

INTRODUCTION TO THE WORK OF HELSINKI WATCH

No one would have predicted the succession of miracles that transformed Eastern Europe in 1989. As the world watched with incredulity, European communism collapsed in one country after another -- Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and, at year's end, Romania. Communist systems that were considered immutable capitulated with hardly a struggle, the result of popular revolutions that were, with the glaring exception of Romania, astonishingly peaceful. Ordinary people, hundreds of thousands of them, rose up in mass demonstrations against their Soviet-imposed communist leaders. There is poetic irony in the fact that the downfall of communism in Eastern Europe was brought about by the very masses whose interest the communists purported to serve and whose allegiance they were unable to win. Emboldened by Mr. Gorbachev's renunciation of the "Brezhnev Doctrine," by his assurances that the Soviet Union would not interfere in their internal policies, the new governments of Eastern Europe committed themselves to multiparty elections and, in another irony of the era, quickly outdistanced the Soviet Union in their reforms.

Early in 1989 Helsinki Watch shifted the focus of its human rights monitoring to those countries that were most recalcitrant in introducing democratic reforms. Poland and Hungary, countries in which we have had a well-developed program of human rights work for many years, were no longer at the forefront of our activities in 1989 because human rights abuses in those countries were negligible. Czechoslovakia, on the other hand, consumed a major part of our attention in 1989: the "velvet revolution" in Czechoslovakia did not occur until late in the year and for most of 1989, when police repression was at its strongest and most desperate, Helsinki Watch kept up an intensive program of missions, reports, news bulletins and trial observations aimed at protecting those whose steadfast championship of human rights inspired the changes that ultimately ensued.

Helsinki Watch in 1989 also intensified its work in Bulgaria and East Germany, where, thanks to the winds of change that were enveloping the region, there were unique opportunities to send missions and gather information. In October, Helsinki Watch, together with the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF), was able to send its first official mission to Bulgaria. So quick was the pace of change in Bulgaria that the mission witnessed what was to become the first of a series of demonstrations that, just a few weeks later, brought about the downfall of communist leader Todor Zhivkov.

After the December revolution in Romania, which provided an unprecedented opportunity to investigate abuses there, a Helsinki Watch mission was planned: it arrived in Bucharest at the earliest possible time, on the day that the airport reopened.

At year's end, with a radically changed landscape in most of the countries that have claimed our attention over the years, Helsinki Watch began planning its activities for 1990. We will, of course, continue our traditional monitoring of human rights abuses in countries where such abuses remain and are even increasing, such as Turkey and Yugoslavia, and in the Soviet Union, where problems

persist. We will continue monitoring all the countries in the region where human rights abuses may continue or recur. We will continue our efforts to strengthen the existing network of Helsinki Committees, East and West, and to document and encourage the development of civil society in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, a process essential in the building of democracies. We also see opportunities for new types of activities in countries where reforms are now under way: documenting the abuses of the past; observing trials of past abusers to assure that they conform to the norms of international law; helping in the development of fair electoral conditions and procedures; and assisting in the drafting of new constitutions and new legislation.

In much of Eastern Europe there has been little or no experience with democracy. The new governments are fragile, sometimes compromised, and generally inexperienced. The security police may be operating secretly, autonomously. The possibility of a coup or a military takeover is always present. Beset by economic and social problems of great magnitude, by the resurgence of long-suppressed ethnic hostilities and yearnings for independence, there is a danger that even those governments with the best of intentions may succumb to pressures beyond their control.

As before, Helsinki Watch will be there -- to observe, to report and to help. The struggle for human rights in Eastern Europe is far from over. To the contrary, it is just beginning.

Jeri Laber

Executive Director

BULGARIA

The leading human rights problems in Bulgaria during 1989 concerned its ethnic Turkish minority, which continued its resistance to the government's policies of assimilation. In June, following days of demonstrations by ethnic Turks against the government's pressures, thousands of ethnic Turks were expelled or fled from the country. At the same time, independent groups promoting human rights, environmental and minority issues emerged in Bulgarian society. Helsinki Watch made contact with activists in these groups and in the course of the year was able to strengthen and expand such relationships.

