

Peter Benenson's "The forgotten prisoners" (1961)

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In a full-page article, published on May 28, 1961, British barrister Peter Benenson shared with the world his idea of organizing a one-year campaign to draw attention to prisoners of conscience around the world. The response to this initiative was overwhelming and soon reached beyond the borders of the United Kingdom. What was meant to be a one-year effort turned into a compelling international movement that would soon become the most well-known human rights organization in the world: Amnesty International. Within a matter of years, the organization that started in a spare room in Benenson's law firm turned into a reputable voice that captured the attention of governments and international institutions, and whose research has become well-regarded among media outlets and other human rights specialists. Within a few decades, Amnesty International became a mass-membership movement, which now boasts several million members around the world. With his 1961 article, Benenson not only drew attention to "the forgotten prisoners" but also set the tone for Amnesty International for decades to come. He rooted the organization firmly in the Cold War divide and introduced confusion about what Amnesty exactly wanted to be: a mass movement or a research organization. This legacy would define the organization in the decades to come, long after Benenson's own involvement came to an end.

Genesis

In November 1960, during his morning commute, Peter Benenson read an article about two Portuguese students who, after toasting to freedom, were arrested and sentenced to seven years in prison. This story inspired him to start an initiative to advocate for the release of political prisoners around the world. This is the founding myth of Amnesty International, the organization that has become one of the most important forces for human rights in the world today.¹ Unfortunately, there is no way to verify the origins of Benenson's idea. In fact, historian Tom Buchanan and several Amnesty chapters have tried to track this story, but he could only prove some of Benenson's recollections of what had initially sparked his idea for the organization.²

What certainly is true, however, is that the inspiration for the initiative that would evolve into Amnesty International spawned in the imagination of this one man. Peter Benenson had a privileged upbringing. He was of British-Russian ancestry, a recent convert to Catholicism, and had been trained at England's best schools. This background allowed him to operate with ease amongst the British elite. More importantly, his commitment to human rights did not start on that tube ride. Benenson had a history of advocating for human rights in other countries, including Spain, South Africa, and Cyprus. In 1957, he even co-founded a lawyers' organization called Justice, in an attempt to engage lawyers from all political currents in the UK with issues of international human rights advocacy.³

After his epiphany on the underground, he searched for collaborators in circles similar to

his own. Through years of practicing law, and his membership in the Labour party, Benenson had built up a large network of barristers and politicians. These connections gave him access to the pages of the Observer to share his ideas, as well as to politicians to propagate them. One of his most important allies was peace activist and Quaker, Eric Baker, with whom he discussed his ideas extensively prior to the launch of the initiative. Baker would contribute the concept “prisoner of conscience” to the emerging organization.⁴

Inspired by the World Refugee Year of 1959-1960, Benenson suggested a year of attention for another group of people: those imprisoned for their opinions. The World Refugee Year was an initiative promoted by the UN to make the abstract concept of “refugee” more personal through spotlighting individual stories that would move citizens of the “first world” and convince governments to sign the 1951 Refugee Convention. Some organizers of the campaign enthusiastically concluded how the initiative had brought people together and instilled a new “spirit”, hoping that this would do away with old enmities. The illusory nature of these wishes was clear from the very beginning as the year itself was immediately opposed by countries from the Soviet sphere of influence, who contended that any refugees from their region had no reason not to return.⁵

Despite the fact that the Year of the Refugee had not been free of Cold War influences, Benenson believed that his new initiative could build on this precedent and transcend East-West tensions. He would later describe the period in which he conceived of his idea as a “brief thaw in the Cold War.” And even though we now know that the winter and spring of 1960-1961 would soon be followed by some of the most intense stand-offs of the East-West conflict, in those months one could believe that the confrontation of the 1950s had ended, with new, more moderate world leaders in place. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev’s positive outreach towards American president-to-be John F. Kennedy upon his election in 1960 contained the promise of a new era of international relations.⁶ Despite this optimism, the Cold War remained central to Benenson’s initiative, if only in his explicit goal to overcome its divisions. He even briefly considered naming the initiative “Armistice”.⁷

Eventually Benenson and his collaborators would choose a name that directly referred to releasing prisoners: “Appeal for Amnesty”. As several chroniclers of the organization later rightfully remarked, the name unwillingly created the suggestion that political prisoners needed a pardon because they had actually done something wrong.⁸ The name also associated the initiative with the many partisan amnesty campaigns of the 1950s and 60s, many of which focused on groups of prisoners of a particular ideological persuasion. These campaigns usually only campaigned for like-minded prisoners rather than advocating that everyone should be able to enjoy their basic rights irrespective of what they believed or where they lived, as Benenson proposed. After the release of his article, the “Appeal for Amnesty in Spain” complained about the similarity in name. Even more awkwardly, to others the name invoked the post-war amnesty groups aiming to release Nazis, collaborators, and other war criminals. Meanwhile, in the US the organization was hampered by connotations with amnesty campaigns for Vietnam war draft resisters.⁹

Benenson’s initiative cannot be understood without the context of the insecurities caused by the East-West conflict and the changing, secularizing world of the 1960s. Several political and activist circles, including the (Christian) peace movements of the time, engaged in soul-

searching in the 1960s. This soul-searching was prompted by the brief illusion that the ideological stalemate of the 1950s, which had previously defined their activities, might have come to an end.¹⁰

