

The International League for the Rights of Man, Amnesty International, and the Changing Fate of Human Rights Activism from the 1940s through the 1970s

In the late 1940s, the International League for the Rights of Man greeted the newborn human rights system at the United Nations as a beacon of hope. Founded in the midst of the Second World War, the League had all along advocated worldwide safeguards for the protection of individuals. Confident that international relations were on the verge of a new era, its activists invested all their energies into supporting the development of international law and the establishment of supervisory mechanisms at the world organization. Roughly fifteen years later, however, the initial enthusiasm had largely dissipated. In 1966, Roger Baldwin, the League's director, reached a bleak conclusion: "If we look back on the 24 years of the League, the record shows an influential role at the United Nations, greater than that of any NGO, but even so small; [and] many interventions with governments, some successful and many not."¹

At around the same time, Amnesty International, founded in 1961, was struggling hard to survive. The organization's credibility was severely damaged by publicity surrounding its links to the British government and strife among the leadership.² Several national sections were about to collapse, and the overall growth of the international movement was subsiding. After prolonged preparatory work, the U.S. section was finally established in 1967 but faced years of frustration, lacking money, members, and dynamism. The "American operation," concluded Ivan Morris, one of the section's founders, in 1970, was "an unmitigated failure."³ By the end of the following decade, Amnesty International presented a completely different picture. In 1977 the organization was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, rising to worldwide recognition and fame. It had successfully spread knowledge about the plight of what it called "prisoners of conscience" and by means of a widely noticed campaign sparked a "rediscovery" of torture. At the same time, Amnesty's U.S. section saw a vast influx of new activists. Numbering a few thousand at the beginning of the 1970s, its membership soared to almost 100,000 by the end of the decade.

These three moments in the life of two non-governmental organizations, while providing only small glimpses into the evolution of human rights activism, suggest two important observations. First, both indicate the changing fate of private initiatives in this realm, illustrating how much the outreach and potential success of civil human rights engagement varied in different periods. Second, if variance was considerable, there is no easy explanation for it. Why did the League regard its postwar activities as largely futile, operating as it did in a period that historians have depicted as the

triumphal breakthrough of human rights on the international stage? Why did Amnesty International have so much difficulty getting started?⁴ And how could an enterprise that seemed doomed to failure in the late 1960s become a powerful international force only a decade later?

Even though non-governmental organizations can arguably be considered the most important driving force behind international human rights politics after the Second World War, historians have so far devoted scarce attention to them. Accounts by two protagonists of the human rights movement provide interesting background information.⁵ Several groundbreaking publications have elucidated important aspects of Amnesty International's history.⁶ Other organizations have attracted far less interest. A well-founded political science study provides a historical overview of the International Commission of Jurists.⁷ No similarly careful study exists on the International League for the Rights of Man or, for that matter, on the Anti-Slavery Society, the Watch Committees, and numerous other important NGOs. Little is yet known about the motivations of activists, the historical contexts in which their engagement unfolded, and the inner workings of organizations.

In providing an archive-based study of the International League and Amnesty International, both the International Secretariat and the U.S. section, I pursue three interrelated objectives in this essay. First, I aim to deepen our understanding of two important organizations, examining their institutional development and practices, their political projects, and their impact upon international relations. Second, I relate human rights engagement to more general developments in the history of both social movements and international NGOs.⁸ During the roughly four decades considered here, the trajectories of the League and Amnesty reflect significant trends in both areas. They testify to the historical distance that separated the elitist nature and lobbying approach of postwar NGOs from the fluid and publicly powerful protest of 1970s "new social movements." At the same time, they demonstrate the shifting opportunities as well as limits of civil activism in the international arena. Finally, I will suggest here a new interpretive framework that goes beyond narratives of international human rights history developed so far. Much of the early literature regarded the 1940s, particularly the establishment of an international regime at the United Nations, as a moment of crucial innovation. Several authors have framed these years as the beginning of a "human rights revolution" that during the following decades steadily gathered steam.⁹ Perhaps most significantly for the topic of this essay, William Korey's account of human rights organizations is also shaped along these lines, capturing the sense of organic growth in the image of the "Curious Grapevine."¹⁰ Other historians, by contrast, have emphasized the 1970s as a transformative period that saw the "real" emergence of human rights in international relations.¹¹ While some have tended to belittle the importance of the postwar years, others argue that the prominence human rights achieved in 1970s politics eclipsed earlier stirrings. Still others simply have not attempted to trace connections between the two phases.

This essay attempts to transcend these opposed views by delineating a more complex, and less clear-cut, picture. Not playing out the "moments" of the 1940s and the 1970s against each other, it frames the story of the International League and of Amnesty International as the tale of two new departures, undertaken under differing

circumstances and with varying results. The first section argues that the League's endeavors, unprecedented in many respects, essentially failed. The organization never moved beyond a marginal role because it never managed to sufficiently professionalize its institutional structures; because it concentrated its efforts on the United Nations; and because its work placed it at odds with the U.S. domestic political scene. If the League proved largely powerless, this was certainly not due to a lack of commitment or political acumen. Rather, its story highlights the structural limits that a universalized civil engagement faced at the height of the Cold War.

For roughly a decade, Amnesty International appeared to have met a similar fate. From the early 1970s on, however, it began to operate so effectively as to surpass the founders' boldest expectations. The second section of this essay argues that this abrupt turnaround stemmed from Amnesty's conscious reinvention of the practices of international human rights activism in terms of documentation, action, and raising of awareness. Equally important, a profoundly altered political context made Amnesty's supposedly nonideological concern for suffering appear immensely attractive to scores of activists striving to transcend earlier forms of social engagement.

The final section of this essay seeks to connect both case studies and to contextualize them by highlighting some general trends in the field of international human rights NGOs. This section suggests that we can comprehend the evolution of human rights activism as both a multicausal and a multidimensional transformation, reflecting broader changes in popular activism and NGO strategies and inherently linked to the varying appeal of moral politics. In the process, human rights activism not only adopted new practices and spread new political sensibilities but also started to shape international relations more profoundly.

The International League and Early Activism

The “International League of the Rights of Man and for the New Democracy” was founded in New York in 1941, largely by French exiles who strove to continue the work of the by-then inoperative Fédération internationale des droits de l’homme.¹² The original group consisted of approximately fifteen people who set out to co-opt members from the United States and Latin America, intending to establish the League as a small circle of experts representing as many democratic countries or exiled groups as possible. Initially, the members understood their work as an intellectual contribution to Europe’s liberation from National Socialism, reflecting on the political consequences to be drawn from Nazi totalitarianism, the struggle of the resistance movements, and the persecution of European Jews. Their political project crystallized in the terms “democracy” and “peace.” To forestall totalitarian abuse, the League aimed at safeguarding fundamental political rights such as free speech, the right to assembly, and the right to opposition.¹³ Protecting democratic rights, in turn, appeared to the members as the precondition for securing peace, since they assumed that “the violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms was one of the main causes of World War II and might well be one of the causes of what pessimists already term World War III.”¹⁴

Toward the end of the war the League began to broaden its focus. A memorandum of March 1944 called for a “more universal approach to the ‘rights of man,’ which has

been too closely confined to Europe.” By the end of 1945, the new orientation was reflected in the setting-up of regional committees on South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa, in addition to committees dealing with an International Bill of Rights, the “Jewish Question,” and colonial issues. The League’s turn to worldwide problems proved to be an important redefinition that would determine its profile over the next few decades. In its attempts at “defending the rights of others,” the League developed a universalized notion of solidarity, which constituted a remarkable innovation.¹⁵ This approach distinguished it from earlier internationalist movements, such as those of women, Jews, and workers, whose engagement was predicated on an “internationalized” group solidarity aimed at protecting members of their groups or furthering their interests.¹⁶ The broader understanding of solidarity characteristic of the League would also be a defining feature of later groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

In contrast to later organizations, however, the League never had a mass following of grassroots activists and did not engage in “direct action.” None of the earlier NGOs did. The League was quite typical of the organizations operating in the 1940s and 1950s in that it remained a small lobbying group, pursuing an elitist, nonpopulist approach to politics. The most important forum for the League’s endeavors was the United Nations, where it carried out the vast majority of its initiatives.¹⁷ Here the League engaged in a tireless effort to strengthen human rights norms by providing meticulous memoranda on the need for new instruments or on concrete provisions for international treaties. During the first two decades, activists worked on an impressive range of topics, supporting virtually all undertakings of the United Nations in the human rights field. They devoted much time and energy to the drafting of the International Covenants, which after the adoption of the Universal Declaration in 1948 came to be the main project of the UN’s human rights work. Furthermore, they took part in the codification of women’s and labor rights, worked for the protection of minorities and refugees, and supported colonial demands for self-determination.¹⁸

In addition to its legal work, the League helped to bring the concerns of persecuted groups before the world organization. Submitting petitions on their behalf or adding them to its speaker list, the League often directed the attention of UN bodies to human rights abuses that otherwise would have gone unnoticed. In the process, the New York organization became a sort of clearinghouse for victims of injustice around the world. It was approached by a broad range of groups, such as political parties in colonies, German expellees, exiled groups having fled communist or military dictatorships, and national or religious minorities.¹⁹ In its efforts to help them, the League used every possible avenue, directly appealing to the Secretary General, lobbying delegations, and attempting to forge coalitions with other NGOs.