Helsinki Watch devoted considerable attention to the situation of ethnic Turks in Bulgaria. Among the human rights violations committed by the Bulgarian authorities during the period of demonstrations and expulsions in late May and June are police and army brutality against peaceful demonstrators, restriction of movement, deportation, deprivation of property and family separation. At the time of the expulsions, Ted Zang met with Bulgarians in Paris who had come to protest against repression and then traveled to Turkey to collect testimony from refugees. The findings were published in "Destroying Ethnic Identity: The Expulsion of the Bulgarian Turks," released in October. An article by Zang in the July 24 Christian Science Monitor examined the link between Bulgaria's expulsion of the Turks and the country's domestic stirrings for reforms.

A CSCE (Helsinki process) meeting on the environment in Sofia in October presented Helsinki Watch with a unique opportunity to visit. Joining with the International Helsinki Federation for

Human Rights (IHF), we sent a delegation that included Jonathan Fanton, Jeri Laber and Zang. For the first time in Bulgaria, a nongovernmental delegation held meetings with officials on human rights issues. In addition, the mission members met with independent human rights and environmental activists and traveled to southern Bulgaria to investigate discrimination against and repression of the Turkish and Pomak minorities.

Two editions of "News from Bulgaria" were published in 1989. In January, we reported on government crackdowns on human rights and environmental groups; and in May, we reported a series of arrests, exiles and expulsions of members of newly-formed human rights organizations.

CZECHOSLOVAKIA

The "Velvet Revolution" in Czechoslovakia in November resulted in the resignation of the Communist Party leadership and the appointment of Vaclav Havel, playwright and human rights activist, as President. Until the November demonstrations, Czechoslovak officials sternly resisted the movements toward open societies that were emerging in neighboring countries. On November 28, the Party relinquished its monopoly on political power. Multiparty elections are currently scheduled for June 1990.

Helsinki Watch focused considerable attention on Czechoslovakia during 1989, sending missions, publishing reports, issuing press releases to announce forthcoming trials of human rights activists and sending observers to political trials.

In January, Helsinki Watch released "Prison Conditions in Czechoslovakia," based on an investigation by Herman Schwartz. The report described unsanitary living conditions, insufficient food, and forced hard labor by inmates in unsafe working environments. It has been translated into Czech by the Czechoslovak Helsinki Committee.

In March, Jeri Laber participated in an International Helsinki Federation (IHF) mission to Czechoslovakia to meet with officials and independent groups and to attend the trials of Ivan Jirous and Jiri Tichy. The Czechoslovak officials canceled the scheduled meetings with the Helsinki representatives because Jiri Hajek, Chairman of the Czechoslovak Helsinki Committee and former Foreign Minister under Alexander Dubcek, was in the delegation. Jeri Laber wrote about this trip in "Fighting Back in Prague," in the April 27 The New York Review of Books.

Janet Fleischman, joined by Hester Minnema of the IHF, traveled to Prague, Bratislava and Brno in June to collect information on new independent groups that had been the targets of the year's crackdowns. In August, we published "Toward Civil Society: Independent Initiatives in Czechoslovakia." Two articles by Fleischman -- "Czechs Chilled by Beijing Spring," The Chicago Tribune, July 1, and "A Journey to Absurdistan," The Nation, September 18 -- were also based on this mission.

In June, Helsinki Watch and the IHF published "Human Rights in Czechoslovakia," a report written in Prague by the Czechoslovak Helsinki Committee.

In September, David Kennedy traveled to Prague to attend the trial of Sasha Vondra, a leading human rights monitor. Jeri Laber was again in Czechoslovakia in October where she attended another

political trial. She and members of the Czechoslovak Helsinki Committee were detained by the police in an effort to prevent their meeting.

Three editions of "News from Czechoslovakia" appeared in 1989. In April we reported on nine political trials since February and six pending cases; in September, we reported on demonstrations throughout the country on the 21st anniversary of the Soviet invasion and on a subsequent crackdown by the authorities; and in November, we identified political prisoners still incarcerated and provided information about recent releases.