The idea to create a rights-based movement to unite people in a nonpartisan form of activism seems to have been on Benenson's mind long before the moment of inspiration in the autumn of 1960.¹¹ In this context, he was aiming for a spiritual experience, which included bringing people together and creating an "awakened and vigilant world consciousness". In his writings he admitted that, to him, this aspect was much more important than what those people would be fighting for.¹² Benenson's initiative, then, would be related to the pacifist, Christian, and left-wing movements of the 1950s and 60s, trying to offer hope, instead of fear, and aiming to transcend ideological divides. This kinship would remain visible in the future organization's symbolism and membership composition. Many of the future activists shared Benenson's search for something more, both spiritually and politically, and often would be inspired by left-wing ideals or Christian values.¹³

One of the initiative's first and strongest advocates was Eric Baker of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). This peace organization, established in 1957, effectively mobilized people on the left in unaligned peace activism. Historian Tom Buchanan found that the two organizations offered the same kind of "simple moral message that offered to transcend the Cold War, and which appears to have appealed particularly to the middle class." However, the CND would be more openly left leaning, while the initiative that Benenson and Baker set out to create claimed to be unpolitical.¹⁴

Although Benenson did not refer to religion in his May 1961 appeal, to him, as a recently converted Catholic, it was probably a source of inspiration. A lot of the symbols and ceremonies that Benenson and those around him would develop for the movement he envisioned were religiously inspired. This included the strong presence of candles in the organization's symbolism and the suggestion to launch the appeal on Trinity Sunday. According to social scientist Stephen Hopgood, who wrote one of the most in-depth studies of the Amnesty movement, Christianity was a fertile cultural and social soil for the development of the organization, a process which was further driven by Benenson's own spiritual goals.¹⁵

Content

"On both sides of the Iron Curtain, thousands of men and women are being held in gaol without trial because their political or religious views differ from those of their Governments." From the opening lines of his article Benenson was incredibly clear about one thing: the initiative that he envisioned was not going to be another Cold War-related instrumentalisation of people's fates or the concept of human rights. With his first words "on both sides of the Iron Curtain", he revealed his conviction that suffering was not limited to just one side of the conflict.

Only a little further in the article, Benenson made clear how he aimed to emphasize this point: by taking turns in calling out human rights violations on both sides of the ideological

divide. In his first mention of practical examples, Benenson jumped back and forth between decrying violations in countries in both the East and the West. He started by mentioning several violations in Spain and Hungary. Later on, his repertoire turned more varied, calling out Angola, Romania, Spain, the US, and South Africa – emphasizing furthermore that not only dictatorships were to blame, but that human rights were also being violated in democracies.

This tit for tat approach – balancing out the mentioning of a prisoner in the one bloc with a prisoner in the opposing bloc – amounted to an attempt of overcoming the East-West divide that was itself highly politicized. Instead of bidding farewell to Cold War thinking, Benenson’s strategy entrenched it into the initiative. This impression was further strengthened by his use of typical Cold War vernacular such as “Iron Curtain” and “Bamboo Curtain.” By using these concepts, which admittedly were common at the time, he strengthened the image of the division he aimed to transcend. This created a legacy which would prove very hard to shed in the years to come.¹⁶

His balancing approach was not only a very political attempt to escape politics, it was also a strategy that exposed his initiative to the criticism of relativizing large crimes in dictatorships. Benenson was often chastized for putting large scale human rights violations in repressive regimes on par with minor incriminations in democratic states, just in order not to be accused of taking (ideological) sides. Benenson continued to counter this allegation with his conviction that “suffering is suffering wherever it happens.”¹⁷

In his article, Benenson argued that the publicizing of individual fates as a “new technique” was necessary to avoid ideological co-option. This method indicated that Benenson’s campaign aimed to save individuals, rather than promote a certain ideology, which meant avoiding “the fate of previous amnesty campaigns, which so often have become more concerned with publicising the political views of the imprisoned than with humanitarian purposes.” However, this technique was not as new as he suggested. Indeed, many previous amnesty or advocacy campaigns for political prisoners had been partisan and focused on raising money, rather than writing letters. But individual stories had played a role before, including during the World Refugee Year, which seemed to have been a source of inspiration for Benenson.¹⁸ The collection of information in order to galvanize public opinion was an even older method, which had a long history in the campaign to abolish slavery that Benenson eagerly referred to elsewhere in the article.¹⁹

The article featured the personal stories of individuals, with six portraits appearing at the very top. It furthermore announced the publication that autumn of nine stories of men and women deliberately chosen to come “from different parts of the world, of varying political and religious outlook.” This book, entitled *Persecution 1961*, would be based on the premise that “there is no area in the world where people are not suffering for their beliefs, and no ideology which is blameless.” In the book, Benenson even explicitly spoke about crimes being “matched on the other side of the ideological fence.”²⁰

With the announcement of the “new technique”, including the book and an office to collect information, the article foreshadowed Amnesty’s later research-focused approach. Through these announcements Benenson set himself and the movement the challenge of collecting

hard-to-come-by information within a limited time frame. This challenge foreshadowed the all-too-often occurring situation in later years of members advocating for people they hardly knew, beyond their name and the fact that they sat in prison.²¹