Even though the United Nations was clearly the focal point of the League’s work, it pursued some of its initiatives outside the world organization. In many cases, the activists directly appealed to governments that they blamed for rights violations. These interventions gave substance to the League’s claim of nonpartisanship, since they targeted all political systems: communist and right-wing dictatorships, as well as democratic countries—mainly for their colonial policies—and, later on, postcolonial

states.²⁰ The scope of the League's actions was considerable, targeting political imprisonment, the death penalty, torture, electoral fraud, and discrimination against minorities. On the whole, however, direct approaches remained few. Apparently, the League made between ten and fifteen appeals a year, a number that Amnesty USA in the late 1970s would reach within a single month. Public relations activity similarly unfolded within narrow confines. The League organized a few public meetings, published several reports, and released press statements on its work at the United Nations. Much of the information upon which the League acted was provided by organizations outside the United States with which the New York board cooperated fairly closely. The League had some twenty to thirty national affiliates, creating a far-flung and potentially worldwide network of contacts.²¹ These affiliated organizations also spread knowledge about UN instruments in their home countries and sometimes pressed their governments to ratify them.²²

All these efforts were certainly not without effect. The League's memoranda and lobbying efforts put pressure on UN organs, making it harder for states to ignore abuses and providing substantive arguments to those members who were willing to adopt international norms. Its existence encouraged oppressed groups worldwide to voice their grievances—as Roger Baldwin aptly pointed out, “the mere fact that we exist was a comfort to peoples.”²³ In some instances, League activists credited their direct interventions with the release of prisoners or the reversal of harsh sentences.²⁴ The League's networking was occasionally successful and helped foster a measure of cooperation among NGOs at the United Nations. Finally, by specializing in human rights issues the League built up expertise, contributing to the emergence of a fledgling field of human rights politics.

Yet it cannot be overlooked that these successes were limited. The League neither turned into a powerful pressure group nor did its approach draw so much support as to make human rights an important concern of international politics. In part, this was due to the fact that the League never evolved into a fully professionalized institution. Operating on a small budget of approximately \$5,000 in the 1950s, which by the mid-1960s had risen to \$10,000, the League's work was often hampered by financial shortfalls.²⁵ Large parts of the money came from the paying membership that in the first twenty-five years never greatly exceeded a thousand.²⁶ Given the narrow budget, the League could not afford to maintain a large staff, relying on “only one administrative secretary in a small New York office” in the late 1950s.²⁷ Moreover, impressive as the League's ramifications were by the standards of the postwar decades, they did not provide the organization with a particularly strong standing in international affairs. Correspondents supplied information in an unsystematic fashion and on their own, mostly sporadic, initiative. At no point did the organization develop a comprehensive system of monitoring abuses. Furthermore, with the possible exception of the Japanese Civil Liberties Union, all foreign affiliates were small and undeniably weak.²⁸ Almost exclusively concerned with domestic issues, they resembled traditional civil liberties associations much more than transnational advocacy groups.²⁹ Adding to this, the League suffered from a frustrating lack of publicity. Describing the League's technique of sending letters to newspapers when governments did not react to accusations, Roger Baldwin concluded, “I cannot say much of the response from the U.S. press on

complaints of this sort from foreign lands, but there are journalists at the United Nations who send these things to the foreign press . . . That helps to build up a little public opinion, I wouldn't say too much, but a little, throughout the world.”³⁰

The frailty of the League’s activism was not entirely of its own making, however. The organization operated under political conditions that severely limited its chances of success. The League’s strong focus on the United Nations unexpectedly turned out to be a second important reason for its relative lack of impact. The world organization seemed a logical starting point, as it anchored explicit human rights norms in international law and created new institutions. Moreover, the United Nations quickly turned into a forum for discussions on human rights, some of which managed to draw considerable political attention. All too soon, however, human rights became the object of intense power struggles and mutual blockades that strongly circumscribed the United Nations’ room for maneuvering.³¹ Debates on rights issues degenerated into fierce propaganda battles, initially fought out along Cold War fault lines, and from the late 1950s onward mostly between postcolonial nations and former colonial powers.³² In practice, most states advocated only those norms that would bolster their own political values and expose the shortcomings of their adversaries. The United States and Great Britain, for instance, pressed for freedom of information and launched a campaign against forced labor in Eastern Europe. At the same time, they adamantly opposed attempts by communist and postcolonial states to place racial discrimination and colonialism on the agenda. Within democratic governments, some of these initiatives caused “embarrassment” and occasionally became a factor in decision making, such as in the Truman administration’s civil rights policy or the British withdrawal from Africa.³³ Overall, however, it can hardly be argued that many governments shied away from repression because of criticism voiced at the United Nations. To be sure, authoritarian states were much less affected than democracies.

These fiery controversies made most governments extremely reluctant to agree on meaningful international norms. For the League’s work, the resulting stalemate had two important consequences. First, both Western and communist states thwarted all attempts to install effective mechanisms of supervision, fearing that a competent international body would unduly intervene in their domestic affairs. None of the proposals brought forward at the United Nations, such as an international court, a high commissioner, or a system of individual petitions, was adopted during this period. The International League invested much energy in advocating a mechanism for individual petitions, only to find that strict rejection on the part of most states could not be surmounted.³⁴ Since the UN Commission on Human Rights declared that it had “no power to take any action” on human rights problems, the tens of thousands of petitions that did reach the United Nations in the first two decades went unanswered.³⁵ The inherent weakness of the UN’s system of rights protection made it impossible for the League to effectively assist the many persecuted groups appealing to it for help. Frustratingly, the League’s petitions became an empty ritual, provoking little more than the UN Secretariat’s response that no organ had the authority to become active.³⁶ “It is almost impossible for us to take action in view of an Assembly resolution which forbids circulating criticism of member states,” Baldwin explained in one case that

stood for many. “For the record, we have made our complaint which unhappily merely goes into the files of the Commission.”³⁷

Moreover, international law also ceased to develop progressively, which severely affected the second prong of the League’s UN approach. The Universal Declaration of 1948 was a nonbinding instrument, and its value was therefore largely symbolic. Apart from three conventions on women’s rights, the following years saw only the adoption of an extremely weak Convention on Genocide (1948), a Supplementary Convention on Slavery (1956), and a Declaration on Children’s Rights (1959). The protracted and arduous work on the human rights covenants, eventually adopted in 1966, displayed all the political dilemmas that beset the UN’s human rights work at the time. The delegations fought hard battles over provisions such as the right to self-determination, economic rights, and, once again, a possible petition mechanism, many of which were eventually watered down.³⁸

With the luster of the new international machinery fading, a sense of disappointment began to permeate the League’s work during the 1950s. This change in mood was all the more conspicuous as expectations had initially been high. “The establishment of a workable World Bill of Rights may well be the most important single event of this generation,” activists had believed in the late 1940s.³⁹ Even before the Universal Declaration had been adopted, however, the relentless power struggles paralyzing the organization demonstrated to them that “that the UN is incapable of reaching agreements even in the non-political field where hope has been so great.”⁴⁰ Not always was the political resonance as depressingly weak as in the early 1950s, when the League circulated its recommendations regarding the human rights covenants among all sixty member states, only to receive a single affirmative response. Yet the episode illustrates the depths of futility into which initiatives could sink.⁴¹ Some within the League began to argue that participation in UN procedures had proved a dead end. “So disheartened are some of our friends with the lack of progress at the UN that they counsel us to give up that work and concentrate on harassing repressive regimes and aiding their victims,” the annual report noted in 1958.⁴² The acute sense of failure that members evinced in these years was perhaps the strongest proof of the League’s powerlessness. Ten years after the UN’s founding, Baldwin summarized: “The first decade of the UN has been . . . discouraging in actual achievements for human rights.” The “best” that the UN could do was “to study, expose, report, and condemn, leaving results to the speculative forces of world opinion.”⁴³ The League’s leaders sharply diagnosed the limits inherent in the world organization but, quite simply, were at a loss to overcome them. If in the following years they held on to their approach, it was in a sober attempt to use the United Nations for what little could be achieved: “If it is true that we cannot rise much higher than the level of UN activities, it is also true that it is the only world forum where human rights are debated, studied and, in a fashion, acted upon.”⁴⁴

While institutional problems and the ineffectiveness of the UN machinery weighed heavily upon the League’s activism, there was an even deeper reason for its relative weakness. In the Cold War atmosphere of postwar American politics, prospects for rallying support behind worldwide human rights were extremely slim. This was a fate that the League shared with other internationalist movements of the time.

