the human rights movement. By highlighting successful acts of resistance and solidarity, RFE inspired individuals to take part in the struggle for human rights.
- **Connecting with the International Community:** By referencing international human rights norms and conventions, RFE helped Polish listeners understand their situation within a global context. This connection to the broader international human rights community provided a sense of solidarity and support, which was crucial for sustaining the movement.

Professionalization and Strategic Approaches

The materials consulted at OSA provided evidence of the sophisticated and strategic approaches adopted by Polish human rights organizations. For example, the Polish Helsinki Committee's reports were meticulously structured, following the format of international human rights documents. This not only made the reports more credible and authoritative but also ensured that they could be easily used by international bodies and media.

The professionalization of human rights advocacy was further evidenced by the training and development programs undertaken by these organizations. They provided legal assistance, education, and support to victims of human rights abuses, helping to build a strong and resilient human rights community. This professionalization was a key factor in the success and sustainability of the human rights movement in Poland.

Transnational Networks and the Boomerang Effect

The research at OSA also highlighted the importance of transnational networks in the human rights movement. The 'boomerang effect,' whereby local activists leverage international support to put pressure on their own governments, was clearly evident in the case of Poland. Human rights organizations in Poland actively engaged with international bodies, NGOs, and media, using these connections to amplify their efforts and gain support.

The role of RFE/RL in this transnational network was particularly significant. By providing a platform for Polish activists to share their stories and reports, RFE helped to ensure that the international community was aware of the situation in Poland. This international attention, in turn, put pressure on the Polish government to address human rights abuses.

EXPERIENCE AT THE OPEN SOCIETY ARCHIVES

The welcoming environment at the OSA significantly contributed to the success of this research visit. The archivists – Robert Parnica, Judit Hegedus, Mark Laszlo-Herbert were exceptionally helpful in selecting sources and guiding the research process. The administrative team headed by Mrs Katalin Gadaros in particular, provided a warm and supportive atmosphere, ensuring that I had access to the necessary materials and assisting with any challenges that arose. Their

expertise and dedication were invaluable in expanding the scope of the research and in uncovering critical documents.

Networking with other fellows from various parts of the world was a highlight of the stay, enabling me to look beyond my network bubble as a sociologist. The weekly seminars were extremely enriching, offering a platform to see the diverse research being conducted by others and to gain inspiration from their work. These seminars were a highlight of the visit, providing both intellectual stimulation and a sense of community.

Conversations with my mentor, Dr Ioana Macrea-Toma, were particularly influential in conceptualizing, framing, and interpreting the material located in the archives. Her insights and guidance were instrumental in refining the research approach and in understanding the broader context of the findings. Additionally, discussions with other researchers, such as Professor Istvan Rev, provided valuable perspectives and deepened the analytical framework of the study.

CONCLUSION

The research visit to the OSA was immensely fruitful, providing a deeper understanding of the human rights movement in Poland during the 1970s and 1980s. The materials consulted and the findings obtained have significantly contributed to the overall project, highlighting the crucial role of transnational networks and local actors in vernacularizing and advocating for human rights. The support from the OSA archives and the fellowship was invaluable in achieving these insights.

The detailed examination of RFE/RL broadcasts, the professionalization of human rights advocacy, and the impact of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act all underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of the human rights movement in Poland. This research has provided a richer and more nuanced understanding of how human rights concepts were internalized, localized, and mobilized in Poland, contributing to the broader field of human rights history and transnational activism. The welcoming environment and supportive community at the OSA, along with the enriching seminars and mentoring, were key factors in the success of this research visit, making it a truly rewarding and inspiring experience.

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