Despite the attempts to present a broad range of cases, most prisoners mentioned in the article were imprisoned for ideas that were left-wing or liberal. Benenson acknowledged this, but although he spoke out against shared ideological vistas as the basis of activism at other places in the article, he nevertheless realized that some form of political kinship strengthened his case: “The opinions which have brought them to prison are the common coinage of argument in free society.”²² Such a choice of prisoners might very well have helped to attract supporters. In later years it turned out that, despite the high-minded ideal of helping everyone indiscriminately, it was more difficult to motivate members to work on imprisoned communists or far-right politicians. Furthermore, this focus on the ideology of the country, rather than the person, created a situation where Amnesty groups were dividing their activities between the different geopolitical blocs of the world, but were still only helping people of the same ideological background.²³

Benenson’s goal of bringing people together in common action was woven into the article with utilitarian arguments. Benenson first referred to the “sickening sense of impotence” that newspaper readers might feel upon reading about repression day after day, presuming that “if these feelings of disgust all over the world could be united into common action, something effective could be done.” Later in the article he stated more explicitly: “The success of the 1961 Amnesty Campaign depends on how powerfully it is possible to rally public opinion. It depends, too, upon the campaign being all-embracing in its composition, international in character and politically impartial in direction.”

The central weapon of the campaign would be public opinion and that could only be influential if it consisted of more than just the usual suspects – those opposing the violating government on political grounds – thus argued Benenson. In the article, he repeatedly mentioned the need to “mobilise” or “rally” public opinion. Benenson expressed the opinion that, even though most of the aims of the appeal needed to be realized by governments, ordinary people could be important actors in standing up for prisoners of conscience. Here, he took inspiration from one of the many symbols he had chosen to launch his new initiative, the centenary of abolition of slavery in the US: “[E]xperience shows that in matters such as these governments are prepared to follow only where public opinion leads. Pressure of opinion a hundred years ago brought about the emancipation of the slaves. It is now for man to insist upon the same freedom for his mind as he has won for his body.”

The more practical manifestation of his wish to be “all-embracing” and “politically broad” was also present at the very end of his article where he announced the first press conference of the campaign with three MP speakers – one each from the Conservative, Labour, and Liberal parties. This was one of the elements contributing to a situation in which the article itself very clearly formulated that the initiative would be open to everyone who supported its goals, but the subtext was different. The elite background of the emerging initiative was not only apparent in the easy access to national politicians and national (and international) press, but also in the way the initiators introduced themselves

as “a group of lawyers, writers, and publishers in London.” Indeed not only those involved before the publication of the article, but also many of those becoming active in founding the actual organization afterwards would be well-related or even direct acquaintances of Benenson.²⁴

Benenson consciously phrased his quest for a broad and all-embracing movement in practical terms rather than spiritual ones. He shared his thoughts about a “movement for social and spiritual change” with his fellow activists throughout 1961 but did not want to express these aims publicly. He probably rightfully felt that it would be more difficult to garner support if people realized that the movement itself was the actual goal. He wrote to Eric Baker in August 1961: “The underlying purpose of this campaign, which I hope those who are closely connected with it will remember, but never publish – is to find a common base upon which the idealists of the world can cooperate.”²⁵

Benenson described in this letter how he aimed to “re-ignite a fire in the minds of men” and “absorb the latent enthusiasm of great numbers of such idealists who have, since the eclipse of Socialism, become increasingly frustrated.” For him, this was more important than “to bring people out of prison.” Rather than freeing those heroically imprisoned for their ideas, Benenson aimed to free the people around them imprisoned by “cynicism and doubt.” However, his private suggestion that these martyrs and saints were just as well off in prison as anywhere else sounds like an unlikely antidote to cynical thought. Furthermore, Benenson displayed some of the sexism of the time with his suggestion that, beyond attracting the disillusioned of the world, the movement could also attract “women past the prime of their life who have been, unfortunately, unable to expend in full their maternal impulses.”²⁶ Benenson was more interested in changing the lives of the people he mobilized than those of the ones he mobilized for, but probably consciously he did not include any of these deliberations in his public appeal.²⁷

Something else conspicuously missing from the article that started the largest and most well-known human rights organization in the world, was the mention of the concept itself. Only twice did Benenson refer to human rights, namely when he mentioned the international framework of what his initiative aimed to cover including articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights on freedom of conscience and expression. Instead, Benenson introduced another concept: “Prisoners of Conscience”, defined as: “Any person who is physically restrained (by imprisonment or otherwise) from expressing (in any form of words or symbols) any opinion which he honestly holds and which does not advocate or condone personal violence.” This was not surprising in the 1960s, when human rights and the declarations and covenants in which they were laid down, were mainly concepts referred to in UN corridors. If used politically, they were generally used as weapons in the overly ideologically charged context of the East-West conflict. At this time, they had not yet sparked enthusiasm among left-wing or liberal activists yet. That appeal would only emerge from the mid-1970s, when mass human rights activism started to replace the more ideological activism of the 1960s.²⁸ Not only did Benenson hardly refer to the concept of human rights, but the scope for action that he introduced was limited to only a few articles and a narrow category of beneficiaries, which was further limited through a non-violence clause and an exclusion of people who conspired with foreign governments. Hopgood suggests that the non-violence clause could be attributed to the influence of