POLAND

Helsinki Watch sent a mission to Poland in June to investigate prison conditions as a follow up to our visit of June 1987 and a subsequent prison conditions report. The June 1989 visit was at the invitation of the Polish government. While in Poland, Herman Schwartz and Joanna Weschler visited 15 prisons and three jails. They found that many of the abusive conditions described in Helsinki Watch's earlier report had been corrected and that the report had played an important role in the changes. In addition, Professor Schwartz visited three pre-trial detainees in Gdansk prison, two of whom had been held longer than two years. The Helsinki Watch delegation expressed its concern about prolonged pre-trial detention to the Minister of Justice and upon return to the United States, filed an amicus curiae brief on behalf of the detainees that was instrumental in their release in October.

ROMANIA

Until the final days of 1989, Romania remained resistant to change, and the Ceausescu dictatorship seemed immune to the influence of the massive citizens' uprisings in neighboring states. In late December, however, demonstrations that started in Timisoara and spread to Bucharest, and the severe violence used to put down these demonstrations, resulted in Ceausescu's ouster.

On December 31, a Helsinki Watch team left for Romania to discuss with the new leadership and the emerging human rights community the importance of human rights considerations during the early stages of the new government. Jonathan Fanton and Jeri Laber were joined in Bucharest by Karl von Schwarzenberg of the IHF. They met with President Ion Iliescu and other government officials and also with the newly formed Group for Social Dialogue and the Romanian Helsinki Committee. Helsinki Watch stressed the need to take immediate steps to investigate the abuses of the Ceausescu era. Janet Fleischman and David Nachman traveled to Timisoara to investigate the reports of mass killings during the revolution and then to Bucharest. Helsinki Watch has prepared an ongoing Romanian program for 1990 that will include a representative in Bucharest, fact-finding missions and trial observations.

Earlier in 1989, Helsinki Watch addressed the problems of the Hungarian minority in Romania in a report, "Destroying Ethnic Identity: The Hungarians of Romania." The report points to increasing restrictions of the Hungarian language and threats to Hungarian schools, churches and broadcasting, all of which undermine the Hungarians' cultural identity. Information for this report was collected by Janet Fleischman in Hungary the preceding summer. Efforts to protect the Hungarian minority will be a major

theme of Helsinki Watch's work in Romania in the post-Ceausescu era.

TURKEY

Helsinki Watch continues to receive reports of routine torture in Turkish police stations; hundreds of political prisoners remain in prison, many convicted for peaceful acts or for expressions of opinion; prison conditions are inhumane; journalists continue to be prosecuted for what they have written (400 journalists in 183 cases in 1989); demonstrators are detained and arrested for engaging in peaceful demonstrations; and the Kurdish minority in Eastern Turkey continues to be denied its ethnic identity and is caught between Kurdish separatist guerrillas and the Turkish armed forces and often abused by both.

In March, Helsinki Watch sent a fact-finding mission of Herman Schwartz, Kenneth Schoen and Jeri Laber to Turkey to investigate conditions in Turkish prisons. The team did not gain entry to the prisons but took extensive testimony from former inmates of jails and prisons throughout the country. The findings were reported in "Prison Conditions in Turkey." Since the publication, Helsinki Watch has been talking with Turkish authorities about arranging a follow-up prison investigation in which access to the prisons would be provided.

Helsinki Watch released in March its report on freedom of expression in Turkey, "Paying the Price." Based on a mission to Turkey in October 1988 by Lois Whitman and Tom Froncek, the report covers freedom of the press and censorship with regard to authors, filmmakers and musicians. In the report Helsinki Watch called on the United States to exert its influence with Turkish authorities to improve protection of freedom of expression. An article by Whitman and Froncek reviews the case of Fatma Yazici, an editor in Turkey facing years of imprisonment for publishing articles on such taboo topics as the Helsinki Watch report on the Kurds, appeared in the International Herald Tribune on February 25-26.