The well-known redefinition of U.S. policy under the auspices of the Truman Doctrine left a deep imprint on the domestic scene.⁴⁵ For roughly two decades after the war, American politics was guided by a policy of anticomunism firmly rooted in a bipartisan commitment.⁴⁶ The view that all political resources had to be directed to fighting communist totalitarianism, at home no less than abroad, provided the common ground for most of the political elite. It grew stronger as the communist threat seemed to be confirmed by unfolding events, such as the Greek crisis, the Berlin blockade, the coup in Czechoslovakia, and, most important, the Korean War. The climate of fear and suspicion reached a fever pitch in the McCarthy years but was generally characteristic of the period between the late 1940s and late 1950s, drastically narrowing the boundaries of permissible political debate. More specifically, the anti-communist consensus undermined the strength of leftist-liberal activism and stifled practically all kinds of political radicalism. On the one hand, the early Cold War years threw the Old Left into disarray. Important labor unions squandered energies in bitter internecine strife over their stance toward communism, the Progressive Party was routed in the 1948 elections, and even the American Civil Liberties Union faltered when it came to protecting the civil rights of alleged communists. On the other hand, the very meaning and ideological content of “liberalism” dramatically shifted. As liberals embraced Cold War politics, they severed their ties to progressive causes, turning significantly more conservative and statist.

Even though domestic tensions slightly relaxed after the end of the Korean War and the downfall of McCarthy, the 1950s were not a propitious time for social mobilization, whatever its cause. The most prominent form of activism was undoubtedly the civil rights movement that gathered steam from the mid-1950s on.⁴⁷ Almost equally visible was the antinuclear movement, even though the number of supporters remained limited. Further stirrings of activism came from women’s groups, Mexican Americans, or activists devoting themselves to Latin American “solidarity.” It is true that from mid-decade onward these groups “created the first public space within the U.S. for dissent from the orthodoxy of national security.”⁴⁸ With the exception of the civil rights movement, however, they were few in number, small, and never more than fledgling in their activities. Before the civil rights protest of the 1960s and the escalation of the Vietnam War, no mass movements emerged, and the foreign policy consensus remained largely intact.

Under these circumstances, the kind of internationalism guiding the League could hardly develop a strong political appeal. Taking action against state crimes independently of what type of government had committed them, the organization’s approach transcended the Cold War Manichaeism and refused to narrowly confine itself to “patriotic” loyalty. Considering the individual initiatives that the League pursued, it becomes even more evident how its human rights approach placed activists at odds with important Cold War beliefs.⁴⁹

First, from the mid-1950s on, the League concerned itself with colonial repression. Anticolonialism, however, did not resonate widely with the American public.⁵⁰ This was evinced by the fate of the American Committee on Africa, which, despite being the strongest anticolonial group in the United States, never played more than a

marginal role.⁵¹ Some activists protested against South African apartheid, but their engagement remained far from a powerful movement.⁵²

The case of African American organizations was more complex.⁵³ Toward the end of the Second World War, awareness had arisen within organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People or the Council on African Affairs that their freedom struggle should be seen as a common cause of black people all around the world.⁵⁴ With the onset of U.S. Cold War policy, however, these attitudes changed. Numerous African American leaders staunchly supported the Truman Doctrine, while others sensed that foreign policy criticism would no longer be well received. Therefore, many organizations now concentrated on domestic issues, arguing that racism at home needed to be eradicated since it undermined the government's claim to being the leader of the free world. Those leftist organizations, by contrast, that held on to their anticolonial activities were subjected to increasing federal surveillance and harassment. African American activism thus confirms the pitfalls that anticolonial internationalism faced in the charged atmosphere of the early Cold War. The International League did maintain contacts with some of these organizations—the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the American Committee on Africa were indeed its affiliates—and occasionally they joined forces at the United Nations.⁵⁵ Given the adverse political and institutional circumstances, however, this did not significantly improve their chances of success.

A second problem arose from the fact that the League's ant-totalitarianism was a genuinely double-edged sword that did not spare right-wing and military regimes. As all administrations before the late 1970s staunchly relied on right-wing dictatorships as bulwarks against communist subversion, this attitude flagrantly defied one of the central tenets of U.S. Cold War policy.⁵⁶ In view of the government's unequivocal stance, the League was well aware that it fought a losing battle. This was particularly true for Frances Grant, who coordinated most of the League's work on Latin America. On numerous occasions, she attacked the administration's backing of right-wing dictators for the sole reason of their professed anticomunism, yet to little avail.⁵⁷ Even some League members themselves favored prioritizing the struggle against communism.⁵⁸

The League's anticomunist efforts were in fact the only broadly consensual part of its activities. But they receded into the background, given the practical difficulty of dealing with regimes largely shut off from the outside world.⁵⁹ More importantly, when compared to the language of containment, human rights proved far too weak a political idiom to muster strong support. U.S. concern about communist dictatorships focused on the global threat to American power and security, not so much on the lot of Eastern European populations or even individual suffering. A foreign policy aimed at stemming Soviet expansionism, keeping the advantage in the arms race, and preventing communist "penetration" of the Western world simply left no room for an approach based on a universal morality.

It is hard to escape the conclusion, therefore, that the League achieved what was possible in the postwar decades, but that this was not much. At any rate, human rights quite obviously did not grow into a project that energized American supporters, captured the public imagination, or aroused political zeal. Realistic as they were, this

was not lost on the League's activists. Comparing their organization with the American communists of all movements, they pointed out that "if we could infect our people with some of their energy and devotion, it would be wonderful." Roger Baldwin concurred, musing that "we don't have colleagues who are willing to spend day and night on the telephone like the Stalinists and other party fanatics."⁶⁰

Aмnesty International and the Gradual Reinvention of Advocacy

Aмnesty International was founded as the League entered its twentieth year. Its advent did not immediately reshape the field of human rights activism or even leave a strong mark. It was not until the early 1970s that the organization started to build up enormous institutional clout, in a years-long, painstaking process. And the movement's growth was not only a matter of quantity but also of quality. Aмnesty initiated a momentous change in human rights activism by basing it on a new kind of information politics and by crafting effective techniques of exerting pressure. Many of these techniques, however, would not have worked had it not been for the mass membership that Aмnesty was rapidly assembling. The political morality Aмnesty displayed attracted huge numbers of followers. While rooted in the experiences of 1960s social movements, this political morality appealed so strongly to many activists because it resonated with their desire to forge a new, postrevolutionary form of civil activism.

The London organization was by no means an instant success.⁶¹ Peter Benenson's initial appeal to help "The Forgotten Prisoners," published in the *Observer* in May 1961 and later regarded as the movement's founding document, did meet with a notable response, particularly in Britain.⁶² Nonetheless, establishing a viable international movement proved a depressingly slow task and was hampered by numerous setbacks. To spread knowledge of the new organization, the British founders relied heavily on personal networking. Benenson traveled to various countries to get in touch with potential local organizers. His close associate Eric Baker addressed the German journalists Gerd Ruge and Carola Stern, who then went on to found the West German section and in turn helped establish Aмnesty in Austria.⁶³ Early attempts to launch Aмnesty outside Britain seem to have worked comparatively well in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and West Germany, even though the sections were not fast in developing. In other countries, enthusiasm soon waned, and groups formed in response to Benenson's "Appeal for Aмnesty" did not last long. The Dutch Aмnesty movement, later one of the most vigorous, consisted of two groups whose work had effectively come to an end by 1964. The French section ceased operating in 1967–68, and the Italian section dissolved in 1972. In Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, and Canada, virtually no activism evolved before the 1970s.

At the international level, the new organization did make steady progress, even though the level of its activities remained limited. By 1963, Aмnesty had established the embryonic structures that would remain its basis in the coming decades: an International Secretariat including a research department, an Executive Committee, and an international delegates' meeting. The London organization soon started conducting research missions and in 1965–66 published its first three reports. By this time, the Secretariat was gathering information on 2,800 "prisoners of conscience" in 83 countries. Roughly 400 local groups, whose activities were still only loosely coordinated by

the London secretariat, worked for 1,200 “adopted” prisoners. Measured against the standards of other international NGOs such as the International League, these were noteworthy accomplishments. Even so, in 1966–67 Amnesty stumbled into a crisis that revealed institutional flaws and seriously threatened the organization’s survival.⁶⁴ British newspapers disclosed that Peter Benenson had accepted government funds to support prisoners in Rhodesia (unwittingly, as we now know), severely injuring Amnesty’s reputation as an impartial body. The negative publicity, moreover, added fuel to the tensions that had been simmering within the international leadership. In turn, infighting between Benenson, Sean MacBride, and Robert Swann also came into the open and further tarnished the organization’s reputation. Damaging as they were, these personal conflicts exposed shortcomings that ran even deeper, most notably the lack of control mechanisms and an unclear distribution of tasks. As financial problems added to the crisis and the sections’ development stagnated, toward the end of the 1960s Amnesty had reached the lowest ebb in its history.