Baker's Quaker background.²⁹ Furthermore, Benenson's distance from the concept of human rights was not limited to the time when Amnesty was conceived. In several interviews in the 1980s, thus well beyond the breakthrough of human rights activism and Amnesty as its prime proponent, Benenson continued to prefer "civil liberties" as a description. On the basis of Benenson's original article and his later statements, Hopgood concludes that to Benenson the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was in no way a founding element of the organization. Benenson's mentions of the declaration merely served to show that rights language was used in the international diplomatic sphere and was accepted by states. The declaration was an external affirmation rather than a source of activism.³⁰

In the first few decades of its existence, Amnesty would become known as an organization that focused on a clearly limited definition of human rights, namely a few specific political and civic rights. The idea that to be effective Amnesty needed to limit its mandate would become a basic premise of the organization for decades.³¹ This can be interpreted as one way the emerging organization tried to make itself as politically broad as possible, by sparing itself debilitating debates about social and economic rights. The limitation to campaign for political prisoners who refrained from (propagating) violence similarly could be interpreted as an attempt to avoid debates on the acceptability of political violence. Only several years later, the Nelson Mandela case showed that these clear limits did not preclude such difficult discussions.³²

However, these clear rules can only be partially traced back to Benenson's article. The article itself, after introducing the parameters of articles 17 and 18 and the prisoner of conscience concept, immediately broadened the scope again. Benenson mentioned people who faced harassment for their ideas without being imprisoned, talked about improving access to political asylum, as well as finding jobs for refugees. He also touched upon broad, and sometimes politicized, issues such as freedom, the defense of democracy, and free speech. Benenson was similarly loose in his categorization in *Persecution 1961*, which featured several activists who suffered from harassment or multiple short-term detentions, instead of being a political prisoner on a long jail sentence – as the later classic understanding of a prisoner of conscience would become.³³

The lack of exact categorization and flexibility was exemplary of Benenson, who was not a meticulous organizer but rather a charismatic inspirator that often shied away from strict rules or bureaucracy. Benenson was also rather ambiguous about what exactly he wanted to achieve.³⁴ These uncertain beginnings would soon be replaced by a strict specialization on the cases of prisoners of conscience and, therefore, clearer limitations on what rights the organization advocated for. The adoption of other fields of work, including individuals facing police harassment or short-term detentions, or issues specific to refugees would be subject to considerable discussion. Amnesty's initial looseness had been institutionally forgotten and the people taking up issues such as refugee work believed that they were treading new and radical ground, while still carrying out Benenson's appeal.³⁵

Impact

Benenson's call to action was fruitful from the very beginning, proven by the fact he

received approximately 1,000 letters from individuals interested in getting involved.³⁶ This broad interest was partly facilitated by the fact that the original appeal had a looseness and lack of consistency that allowed many people to read into it what they chose to. This ambiguity was something Amnesty would continue to struggle with for a long time. Some of Amnesty's earliest activists subscribed to Benenson's ideas of moral renewal and uniting idealistic people by transcending old political divides. For Eric Baker, Amnesty represented the response of men and women "who are tired of the polarised thinking which is the result of the Cold War and similar conflicts but who are deeply concerned with those who are suffering simply because they are suffering."³⁷ Others took Benenson's text much more literally. Séan MacBride, former Irish freedom fighter and Minister of Foreign Affairs, was one of the more prominent among the hundreds who would write to Benenson after publication of the article. MacBride later explained how he had aimed to create a kind of "Red Cross" for political prisoners.³⁸

The Red Cross was indeed a sort of guiding light for the emerging human rights movement, not least because both originated in a similar humanistic and religious sentiment, but also because it provided an example of structures, strategies, and concepts to either emulate or to move away from.³⁹ The emerging movement would follow the nationally organized structure of the Red Cross. Facilitated by translations of Benenson's article, interest started to increase in other countries, which led to the establishment of national sections rather than a transnational organization. These sections often developed their own identities and interests, even though they all wished to follow the path set out by Benenson.⁴⁰ The name "Amnesty International" was adopted at the second conference of these sections in Belgium in 1962.⁴¹

The international grassroots mass membership that this system of national sections would generate, originating from the enthusiasm sparked by Benenson's initial appeal, would make Amnesty unique and was crucial to its international standing. It provided the organization with exceptional leverage, a constant flow of money which allowed it to remain independent from governments, and an important source of international legitimacy. The fact that Amnesty was more than just an organization focused on a certain goal, but rather a members' movement that spanned the globe, flowed directly from Benenson's article. It also meant that, contrary to later human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty would always be slow in decision-making, as it needed approval from the membership for any change in policy.⁴²