Helsinki Watch issued a News from Turkey in July on "Eight Cases of Torture," based on testimony of torture victims gathered by Jeri Laber during the March mission. Laber again addressed torture in Turkey in "Cruel and Unusual Punishment," in the July 20 New York Review of Books, the article was reprinted in part in the Turkish newspaper Hurriyet on August 7, 1989. Helsinki Watch received a significant amount of press coverage on its reports and missions and has compiled a 40-page "press package" of the articles and editorials published about them in Turkey.

In a November News from Turkey Helsinki Watch reported on the announcement by the Turkish authorities of new measures aimed at improving prison conditions and at reducing the practice of torture by allowing earlier access to a lawyer and shorter periods of detention. Helsinki Watch has expressed concern that the new measures are not being generally applied and that others are not yet in effect.

UNITED STATES

Within Human Rights Watch, Helsinki Watch has the responsibility for monitoring the United States. As in previous year, we focused primarily on U.S. policies affecting freedom of movement of people and ideas. In June, Helsinki Watch published "Detained, Denied,

Deported: Asylum Seekers in the United States," a 105 page report written by Karin Konig. Later in the year, representatives of Helsinki Watch and of the other Watch Committees took part in a training program of the Immigration and Naturalization Service to inform the Service's "adjudicators" of human rights conditions in various countries that produce substantial numbers of asylum applicants.

Also during 1989, the Prison Project began an investigation of prison conditions in the United States with a report anticipated late in 1990.

USSR

Helsinki Watch sent a delegation of legal scholars, James Busuttil, George Fletcher, Theodor Meron and Louise Shelley, to the Soviet Union in January to investigate legal reform and human rights under perestroika. They conducted interviews with officials, legal scholars and independent activists in Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev. The mission's report, "Toward the Rule of Law: Legal Reform and Human Rights in the Soviet Union Under Perestroika," was released at the end of the year.

Before the March 26 elections, Helsinki Watch released "USSR: Human Rights Under Glasnost," which describes efforts by the authorities to obstruct the campaigns of opposition candidates, the new phenomenon of short-term detention rather than long prison sentences for political activists and the set-backs to individual freedoms embodied in new legislation.

Helsinki Watch issued a lengthy News from the USSR in May that includes a report on the April massacre of demonstrators in Georgia, an update on political prisoners and status reports on freedom of expression, assembly and movement.

In the course of the year, Helsinki Watch hosted many visiting Soviet citizens including Arkady Vaksberg, Soviet lawyer, member of Moscow Tribune; Lagle Parek, Estonian activist; Larissa Bogoraz and Lev Timofeyev, Moscow Helsinki Group; Vytautas Landsbergis, Chairman, "Sajudis;" Kostel Gendorf; Martin Abolins, Latvian activist; Academician Andrei Sakharov; Andrei Kutenikov, USA-Canada Institute; Peter Barenboim, Soviet-American Foundation; Valdis Steins, Latvian Popular Front; Boris Nazarov; Yuri Rozenbaum, Institute on State & Law; Yuri Feofanov; Sergei Grigoryants, editor of Glasnost magazine; Supreme Soviet deputies Kazimiras Uoka (Lithuania) and Mavrik Vulfsons (Latvia); Lithuanian activists Viktoras Petkus, Antanas Terletkas, and Igor Dashkavich.

Catherine Fitzpatrick traveled to the Soviet Union in July-August on a mission that focused on the criminal justice system. In November, Fitzpatrick and Aryeh Neier went to the Soviet Union where they observed demonstrations and several political trials. Neier published an article in the February 1, 1990 New York Review of Books on punishment for past human rights abuses that was based substantially on information gathered during this visit.

YUGOSLAVIA

Yugoslavia has by far the greatest number of political prisoners in Eastern Europe. Additional human rights problems have resulted from ethnic conflicts between national groups living in Yugoslavia.

A May News from Yugoslavia described the activities of independent groups in the various republics.

In October Helsinki Watch released a report, "Increasing Turbulence: Human Rights in Yugoslavia," based on a mission in December 1988 by M. Bernard Aidinoff and Ken Anderson.

In September Ken Anderson, joined by Hester Minnema of the IHF, went to the Kosovo region of Yugoslavia to investigate the ethnic dispute. Their report will be released in early 1990.