Given this dismal picture, it was all the more stunning how rapidly things changed from the early 1970s on. The staff at the International Secretariat found itself overwhelmed by the pace of developments and clearly felt that Amnesty was entering a new phase in its life. Among the most significant developments was the sheer growth of the membership, taking off around 1969 and dramatically accelerating in 1974. The number of members jumped from 20,000 to almost 100,000 in 1976, and to more than 200,000 two years later.⁶⁵ Subsequently, the membership explosion continued unabated into the early 1980s, reaching 570,000 in 1983.⁶⁶

In addition to the unexpected influx of members, the International Secretariat both vastly expanded and thoroughly professionalized its institutional structures. In 1972, the Executive Committee decided to undertake “long-range planning,” attempting to comprehensively plan the organization’s development for the first time. The basic idea was to have more of everything: more money, more members, more staff, higher quality in the sections’ operations, and greater public visibility.⁶⁷ However ambitious its objectives, the Secretariat managed to achieve most of them. Secretariat staff increased from twelve in 1969 to 146 ten years later. In the same period, active prisoner cases doubled, numbering approximately 4,000 at the end of the decade.⁶⁸ The Secretariat turned into a highly compartmentalized and complex operating center. In addition to the Secretary General’s Bureau and several other bureaus, its main components were a well-equipped Research Department and a Program Department. The latter consisted of fully fledged subunits dealing with membership coordination, public relations, publications, and campaigns.⁶⁹ Amnesty’s budget increased from £20,000 in 1969 to three quarters of a million pounds in 1978. In the process, the organization’s finances found a firmer footing.⁷⁰

Finally, Amnesty considerably broadened its thematic focus. Inaugurated as a movement working for the release of political prisoners, it was only in the 1970s that the London organization adopted more varied concerns, such as torture, the death penalty, and “disappearances.” In one way or another, these new topics all grew out of the work for “prisoners of conscience.” Before they decided to deal with them generally, Amnesty members began to oppose torture and the death penalty only when they affected political prisoners. To some extent, Amnesty’s work developed its own

“cascade,” as it proved difficult for activists to fight inhumane treatment solely when applied to circumscribed groups of people. Amnesty’s “Mandate Committee,” charged with overseeing the work program, argued that it was “absurd” to protest “when a government arrests and then kills someone” but to remain silent “when a government simply kills someone on the spot.”⁷¹ As a result, the organization resolved to include “extra-legal executions” in its agenda. Amnesty thereby ceased being a single-issue group and rapidly turned into a “human rights organization” in the broader sense of tackling a panoply of violations.

The trajectory of the U.S. section during the 1960s and 1970s closely mirrored the evolution of the international organization. Thus it appears to have been much more representative of the movement’s overall development than sections in Scandinavia or West Germany, where Amnesty took root immediately but later lost some of its steam. When after years of arduous groundwork Amnesty USA was founded in early 1967, it consisted of ten to twenty groups and fewer than three hundred members.⁷² In the early years, AIUSA remained small and virtually unknown to the wider public. Even the Faroe Islands had more Amnesty groups than the United States, as the *New Yorker* poignantly observed.⁷³ Furthermore, operations were bedeviled by a surprisingly unprofessional management, lack of funds, and a conflict-ridden, at times even hostile relationship with the International Secretariat.⁷⁴

Fortunes turned almost overnight in the early 1970s, however. By 1973, almost the entire group of original founders and Board members had withdrawn, making room for new personnel that would shape the U.S. section’s development well into the 1980s. The new Board started by confronting the financial malaise. It launched a direct-mail donor campaign that paved a way out of the paralyzing financial crisis and would make AIUSA’s budget the largest of any U.S. human rights organization by the early 1980s.⁷⁵ In addition, the new leadership rebuilt the semiprofessional charity club that it had inherited into a publicly visible NGO. The opening of an Amnesty office in Washington, D.C., providing the U.S. section with systematic access to policymakers in the nation’s capital, proved particularly important, as did the creation of a “press officer” who forged crucial connections with influential journalists.⁷⁶ Not least, the section invested immense resources into stimulation of membership growth.⁷⁷ “Travelling Organizers” swarmed out all over the United States to encourage the establishment of local groups, and the Board devised several “outreach” programs carefully tailored to the interests of specific social groups or regions where Amnesty had few members.⁷⁸ As a consequence, between 1973 and the end of the decade membership soared from 3000 to 90,000.

Revolutionizing Methods

It was against the backdrop of this new institutional strength, both at the international and national levels, that Amnesty International in the 1970s developed distinct political practices that revolutionized the role human rights NGOs played in the international arena. Amnesty’s operations surpassed earlier efforts in many ways: they were more solid, more publicly visible, more activist, more confrontational, and, not least, more effective.

One of the two sources of Amnesty’s political effectiveness was the new kind of

information politics that the Secretariat took great pains to forge and to steadily improve. Amnesty started to systematically gather information about human rights violations, innovating NGO work in a way that in hindsight seems as simple as it was momentous at the time. Not only did the International Secretariat regularly monitor violations (as defined by Amnesty's "mandate") in a great number of countries and, by the mid-1980s, in virtually all countries of the world. Amnesty also set out to *produce* facts by building up channels of information, carrying out investigations, and verifying allegations. High-quality research was an essential part of Amnesty's political capital, providing credibility as well as informational advantage. It is correct, therefore, to consider the Research Department the organization's hidden center—directly or indirectly, Amnesty's international influence depended on the Department's work.⁷⁹ The unit most strongly expanding within the Secretariat, by 1978 it was preparing background information on 4,611 "prisoners of conscience," as compared to 883 nine years earlier.⁸⁰ While the International Executive Committee had considered taking action against ten states in 1966, the Research Department a decade later was doing research on sixty states and preparing thirty-one research missions. In one year, Amnesty International waged campaigns against thirteen states and worked on seventeen reports or information papers.⁸¹ The London organization had reached dimensions of which NGOs in the 1950s could only have dreamed, and until the end of the decade its capacities were still growing.

Hand in hand with the meticulous research went constant efforts to publicize human rights violations, constituting another core element of Amnesty's information politics. Consciously departing from the tacit approach of the Red Cross, the London organization saw the appeal to public opinion as one of its "strongest weapons."⁸² Spreading knowledge via the media both served to damage the international image of repressive regimes and to mobilize support. The centerpiece of Amnesty's publicity was the "Annual Report," a sort of worldwide chronicle of human rights violations that proved a spectacular invention at a time when nothing remotely similar existed. Epitomizing Amnesty's work—its assiduous research, impartial monitoring, and broad geographical scope—the Annual Report constituted "the 'bible' for all our staffs, as well as for group members and others in the movement."⁸³ In addition to its publications, the organization disseminated information through press releases (between fifty and eighty per year), advertisements, and press conferences held to inaugurate larger campaigns. Perhaps most important, both the London Secretariat and the national sections systematically fed information to the media. AIUSA, which acquired particular expertise in this area, regularly briefed a vast array of "news decision makers." In the early 1980s, the Board reported 18,000 media placements, more than 400 editorials mentioning the organization, about 200 inquiries from the press per week, and more than 400 television programs on which the U.S. section had placed Amnesty spokespersons, all in one year.⁸⁴

The sheer mass of Amnesty's public relations work was overwhelming, yet its obvious success was not only a matter of quantity. In addition, the organization developed powerful strategies to arouse pity for the victims of human rights violations. The reports made ample use of testimonies in which victims recounted their excruciating experiences, including graphic descriptions of torture, rape, or the ruthless killing

of relatives.⁸⁵ Publications often dwelled on stories of specific individuals, providing names and photos whenever possible, to help readers identify with their suffering.⁸⁶ Amnesty thus forged a politics of empathy that was highly effective in rallying support.