The other way that Amnesty would ensure public involvement was the "threes" system, that Benenson allegedly came up with. This combined both the wish to inspire and mobilize people and the urge to create an ideology-free campaign. The "threes" groups would form locally and receive from the central Amnesty office one prisoner in the West, one in the East, and one in a nonaligned country to work on. These "adoption" groups often struggled to get through to foreign governments and collect information of prisoners of whom they often only knew a name. The groups were encouraged to a level of self-sufficiency and improvisation in fulfilling these tasks that was hard to muster for people unfamiliar with how international politics worked. This pioneering and improvisation - characteristic of Benenson and many around him - would later give way to strict rules and guidance as well as more information from the central office on how adoption groups should go about their

work.⁴³

Benenson's initial appeal set the stage for some of the most long-lasting confusions and discussions within the movement. Not only did he both envision a movement that simultaneously reactivated the disillusioned and liberated prisoners of conscience, he also introduced a range of activities and concepts that the movement would continue to struggle with for a large part of its existence. Benenson's attempt to create both a mass volunteer movement and a research organization, whose aim would be to collect unique data on a forgotten group of people, was very ambitious. Benenson did not make up his mind in this respect, or perhaps he was trying to express two different sides of his own personality in this initiative.⁴⁴ Hopgood even claims that the moral authority brought by thorough and objective research and the political authority brought by grassroots membership do not go well together.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, setting off from the first article in the Observer, research and mass membership would become so entangled with Amnesty's identity that it was impossible to drop one or the other. The main reason for the growth and professionalization of the research department was the constant need to provide the grassroots network of Amnesty groups with enough cases to campaign on.⁴⁶

Both the wish to become a mass movement and the desire to be a research organization were reflected in the original appeal. The serious dedication by mostly female volunteers of the first hour, originally working from Benenson's office, would set the tone for Amnesty's future research department. Hopgood describes this ethos as very serious and in many ways quite Spartan: Amnesty was not claiming individual successes, researchers were strictly anonymous, and praise for individual work was rare. The workloads were high, and they were justified with the seriousness of the suffering that this work tried to fight and prevent.⁴⁷

Some of the many uncertainties and internal contradictions that the emerging organization had inherited from Benenson's first multi-focused appeal came to a head in 1967. Benenson had always been interested in the bigger picture, rather than the nitty gritty of the daily bureaucratic and financial reality. Coming from a privileged background, Benenson inherited access to the country's elite and he easily moved within networks of political power. This initial relaxed method of dealing with those in power would only later be replaced with strict rules regarding how closely Amnesty could cooperate with governments – rules that were implemented to safeguard Amnesty's independence. Benenson, MacBride, and other prominent actors of the first generation, dealt with the mighty and well-off, traveled, and advocated on behalf of those imprisoned for political reasons in ways that local groups never could. Indeed, the rules not to secretly negotiate with governments and only act in the open, which would become self-evident to Amnesty later and be strictly enforced by London, was not included in Benenson's initial appeal and back-door deals or secret visits were thus not ruled out as an option to reach Amnesty's goals in the beginning.⁴⁸

In 1967, Amnesty went through its most serious crisis to date. The crisis originated in a Benenson's decision to accept and channel government money without sufficient transparency or stringent financial oversight, and was quickly combined with his growing mistrust towards his colleagues.⁴⁹ Today's Amnesty, known for its strict adherence to self-

imposed rules, did not actually originate from Benenson's founding appeal, but would only emerge as a result of the 1967 crisis. From the late 1960s onwards, the organization decidedly moved away from Benenson's loose style towards more centralized structures and clear rules set out in a mandate. This search for rules that could safeguard Amnesty's credibility and moral authority would turn out to foster considerable membership growth in the 1970s.⁵⁰

The end of Amnesty's first decade saw the birth of its second core document: the mandate. It explained what the organization could and could not work on and firmly established the organization's emphasis on impartiality. The mandate stipulated that the organization only covered a limited set of rights. This was seen as crucial for being effective with finite resources. At its core, the direction taken since 1961 was maintained: a focus on prisoners of conscience and limited set of political and civil rights.⁵¹ The mandate would gradually broaden over the years amidst difficult discussions on whether a limited mandate remained defensible, or whether broadening would undermine Amnesty's initial work and the methods that had previously been put in place. The exclusive focus on prisoners of conscience was expanded in the 1970s to include unconditional opposition to torture and the death penalty. The organization acted in Benenson's spirit by using the term "abolition" for these campaigns, which helped maintain Benenson's symbolic bridge between the founding of Amnesty and the struggle for the abolition of slavery. More radical expansions, including the acceptance of activism in the field of social and economic rights, would only follow after the end of the East-West conflict.⁵²

In response to the 1967 crisis, Amnesty increased its emphasis on impartiality.⁵³ From a general attempt not to take sides in a complex geopolitical landscape, the search for impartiality turned into a rigorous and strict set of rules which would be important in establishing and safeguarding the organization's authority, credibility, and independence.⁵⁴ As Hopgood rightfully remarked Amnesty's dual character as both a mass membership and a research organization provided multiple avenues to gain credibility. By the late 1960s, the Amnesty leadership seemed to have made its choice regarding which path to take. They had chosen to focus on objective and distanced research.⁵⁵

Amnesty ensured its research was impartial in multiple ways. From the very beginning Benenson and Amnesty used the principle of balancing criticism between different geopolitical regions to show that no region or ideology was innocent.⁵⁶ While the highly political "threes" policy was meant to safeguard the organization's impartiality, it actually undermined Benenson's wish to overcome the Cold War divided by embedding its structure into its work.⁵⁷

In the years after the 1967 crisis, balancing criticism as a safeguard of impartiality was complemented with distanced research, namely the rule that people should work on countries other than their own. This rule made sure researchers and activists had less of a stake in the country they were working on, prevented "identity politics", and reinforced "the core ethics of international solidarity."⁵⁸ This had not been part of Benenson's original appeal. Benenson later acknowledged that he had always believed that you could not "be interested in human rights in another country (...) unless you were concerned with human rights at home."⁵⁹

In the 1970s, nearly a decade after its establishment, Amnesty still adhered to many of the principles outlined in Benenson's 1961 call to action. However, the organization had also developed in unforeseen directions.⁶⁰ Benenson's idea that the act of combining people into a movement was more important than the goal of the movement no longer reigned. At the same time, however, Amnesty remained a membership organization and this characteristic would be defended just as vigorously by Benenson's successors. When the American section moved away from this original idea and developed more towards becoming a lobbying organization, this action was met with fierce opposition from the international secretariat in London. Amnesty should be a means for ordinary people to be involved in the world's affairs; this element could not be taken away.⁶¹

Beginning in the mid-1970s the rule not to work on one's own country became increasingly dominant in the organization. At the same time the original principle from Benenson's appeal – the idea to balance criticism between different actors – was called continually called into question by members and employees alike. Under the influence of détente, the practice aimed at balancing East, West, and non-aligned countries started to feel like reaffirming an old, and now irrelevant, Cold War paradigm. The rule nevertheless was hard to shed and stayed in place in one form or another for many years to come. Many Amnesty members felt uncomfortable with the strict rules that were meant to make sure the organization balanced its criticism equally. At the same time, despite these rules, Amnesty continued to be haunted by criticism, both from within and outside the organization, that it was too soft or too hard on either socialist or Western countries. Balancing the criticism between different regions and ideologies remained the easiest and most familiar strategy to counter this.⁶²

Besides challenges, détente and the political realities of the 1970s also provided opportunities. Benenson's recognition of a lull in the Cold War had been somewhat premature, but when détente finally arrived, people viewed his message as being on point and queued up to join.⁶³ Amnesty's impartial human rights activism provided an alternative for the socialite utopia discredited by tanks in the streets of Prague and revolutionary violence.⁶⁴ Amnesty's growth in the 1970s fits the narrative of human rights activism as a replacement for utopian beliefs as told by Samuel Moyn and Jan Eckel.⁶⁵ Its style of activism suited and shaped the more apolitical and minimalist activism of the 1970s, which was about "helping individuals" instead of "saving the world."⁶⁶ Amnesty's activism became a widely emulated model of how to campaign for human rights.⁶⁷

Amnesty's rise since 1961 is, however, not an unequivocal success story. Some of the main points of reproach are rooted in Benenson's appeal. Benenson had directed his call towards a British, well-educated, and middle-class public. Although the appeal would reach beyond the borders of the UK, it would initially be received by primarily the same social strata in North-Western European countries. This is not surprising, as these were the potentially disillusioned people whose attention Benenson wanted to capture; they had the time, resources, and mental energy to care about problems far away from their everyday concerns. Hopgood remarks that to Benenson, Baker, and the other pioneers of Amnesty, social identity did not matter, which created a white and masculine working culture with men in leadership roles and women taking on a lot of the practical work. For a long time, these limitations prevented Amnesty from becoming the truly international movement it

wanted to be.⁶⁸

The awarding of the Nobel peace prize in 1977 marked a period of breakthrough and growth for Amnesty. The speech given by Mümtaz Soysal shows some striking similarities with the original appeal Benenson had penned 16 years before, but it also revealed how much the organization had changed. The main focus of the organization, which Soysal reminded the audience had emerged from “the outrage of one man”, was still on individual fates rather than political or ideological judgments.⁶⁹ Additionally, the central role of public opinion and the activism of “individuals of goodwill” was still there: “The concern of one individual for another, one group for another, one nation for another (...) It was upon this commitment of individual human beings to each other’s welfare that Amnesty International was founded.”⁷⁰ The increased growth and fame of Amnesty, as well as the concept of human rights, had strongly increased the organization’s access to media and its ability to “rally” public opinion., however, not without a certain level of alarmism in Amnesty’s messaging as a consequence.⁷¹

The concept of human rights, which had been so conspicuously missing from the first appeal, was central in the Nobel Prize speech. This can be explained by the prevalence of the concept in the public debate by the 1970s, but also by the fact that Amnesty now worked on a range of human rights issues, including political imprisonment, torture, and the death penalty.⁷² More explicitly than in the 1961 article, this speech explicitly spoke out against using human rights politically or ideologically, as well as juxtaposing different sets of rights against each other: “In the world of international politics it is a perennial temptation to use human rights as a weapon, to ignore the deficiencies at home and exploit those elsewhere as points to be scored in the international power game.”⁷³