If information politics was the one area in which Amnesty International opened up new dimensions to civil human rights activism, pressure politics was the other. In its early years, the movement had worked rather silently, if persistently, prodding repressive governments with letter writing, diplomatic contacts, and occasional publications. Only in a prolonged process of trial and error did the Secretariat manage to build up the institutional strength necessary for Amnesty to wage forceful public “campaigns.” The “Campaign for the Abolition of Torture,” launched in 1973, clearly marked the breakthrough, reaching a level of coordination and political impact never remotely matched by Amnesty’s earlier activities. Between 1973 and 1977 Amnesty published seventeen reports and intervened with over sixty governments to protest against torture. Furthermore, the organization undertook a vast array of public initiatives, holding press conferences, organizing expert meetings, and submitting a symbolic petition to the United Nations. Not least, Amnesty developed its so-called Urgent Action program, which would become one of its most popular and successful techniques. The campaign marked a quantum leap for the London organization, in terms of both public visibility and membership growth.⁸⁷

Amnesty’s campaigns aimed to build up comprehensive pressure. The first time the organization fully exploited all possible channels of influence, and a milestone in the enhancement of its overall effectiveness, was the campaign waged against Uruguay in 1976 as part of the antitorture activities. The Secretariat prepared action in an experimental fashion, using it as an “opportunity to ‘test’ the capacity of the whole of Amnesty International.”⁸⁸ The situation in Uruguay seemed particularly well suited for these ends. Amnesty possessed detailed information, violations were grave—in relation to the country’s small population, the frequency of torture was extremely high—and Uruguay had so far hardly attracted international attention. The International Secretariat worked out a central plan to harness all structures of the organization and to involve as many other actors as possible: governments, parliaments, NGOs, and international governmental organizations. Some of its tactical gambits played out unexpectedly well, such as the decision to leak news about its forthcoming action. The rumors caused the Uruguayan foreign minister to hold a press conference at which he denounced Amnesty as a calumnious group of subversives, providing the organization with a public relations coup highly counterproductive to the regime. The national sections then embarked on months-long activities stigmatizing the regime and demonstrating against its abuses. AIUSA members alone wrote letters to 430 military and civil officials, and approximately a thousand activists sent letters to President Bordaberry.⁸⁹ Sheer luck also played its part. A Uruguayan military officer provided Amnesty with two photos depicting the military’s sadistic torture practices; they had a deep emotional impact on the public. The campaign ultimately proved to have tangible consequences. The European Community denied a Uruguayan request for a preferential trade agreement, the U.S. Congress voted to end military aid, and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights launched an investigation of the

Uruguayan case. Amnesty played a catalyzing role for all of these initiatives, supplying them with solid information and sound arguments.

Yet attacking and isolating regimes was only one part of Amnesty's campaigns. At the same time, they were large-scale attempts to raise public awareness, an area in which the organization was arguably much more successful than in weakening regimes politically or economically. Amnesty's newsworthy publications as well as its well-arranged expert conferences sensitized the international public. Moreover, national sections systematically involved their governments and parliaments as well as numerous professional groups and public institutions. For the antitorture campaign, they organized "dialogues" with churches, lawyers, medical doctors, trade unions, teachers, and the police. AIUSA in its campaign against the Uruguayan dictatorship approached 3,500 colleges and more than a thousand other organizations, among them some eighty corporations investing in the country and dozens of churches.⁹⁰ How far this public approach removed Amnesty from the operations of the International League is also illustrated by its work at the United Nations. Here the London organization proved fairly influential, most notably in contributing to the so-called thematic mechanisms that the United Nations created on torture, disappearance, and arbitrary killings, the topics of three major Amnesty campaigns. Yet to the Secretariat this strategy never had more than secondary importance, providing "just one of the channels AI can use to expose human rights violations."⁹¹

Both information politics and the numerous campaign actions clearly testified to the institutional strength that Amnesty International had been accumulating in the 1970s. The activists developed a new kind of professional institutionalism that set Amnesty conspicuously apart both from earlier human rights NGOs and from the protest movements of the 1960s. The latter had relied almost entirely on decentralized and spontaneous actions. They repudiated the meticulous coordination and administrative discipline that Amnesty's international and national leaderships considered vital for the organization's proper functioning. Yet Amnesty also had a grassroots basis, which furthermore was growing and increasingly resembled the "new social movements" mushrooming in the 1970s. As a result of its dynamic expansion, Amnesty International in fact evolved into a peculiar hybrid, being a highly specialized inner circle of political experts and a mass organization of lay activists at the same time. In the field of human rights activism, Amnesty's mass membership was no less groundbreaking than its high-level political strategies. It was only in the 1970s that civil human rights activism turned into a vibrant political "movement."

A Novel Brand of Engagement

Amnesty USA offers a window into the attitudes and motivations that all of a sudden made activists flock to the organization. Judging by the U.S. section's social composition, the movement had a fairly broad appeal, albeit within marked limits. Although it is impossible to determine the exact percentage, large constituencies had an academic and/or religious background. Amnesty flourished in university towns, recruiting members both from among students and faculty.⁹² Many members were active in their church communities, and a sizable number of clerics joined the ranks. Protestants, Catholics, and Jews were visibly represented in the section, as were

Quakers.⁹³ AIUSA was a fairly young organization, with many members in their twenties or thirties, but group work proved attractive for older and retired people as well. Women played an important role, not only in numerical terms but also politically. Unlike in the British section during the 1960s, they shaped the life of the U.S. section as group leaders, coordinators, or Board members.⁹⁴ Amnesty's base of support remained strictly limited, however, inasmuch as members were educated, middle class, and leaning toward the Democratic Party. These groups were "sufficiently concerned and well enough off," as an internal memorandum aptly put it, to care for the human rights of others.⁹⁵ Furthermore, AIUSA was and remained an overwhelmingly "white" organization. The Board put considerable resources in its "Minority Outreach Program," but unlike other promotional programs it fell short in its goal of expanding the involvement of African, Asian, or Hispanic Americans.⁹⁶

A set of both political and personal experiences seems to have been integral in bringing people to the organization. A large number of activists, local members as well as staff, had previously been involved in the civil rights struggle or in the protests against the Vietnam War. David Hawk, who acted as executive director between 1974 and 1978, was but one of many who had been engaged in both. In the 1960s, he had been active in voter registration and community organizing in the South, before he went on to support the antiwar movement, helping to coordinate the 1969 "Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam," among other initiatives. When he started at AIUSA, Hawk thought of his new work as a sort of global extension of his former political activities.⁹⁷ Moreover, many members had themselves gone through hardship and suffering. Local groups included refugees and emigrés from Ethiopia, Chile, Turkey, and other countries who had been persecuted and whose relatives sometimes continued to suffer from political or religious repression.⁹⁸ Not a few refugees who had fled from Europe in the 1930s and 1940s seem to have joined Amnesty. Among them were several of the U.S. section's leading figures, such as Gerhard Elston, its executive director between 1978 and 1981. Born into a German Jewish family, he fled Germany in 1938. Later he would claim that his engagement for Amnesty was rooted in his experiences "as a one-time refugee; as a one-time stateless alien of a former enemy nationality; as a worker with refugees."⁹⁹

A further sizable group had an interest in foreign countries or world regions. Numerous Amnesty members had traveled extensively or spent longer periods of time working or studying abroad. Learning firsthand of political injustice, they resolved to take action upon returning to the United States. A group in Ithaca, New York, included an "expert on the Soviet Union" who was dealing with abuse in psychiatric hospitals; an expert on Slavic languages who had been living in Yugoslavia; a teacher who had worked in Kenya; two members who had been living in Latin America; and an activist who had relatives in the Baltic States. Two members were former "prisoners of conscience," one from Argentina and one from the USSR.¹⁰⁰ This high number of members with ties to foreign countries was certainly not representative, but it provides a vivid illustration of the biographical trajectories that led activists to the section.

Contemporary statements of members reveal that their commitment to AIUSA was based on a set of both moral and political motivations. Their engagement apparently lacked deeper philosophical foundations, as did the organization itself, but moral

impulses were nevertheless pervasive. A globalized sense of “concern” and “responsibility”—two key terms in the activists’ vocabulary—drove many to become active. “What happens to one here is related to what happens in Bolivia,” one Amnesty representative stressed in a presentation, concluding that “all should be concerned.”¹⁰¹ Many statements implicitly testified to an ethics of interdependence, according to which human rights violations committed anywhere on the globe affected all people everywhere. “The world is so small and so much more interdependent today than it used to be,” an activist explained in 1972, “that it is morally right for citizens of all countries to feel responsible for possible political injustice anywhere on the globe.”¹⁰² One journalist spoke of the “inchoate terror that touches us all, no matter how secure and unaffected we might think ourselves to be.”¹⁰³ Many members stressed related moral impulses, mentioning the “moral obligation” to help, their unwillingness to become “silent accomplices” in the face of evil, or their desire to “bear witness” to human rights abuses.¹⁰⁴ Numerous activists referred to “simple” feelings of pity: “It breaks your heart. You can’t not do something,” one activist stated.¹⁰⁵

Turning to more specifically political motivations, many members felt attracted by what they regarded as Amnesty’s nonideological or even apolitical character. “I liked it because it was non-political. It was strictly a matter of human rights,” a psychotherapist explained. “I was taken up because it crossed all ideological and political lines.”¹⁰⁶ Similarly, activists emphasized that Amnesty’s approach enabled them to protest against repressive states independently of their ideological outlook or political systems: “The problem of political prisoners and of torture crosses political boundaries. The issue here is not one of ideology; it is one of human dignity.”¹⁰⁷ Closely related to these notions, many members felt attracted by a movement that appeared to be “above” party politics. As they saw it, Amnesty united people from diverse political, religious, and social backgrounds. One member proclaimed, “You can be of any political persuasion, any religion, any professional background, any economic group, and still come together in this one cause for human rights.”¹⁰⁸ Even though far from reflecting the organization’s real social profile, these perceptions proved powerful in drawing activists to Amnesty’s cause.