Nearly thirty years later, Benenson’s appeal and his charismatic personality have remained a key point of reference for the movement, now headquartered in the Peter Benenson house in London.⁷⁴ Amnesty marked its 50th anniversary in May 2011, commemorating the publishing of Benenson’s article as its moment of establishment. The celebrations leaned heavily on Benenson’s ideas and symbolism. For example, the organization launched a “global call to action designed to help tip the scales against repression and injustice” on 28 May – the same date that Benenson’s initial appeal appeared in the Observer. They even included a virtual ‘Earth Candle’, mirroring the strong presence of candles that Benenson had integrated into the early days of Amnesty’s existence. Furthermore, Amnesty sections around the world held a symbolic toast to freedom “pay[ing] tribute to the tale of two Portuguese students imprisoned for raising their glasses to liberty – an injustice that so outraged British lawyer Peter Benenson that he launched Amnesty International on 28 May 1961.”⁷⁵ In the UK the anniversary celebrations were held in St. Martin in the Fields, the church where Benenson is said to have gone after reading about the Portuguese students to come up with the idea of a movement.⁷⁶

The spirit of Benenson continues to be invoked within the movement even beyond moments of reminiscence and celebration. For instance, in 2011, in response to the Arab Spring uprisings, Secretary General Shalil Shetty wrote: “Let us – ordinary individuals working together – recommit to the vision of Peter Benenson, the man who founded Amnesty International, and remember that individuals can make a difference.”⁷⁷ In 2018,

Amnesty Turkey's Honorary Chair Taner Kılıç alluded to Benenson's article from a Turkish prison cell: "Even if an imprisoned person may fall in the illusion that he would be forgotten even by his closest ones – like "forgotten prisoners" – my situation has been the opposite in fact. In addition to my family and friends, I've become known in and watched by the world thanks to Amnesty International."⁷⁸

Over fifty years after they first appeared in *The Observer* in the spring of 1961, Benenson's words has given rise to an organization that brought his words to life, but also reinterpreted them. The words themselves had kept their appeal, even in the prison cells where Benenson intended to shine a light.

Annotated Bibliography

Hopgood, Stephen: *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International*. Ithaca, NY 2006.

Using a sociological approach and immersing himself into the organization, Stephen Hopgood has authored one of the most extensive studies into the workings of Amnesty International as a whole. By spending considerable time at the International Secretariat and interviewing many employees, he gained an unprecedented insight into the daily life within Amnesty. In addition, he completed extensive research into the travails of the organization, in particular its many soul-searching exercises and restructuring efforts over the years. Hopgood styles the internal debates as a struggle between those wanting to reform the organization and adapt it to the changing times and the "keepers of the flame" who wanted to stick to what they believed was the original intent of the movement. His study reveals the culture and work ethos that has grown within the organization, as well as its continued Western and middle-class overtones.

Jonge, Wilco de, et al. (eds.): [50 Years of Amnesty International: Reflections and Perspectives](#). Amsterdam 2011.

This small band of articles, published on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the organization in 2011 by the Dutch section and the Centre for Human Rights at Utrecht University gives an interesting amalgam of viewpoints and historical insights. Both eyewitness approaches (former Head of Research Stephanie Grant, formal Legal Director Nigel Rodley) and historical and sociological accounts (Stephen Hopgood, Anja Mihr, Ellen Dorsey) shed more light on the development of the organization.

Buchanan, Tom: "The Truth Will Set You Free." *The Making of Amnesty International*, in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 4 (2002), 575-597.

Buchanan, Tom: *Amnesty in Crisis 1966-7*, in: *Twentieth Century British History* 3 (2004), 267-289.

In two well-researched articles about the first decade of Amnesty International, Tom Buchanan accomplished some valuable tasks, including clearing up the stories and myths around the emergence of the organization and detailing the events of the 1966-1967 crisis in

the organization that ousted Benenson and almost brought the movement to an early end. With an eye for detail, good command of the sources, and attention for the political and personal, Buchanan has deconstructed the prevailing narratives within the organization regarding the events that shaped it and written two authoritative historical accounts of how the two major events in Amnesty's history unfolded.

Eckel, Jan: Die Ambivalenz des Guten. Menschenrechten in der internationalen Politik seit den 1940ern. Göttingen 2014.

In his extensive monograph on human rights in international perspective (as well as in several articles mentioned in the bibliography below) Jan Eckel extensively studies Amnesty as a vital phenomenon to understand the development of human rights activism in the second half of the twentieth century. His historical analysis is primarily based on archival documentation of the International Secretariat and American section. He paints the long-term development of the Amnesty movement from its early beginnings in the 1960s, to a time of growth in the 1970s and consolidation in the 1980s that differs from the continuities that the organization itself likes to stress. Instead, he explains the movement reinvented itself in a constant process of trial and error. He gives an apt analysis and critique of many of the organization's struggles with its own methods, concepts, principles, and practices. A case study of the American section gives more insights into national developments and motives within the movements, including its distinctly limited social composition.

Rabben, Linda: Fierce Legion of Friends. A History of Human Rights Campaigns and Campaigners. Hyattsville 2003.

In this popular journalistic book about the rise of human rights activism, primarily in the US, there is also a chapter on Amnesty International. This chapter dives deeply into Benenson's background and the start of the initiative, relying heavily on the oral history interviews recorded with Amnesty's founders by others within the movement in the 1980s. Although Rabben unpacks the founding myth of Amnesty – even calling facts out as part of the myth – she hardly unpacks the consequences of the fact that the majority of her sources are oral testimonies of over two decades after the events. The chapter on Amnesty is nevertheless a relatively comprehensive overview of the organization's origin and early years with some astute observations of its workings.