Finally, many Americans found their work for Amnesty gratifying because it offered them a way of reducing politics to its essence, to a few basic issues that truly mattered. “If you really feel your vote won’t have any effect at home, and you’re not using that excuse as a rationalization for apathy in general, then join Amnesty International,” a group member wrote in 1978. “Put your energies to work prodding governments where politics means more than elections, it means lives.”¹⁰⁹ Likewise, many saw in Amnesty’s work a way of concretizing and individualizing politics. A staff person stressed, “We’re talking about individuals with names and faces, with histories and with families. It’s not an abstract and not intangible.”¹¹⁰ Human rights activism thus turned into a way of unraveling the complexities of politics, and this perception may have been one of the deepest driving forces. Whether activists wanted to follow their moral impulses, to move beyond ideological splits, or to preserve their and others’ individualities, they attempted to make the political process understandable and accessible to influences “from below.”

Transcending the Protest of the 1960s

AIUSA's political and moral profile reveals a dialectical relationship with the watershed changes that had reshaped social activism in the 1960s, making the U.S. domestic landscape much more favorable to human rights NGOs than in the 1940s and 1950s.¹¹¹ On the one hand, that human rights activism could meet with such far-reaching support clearly resulted from the mass activation that the 1960s movements had sparked. They had finally broken through the muted protest of the postwar era, turning "grassroots" activism and "direct action" into widespread forms of political participation. One of the prime catalysts had been the civil rights movement that politicized many student and women activists, who later brought their experience to other causes. The movement against the Vietnam War was arguably even more momentous, not only because it reached numerical dimensions unprecedented in postwar American history and united virtually all protest groups behind a shared objective. The protests also marked the definite break with the Cold War consensus of earlier decades. They discredited the policy of containment, profoundly questioned America's mission in the world, sowed a deep distrust toward secretive policymaking, and profoundly delegitimized military intervention. Cold War anxieties generally receded as détente came to shape relations between the Western and Eastern blocs. At the same time, the period saw rapidly increasing awareness about remote world regions, obviously including Southeast Asia but also numerous other "Third World" countries. All of these developments make the long 1960s a transformative phase that did not end at the threshold of the decade but reconfigured popular politics for many years to come. These impulses clearly continued to underlie the activism of Amnesty International.

On the other hand, Amnesty's activism was a distinct project that constituted a new departure. AIUSA experienced its membership explosion precisely at the moment when most of the earlier movements had come to an impasse or were even facing outright failure: when the student movement split up into factions without having fundamentally changed the educational system; when the civil rights movement had reached formal equality but realized it could not improve the dismal living conditions of many African Americans; and when the Vietnam War finally came to its inglorious end. Keeping in mind that many Amnesty members had previously been engaged in the civil rights and the antiwar movements, it seems plausible to assume that the organization absorbed much of the potential for political activism now set free.

For many activists, their entry into Amnesty International did in fact entail a departure. They consciously distanced themselves from many of the political aspirations, modalities, and styles of 1960s activism. They repudiated social utopianism, the revolutionary struggle against "the system," endless theoretical discussions, the draining polarizations of the political scene, and not least radical action and terrorist violence. An external study on the voluntary staff of the American section concluded in 1981 that many had joined the organization because "AIUSA offers an alternative to, or even a retreat from, more confrontative political action, while still providing the opportunity to be active in a very direct way." Compared to 1960s dreams of social change, the ambitions of these human rights activists were much less comprehensive.

They did not intend to free the world from evil but rather wished to lend help in a few individual cases. Amnesty's members turned to a more minimalist and pragmatic approach; they were, in the words of one activist, "working to make the world a slightly less wicked place."¹¹² In part, therefore, the human rights activism of the 1970s grew out of a postrevolutionary idealism that drew its lessons from what activists perceived as the shortcomings of previous social activism. An undercurrent of disillusionment was all too tangible, contrasting with the lofty ambitions and euphoric hopes of the 1960s movements.

Amnesty's activism thus confirms recent interpretations of 1970s social movements as evolving out of 1960s mobilization.¹¹³ At the same time, however, the case of Amnesty demonstrates that the activism of the new decade cannot be understood as a mere extension of earlier impulses. Rather, it responded to new experiences, the sobering realization of the limits of revolution figuring prominently among them, and crystallized around a changed political consciousness.

The League and Amnesty in Context

Even though changes in human rights activism were considerable during the intervening four decades—somewhat unsurprisingly given the social and political upheaval of the period—the International League of the long 1950s and the Amnesty International of the long 1970s in many respects represented the same type of organization. Both were working toward a better world order by protecting innocent victims. Both believed in the right of citizens to interfere in international affairs, and both found their frame of reference in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Most notably, perhaps, both were internationalist NGOs exclusively dealing with human rights questions. During the postwar decades, the League was indeed an exception here and had more in common with Amnesty and other 1970s organizations than with contemporaneous NGOs. Only two other internationally visible NGOs appear to have had a similar profile insofar as they dealt with human rights problems more broadly defined, which moreover constituted their sole concern. One of them was the longstanding London-based Anti-Slavery Society. Founded in 1823, the Society had effectively evolved into an organization protecting both colonial peoples and indigenous populations from all types of ill treatment.¹¹⁴ The other was the International Commission of Jurists, established with U.S. government funds as part of the CIA's containment strategy. During the 1950s, its focus gradually changed when activists began to confront right-wing dictatorships and adopt colonial issues, incidentally developing an outlook quite similar to that of the International League.¹¹⁵

By contrast, the vast majority of international NGOs concerned with human rights issues consisted of women's organizations, religious organizations, trade union associations, and more specific groups such as law societies.¹¹⁶ The oldest of these organizations had already been established between the late 1880s and the early 1920s, the period that saw the first wave of internationalist NGOs.¹¹⁷ Many had gathered at the League of Nations and, after the Second World War, quickly found their way to its successor organization, the United Nations. Here they worked on a broad range of issues. Human rights were only one of their concerns and often not even central. Unlike the League, they concentrated their efforts on those areas that seemed crucial

to postwar reconstruction and the building of a stable world order, such as disarmament, refugees, the resolution of the long chain of Cold War conflicts, or the economic “development” of colonized territories.¹¹⁸ Looking back on an often decades-long history, these NGOs did not perceive their human rights work at the United Nations as a new departure. Jewish organizations, for instance, felt they had always been striving to protect co-religionists. Women’s organizations found themselves proposing the very same guarantees for women that they had advocated at the League of Nations. They had just never before called them “human rights.”¹¹⁹

Moreover, as these two cases suggest, many organizations had emerged out of what we might call internationalized group solidarity. NGOs such as the Alliance Israélite Universelle or the International Council of Women had been established after the mid-nineteenth century in an attempt to further the rights and the political standing of Jews and women across borders. Their group-related origins continued to have a strong bearing on their human rights work in the United Nations, where delegates often acted as representatives of interest groups. There were no strict boundaries, of course. All organizations were generally in favor of strengthening human rights norms and creating effective mechanisms of implementation. Yet Jewish NGOs such as the World Jewish Congress understandably focused their energies on those human rights questions that were linked to the Jewish experience of persecution and the material problems resulting from the war and the Holocaust.¹²⁰ Others retained even stronger links to the group interests they nominally represented. Church organizations such as the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs particularly stressed religious rights, and women’s groups such as the WILPF dedicated the bulk of their work to women’s rights. The Anti-Slavery Society occasionally even prioritized slavery over other human rights violations, if largely for tactical reasons.¹²¹ Their more narrowly defined activism distinguished these NGOs both from the International League and from several organizations emerging in the 1970s that in name or fact stood for “universal” advocacy. Indeed, the League appears to have been a forerunner in clearly decoupling international human rights activism from group solidarity.

If the League and Amnesty shared many operating principles, in other areas a wide gulf separated the earlier human rights activism from its later counterpart. Both the causes and effects of this transformation were multiple. Institutionally, the trajectories of the early League and of Amnesty in the 1960s and 1970s illustrate a broader shift in the development of international NGOs from elite lobbying groups to highly expert public-pressure groups. This shift occurred against the background of profound changes in the field of human rights groups during the 1970s. On the one hand, a wealth of new groups emerged, many of which now explicitly used the term “human rights” to describe their concerns.¹²² On the other, established organizations reinvigorated this trend by creating specific programs or bodies dedicated to human rights questions: most notably, perhaps, religious organizations, but also trade unions, lawyers’ organizations, professional associations, and others such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union.¹²³ As early as the 1970s, critical observers sardonically referred to the bustling activities as a “human rights industry.”¹²⁴ It was only now that “human rights” came to describe a type of activism *sui generis*. Boundaries were fluid: the British Human Rights Network, for instance, created in 1974, apart from the usual

suspects included refugee organizations, a penal reform league, pacifists, advocates of gay rights, proponents of racial equality, and Latin America committees.¹²⁵ Nonetheless, “human rights” increasingly served as a unifying term, under which civil organizations subsumed their activities.

Amnesty International was an exception inasmuch as the two tendencies it epitomized—professional institutionalism and pressure based on mass membership—remained by and large separated in a fermenting field. New professional NGOs like the Watch Committees, the International Human Rights Law Group, Survival International, or Physicians on Human Rights were not membership organizations. Rather, they were all exclusively operated by a small, well-trained staff. In addition, older organizations that remained elitist in orientation stayed on the scene and continued to be influential. Well into the 1980s, the ICJ and the International League would remain among the four most potent international human rights NGOs, together with the ever-expanding Amnesty International and the ascendant Human Rights Watch. However, all of these organizations now turned to direct action, starting to confront governments and to use effective means of public pressure. Since the 1960s, awareness had been rising among NGO leaders that channels of influence needed to be sought outside the UN machinery, given the stalemated human rights politics within the world organization.¹²⁶ Subsequently, Amnesty International came to be the widely admired model for innovative techniques and enhanced vigor in human rights advocacy. Perhaps most significantly, the Board of the International League in the late 1960s decided to overhaul its institutional makeup. Its leaders understood that they needed to heighten the organization’s public profile and put more emphasis on openly protesting against state crimes. They looked to the London organization for ways and means, and even though the League never turned into a second Amnesty, the Board consciously adopted some of its strategies and techniques.¹²⁷

In addition to these professional NGOs, old and new, countless more or less ephemeral grassroots groups sprang up in the 1970s. Their outlooks differed considerably. Some rallied around particular issues such as torture or indigenous rights, while others focused on specific countries and regions, mostly Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Southern Africa. Through their manifold activities, human rights engagement turned into decentralized, spontaneous, creative protest. The campaigns against the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile and on behalf of dissidents and Jews in the Soviet Union, for instance, were largely carried out by newly formed and loosely institutionalized groups.¹²⁸ Among these groups there was much cross-fertilizing when it came to forms of action, yet many clearly had appropriated Amnesty’s techniques, most notably the “adoption” of prisoners and letter campaigns directed at state authorities. Moreover, information politics emerged as a powerful trend. Both expert organizations and less professionalized groups gathered information, conducted research, and proved eager to harness public opinion. Numerous documentation centers were established, and “alternative” journals or newsletters thrived. Activists thus produced a vast body of human rights-related knowledge that increasingly spilled over into the mainstream media.

As a political project, human rights activism in the 1970s clearly gained a much

more exciting aura than it had ever possessed before. The gradual disillusionment that came to weigh so heavily on the League's members during the 1950s was no exception. In fact, a mood of gloominess spread throughout the NGO community, suggesting that the UN human rights regime cannot be regarded as a breakthrough achievement that remained dormant until kissed awake in later decades. To those who had fought the hardest for the new norms to have teeth, the system by the mid-1950s had plainly failed.¹²⁹ Only later did human rights advocacy take off as a popular form of internationalist activism. More important, it acquired a distinct political meaning that was closely bound up with the post-1960s constellation.¹³⁰ The story of AIUSA suggests that human rights offered a departure from the dilemmas into which social utopianism and ideological rigor had maneuvered the protest movements of the 1960s, once they had successfully broken up the antitotalitarian consensus and opened up new avenues for political participation. At this historic moment, human rights started to make political sense. They served as a vehicle to overcome the deeply rooted cleavages in the political landscape of Western democracies. Also, they held out the promise of subverting the bipolar world order by applying universal norms to states from all ideological camps. Finally, concern for human rights enabled activists to channel their empathy for the suffering of remote "others" into concrete action and to reaffirm their own moral personae at the same time. A close interrelation between moral subjectivity and personal politics emerged that was by no means confined to Amnesty but rather proved to be a pervasive feature of the "alternative" milieu.¹³¹

Perhaps the greatest difference between the League and Amnesty lay in the impact they had on international relations, and here they were indeed worlds apart. Amnesty's campaigns turned domestic crimes of states, traditionally shrouded in secrecy, into objects of widespread, well-informed public debate abroad and it identified individual victims with a precision hardly imaginable in earlier decades. Never before had a single organization possessed such detailed knowledge about such a vast number of victims of state repression as Amnesty did in the 1970s and 1980s.¹³² With the new kind of expertise that the London organization provided to policymakers it helped entrench the "human rights record" of states as a political category in its own right, which by the late 1970s came to be an increasingly common standard both in the media and in governmental administrations to measure the behavior of states. As more and more organizations joined the struggle, human rights activism now resonated much more strongly in the international arena than during the two decades after the Second World War. By dramatically exposing crimes, NGOs managed to tarnish the international reputation of numerous repressive regimes. Of course, not all targeted governments were effectively hurt and none succumbed under NGO pressure. Yet many did see themselves affected and felt compelled to react, becoming entangled in public controversies about their policies.¹³³

Human rights NGOs in the 1970s and 1980s were clearly more successful than the International League in the sense that they reached their aims to a much greater extent. Yet the final point suggested by the case of Amnesty is that human rights activism cannot even in these years be regarded as a success story. Amnesty's shining star had much dimmer aspects, namely, political ambiguities, institutional inconsistencies, and roiling crises. Even though the organization's growth seemed miraculous,

the regional distribution of the membership remained vastly unequal. Far from suggesting a truly international, let alone global, organization, in 1979 only six countries accounted for three quarters of all Amnesty adoption groups. Amnesty's information politics likewise faced clear limits. During the 1970s, the Secretariat still lacked a solid base of research for large regions in Africa and Asia and found it extremely hard to produce information on so-called closed countries, mostly isolated communist dictatorships. A certain imbalance in its activities could, indeed, hardly be overlooked, as Amnesty focused much of its energies on accessible countries in Latin America, whereas it was often unable to take vigorous action against state crimes in Eastern Europe or China.

Further, even when its activities were well founded in research, Amnesty's politics of empathy proved highly ambiguous. The organization's reports largely stripped human rights violations of their political context. Seldom did they discuss the political or ideological causes of state terror. Very often, therefore, they evoked the picture of ubiquitous, anonymous, and even unaccountable violence.¹³⁴ Amnesty's publications also blurred social patterns of violence by selecting victims from among as many different groups as possible, and its messages were often dramatizing.¹³⁵

Finally, Amnesty's rapid professionalization came at a cost for activists. As can be seen from the experience of AIUSA, reorganization reached down to the very basis of grassroots members. Local groups no longer dedicated most of their time to writing letters for their "adopted" prisoners, as they had done in the idyllic 1960s. Rather, they came to resemble miniature Amnesty sections. Groups became increasingly involved in national campaigns, were expected to organize their own fundraising drives, to lobby politicians, and to get in touch with the local media to buttress the section's promotional efforts.¹³⁶ Not all activists were happy with their new tasks. Many started to complain about what they regarded as an unnecessarily bureaucratized and paternalistic Board.¹³⁷ An external survey noted that members wanted to "get back in touch with the sense of 'cause' that brought them to AIUSA in the first place."¹³⁸ As the gap between the highly centralized national management and the active grassroots membership continued to widen, AIUSA in the early 1980s even became embroiled in an identity crisis.¹³⁹

For whatever its novelty and success, whatever its shortcomings and ambiguities, human rights activism as it had developed up to that point was clearly not the end of the story. The coming decades would see new political ambitions and windows of opportunity, as well as new setbacks and limits. The 1970s, after all, were but a transitory phase, after which civil human rights engagement continued its protean journey.

NOTES

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3. Ivan Morris to Martin Ennals, September 17, 1970, Film 464, Amnesty International International Secretariat, International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam (hereafter AIIS IISH).

4. Jonathan Powers, *Against Oblivion: Amnesty International's Fight for Human Rights*

(Glasgow: Fontana, 1981); Powers, *Like Water on Stone: The Story of Amnesty International* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001); Egon Larsen, *Im Namen der Menschenrechte: Die Geschichte von Amnesty International* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1983).

5. William Korey, *NGOs and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "A Curious Grapevine"* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998); Arieh Neier, *The International Human Rights Movement: A History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012).

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9. See Johannes Morsink, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Origins, Drafting and Intent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001); Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005); Jay M. Winter, *Dreams of Peace and Freedom: Utopian Moments in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006); Paul Kennedy, *The Parliament of Man: The United Nations and the Quest for World Government* (London: Penguin, 2006).

10. Korey, *NGOs*.

11. See Kenneth Cmiel, "The Emergence of Human Rights Politics in the United States," *Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (1999): 1231–50. The most elaborate version of this argument is Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010). For a nuanced discussion of the 1970s, see Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn, eds., *Moral für die Welt? Menschenrechtspolitik in den 1970ern* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012).

12. Lists of members can be found in ILHR Records, NYPL, box 9. See William D. Irvine, *Between Justice and Politics: The Ligue des Droits de l'Homme* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007); Éric Agrikoliansky, *La Ligue française des droits de l'homme et du citoyen depuis 1945: Sociologie d'un engagement civique* (Paris: Harmattan, 2002).

13. Presenting the International League of the Rights of Man, December 1945, Frances Grant Papers, Rutgers University Archives, New Brunswick, N.J. (hereafter Grant Papers), box 25.

14. Memorandum submitted to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, May 13, 1946, Grant Papers, box 23; Affiliates, n.d. [1947?], ILHR Records, NYPL, box 10.

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18. For an overview, see Baldwin to all Members of Board and Volunteers, June 1956, ILHR Records, NYPL, box 11.
19. On the League's support to anticolonial activists, see Meredith Terretta, “‘We Had Been Fooled into Thinking that the UN Watches over the Entire World’: Human Rights, UN Trust Territories, and Africa’s Decolonization,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2012): 329–60.
20. On this and the following passage, see the listings in the League's summaries of activities, e.g., *A Year's Story of Human Rights, 1952* (New York: The League, 1953).
21. See Baldwin to George Paik, May 16, 1951, ILHR Records, NYPL, box 10.
22. See To all affiliates, May 27, 1954, and Baldwin, [round letter “Dear Friend of Civil Liberties”], n.d., both ILHR Records, NYPL, box 11.
23. Minutes of the Board Meeting, June 8, 1960, Grant Papers, box 23.
24. Releases in Haiti, Peru, and Yugoslavia cited in International League for the Rights of Man, ed., *Human Rights 1953–4*.
25. See ibid.; International League for the Rights of Man, ed., *The Rights of Man and the Wrongs of States: A Summary of Activities, 1964–1965* (New York: The League, 1965).
26. See International League of the Rights of Man, ed., *A Year's Story of Human Rights, 1952* (New York: The League, 1953); Proposals for new membership in the ILRM in 1971, n.d., Grant Papers, box 24.
27. See Baldwin, Some Techniques for Human Rights, n.d. [1957/58?], ILHR Records, NYPL, box 8; Tony Smythe, Evaluation of the League's Administrative Capacity and Structure, n.d. [mid-1970s?], Grant Papers, box 23.
28. See Baldwin to Peter Benenson, February 5, 1964, ILHR Records, NYPL, box 29; Minutes of Board Meeting, November 14, 1974, Grant Papers, box 23; Smythe, Evaluation.
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30. Address by Baldwin to 65th Plenary Meeting of Assembly of Captive European Nations, December 10, 1958, ILHR Records, NYPL, box 5.
31. See Mark Mazower, “The Strange Triumph of Human Rights, 1933–1950,” *Historical Journal* 47, no. 2 (2004): 379–99.
32. On the UN, see A. W. Brian Simpson, *Human Rights and the End of Empire: Britain and the Genesis of the European Convention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Roger Normand and Sarah Zaidi, *Human Rights at the UN: The Political History of Universal Justice* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008); Fabian Klose, *Menschenrechte im Schatten kolonialer Gewalt: Die*

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37. Brockway to Baldwin, May 11, 1954, ILHR Records, NYPL, box 7.

38. See Normand and Zaidi, *Human Rights at the UN*, 197–242.

39. Affiliates, n.d. [1947?], ILHR Records, NYPL, box 10.

40. Baldwin and Grant to Eleanor Roosevelt, June 15, 1948, Grant Papers, box 24.

41. See Minutes of Meeting, November 20, 1951, Grant Papers, box 23.

42. International League for the Rights of Man, ed., *The State of Human Rights: Record of Activities for 1957 to 1958* (New York: The League, 1958).

43. Baldwin, Some Techniques.

44. International League for the Rights of Man, ed., *The State of Human Rights* (New York: The League, 1958), foreword.

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48. Van Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretative History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 55.

49. See Baldwin, Memo, n.d., Grant Papers, box 23; International League of the Rights of Man, *Human Rights 1953–4*, introduction. The following passage is largely based on the Minutes of the Board meetings and the League's published "Summaries of Activities," as well as on various correspondence.

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58. Marcel Aubry to Baldwin, February 20, 1953, NYPL, box 9. See also Norman Thomas to J. E. Holloway, December 10, 1956, ILHR Records, NYPL, box 4.

59. See Minutes of Board Meeting, December 16, 1957, Grant Papers, box 23.

60. William Fitelson to Baldwin, February 25, 1952; and Baldwin to Fitelson, February 26, 1952, ILHR Records, NYPL, box 10.
61. See Larsen, *Im Namen der Menschenrechte*.
62. See Buchanan, “‘The Truth Will Set You Free.’”
63. On the following, see Thomas Claudius and Franz Stepan, *Amnesty International: Portrait einer Organisation* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1978).
64. See Buchanan, “Amnesty International in Crisis.”
65. See Fritz Scherk, Fundraising and Promotion, July 1975, AIIS IISH, folder 92; Principles underlying AI’s Development Work, November 1986, AIIS IISH, 265; IEC, Report to the 11th ICM, 1978, AIUSA Records, Columbia University, Record Group [hereafter RG] I, series 3, box 1; AI—25 Years against Injustice, 1986, RG II, series 3, box 5.
66. See [List of groups], AIIS IISH, folder 48; [List of groups], February 1968; International Executive Meeting, May 9/10, 1970, both AIIS IISH, film 555; Group development, March 1971, AIIS IISH, folder 51; Number of Groups at 30 June 1975, AIIS IISH, 94.
67. See Long Range Planning Committee, AI—Five Years Hence, May 31, 1972, AIIS IISH, folder 58.
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84. Mary Daly, Planning Paper, May 15, 1985, AIUSA Records, RG IV, series 1.7, box 11.
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89. See Major Activities of Initial Period of the Campaign, n.d., AIUSA Records, RG IV, series 1.3, box 7.
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91. International Secretariat, AI and International Organizations: 2. The UN, December 1979, AIUSA Records, RG IV, series 1.3, box 2.
92. See the documents and reports of local groups in AIUSA Records, RG IV, series 2.2.
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127. See Baldwin, Additional Memo on League Program; Zimmermann, Program for the ILRM, n.d., ILHR Records, NYPL, box 43; Baldwin, A Few Comments on League Politics, n.d. [1967?], Grant Papers, box 29; Herschel Halbert to Baldwin, November 30, 1969, Grant Papers, box 24.
128. See the lists of Chile groups in Garling, *Human Rights Handbook*, 71–81; and Laurie S. Wiseberg and Hazel Sirett, eds., *Human Rights Directory, Western Europe: A Directory of Organizations in Western Europe Concerned with Issues of Human Rights and Social Justice* (Washington, D.C.: Human Rights Internet, 1982), index 3; Galchinsky, *Jews and Human Rights*, 51–82.
129. See C. W. W. Greenidge, *Slavery at the United Nations* [Address at the Annual Meeting of the Society, 15 June 1954] (n.p., 1954); Galchinsky, *Jews and Human Rights*, 43; International Council of Women, ed., *Women in a Changing World: The Dynamic Story of the International Council of Women since 1888* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 153; *Human Rights: Final Report of the International NGO Conference*, 66.
130. For a similar argument, see Moyn, *Last Utopia*.
131. See Sven Reichardt and Detlef Siegfried, eds., *Das alternative Milieu: Antibürgerlicher Lebensstil und linke Politik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und Europa 1968–1983* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2010).
132. With the possible exception of the Red Cross, which, however, did not make public use of its information.
133. See my essay “‘Under a Magnifying Glass’: The International Human Rights Campaign against Chile in the 1970s,” in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 312–42.
134. Amnesty International, Irish Section, ed., *25 Years against Injustice* (Dublin: Amnesty International, Irish Section, 1986).

135. See Amnesty International, ed., *Chile: An Amnesty International Report* (London: Amnesty International Publications 1974).

136. See Maurer, Techniques for adoption groups, June 4, 1980, AIUSA Records, RG I, series 1, box 2.

137. See John and Kathleen Boli-Bennett to Ginetta Sagan and Ivan Morris, January 20, 1975, AIUSA Records, RG I, series 1, box 1.

138. Planning and Management Assistance Project, Center for Community Change: Report on the Organizational Structure of AIUSA, April 20, 1981, AIUSA Records, RG I, series 4, box 11.

139. See Planning Meeting: AIUSA Growth and Development, November 20, 1976, AIUSA Records, RG I, series 4, box 7; Meeting of the Board of Directors, December 10/11, 1977, AIUSA Records, RG I, series 1, box 1; Maurer, Evaluation of Annual Meeting, March 18–20, 1977, AIUSA Records, RG III, box 1.