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Fußnoten

1. Larsen: A flame in Barbed Wire, 10; Buchanan: The Truth, 575 f.; Rabben: Fierce Legion, 174 f.; Amnesty First Annual Report 1961-1962, 2.
2. Buchanan: The Truth, 576; Shipsey: The "Toast to Freedom".
3. Larsen: A Flame in Barbed Wire, 10 f.; Buchanan: The Truth, 577 f.; Rabben: Fierce Legion, 175-179.
4. Buchanan: The Truth, 579, 584-586, 589, Rabben: Fierce Legion, 177-180, 184; Breij/Van Oosterhout: Het verhaal van Amnesty International, 13, 32.
5. Gatrell: World Refugee Year.
6. Buchanan: The Truth, 577; Rabben: Fierce Legion, 195.
7. Buchanan: The Truth, 579, 584, 592 f.; Hopgood: Keepers of the Flame, 7 f.; Rabben: Fierce Legion, 180 f., 192.
8. Buchanan: The Truth, 584; Larsen: A Flame in Barbed Wire, 11, 17. Larsen however also remarked that the fact that the word was almost the same in many languages would later serve the internationally growing organization.
9. Buchanan: The Truth, 579-581, 584; Keys: Reclaiming American Virtue: 184; see also Benenson's own reference in Benenson: The Forgotten Prisoners.
10. Hopgood: Keepers of the Flame, 9, 52 f.
11. Buchanan: The Truth, 595; Hopgood: Keepers of the Flame, 57; Breij/Van Oosterhout: Het verhaal van Amnesty International, 23, 29.
12. Buchanan: The Truth, 595; Hopgood: Keepers of the Flame, 57; Breij/Van Oosterhout: Het verhaal van Amnesty International, 23, 29.
13. Moyn: The Last Utopia, 130-132; Mihr: Menschenrechtsorganisationen, 313; Hopgood: Keepers of the Flame, 56 f.
14. Buchanan: The Truth, 595; Moyn: The Last Utopia, 132.
15. Buchanan: The Truth, 587, 590 f.; Hopgood: Keepers of the Flame, 18, 64 f., 71.
16. Miedema: Not a Movement of Dissidents, 95-100, 245 f.
17. Benenson: Prisoners Remembered, 5; Miedema: Not a Movement of Dissidents, 245 f.
18. Gatrell: World Refugee Year; Rabben: Fierce Legion, 175-177.
19. Eckel: Die Ambivalenz, 365.
20. Benenson: Persecution 1961, 1, 9; Breij/Van Oosterhout: Het verhaal van Amnesty International, 30.

21. Buchanan: The Truth, 586; Rabben: Fierce Legion, 185, 188; Benenson: The Forgotten Prisoners.
22. Buchanan: The Truth, 586.
23. Miedema: Not a Movement of Dissidents, 33, 99.
24. Rabben: Fierce Legion, 184 f.
25. Buchanan: The Truth, 593.
26. Ibid; also see Keys: Reclaiming American Virtue, 190.
27. Buchanan: The Truth, 593.
28. Keys: Reclaiming American Virtue, 186; Moyn, The Last Utopia, 45-47, 63, 68, 79.
29. Benenson: The Forgotten Prisoners; Hopgood: Keepers of the Flame, 60.
30. Hopgood: Keepers of the Flame, 9, 57.
31. Baehr: Amnesty International, 3, 19 f.
32. Hopgood: Keepers of the Flame, 143; Baehr: Amnesty International, 10, 14; Buchanan: The Truth, 585; Clark: Diplomacy of Conscience, 14.
33. Benenson: The Forgotten Prisoners; Benenson: Persecution 1961, 9 f.
34. Buchanan: The Truth, 589, 593 f.
35. Miedema: Not a Movement of Dissidents, 117; Catz/Terlouw: Amnesty International, 101.
36. According to Benenson himself: Benenson, Prisoners Remembered, p. 5.
37. 37 Buchanan: The Truth, 579.
38. 38 Buchanan: The Truth, 583, 594 f.; Rabben: Fierce Legion, 184; Power: Like Water, 121-123.
39. Hopgood: The Endtimes, xi; Amnesty International: Movement for Freedom 4 f., 9, 11 f.; Hopgood: Keepers of the Flame, 24, 68 f.; Miedema: Impartial, 181 f.
40. Hopgood: Keepers of the Flame, 24 f.; Bouwman: Enraged, 57; Snyder: Exporting, 779-799.
41. Buchanan: The Truth, 576.
42. Clark: Diplomacy of Conscience, 9; Dorsey: Managing Change, 182; Hopgood, The Endtimes, 111; Winston: Assessing the Effectiveness, 31, 34 f.
43. Winston: Assessing the Effectiveness, 43; Buchanan: The Truth, 591 f.; Rabben: Fierce Legion, 186-188; Benenson: Prisoners Remembered, 5.
44. Buchanan: The Truth, 592; Hopgood: Keepers of the Flame, 12.
45. Hopgood: Amnesty International's Growth, 80; Hopgood: Keepers of the flame, 210.

46. Clark: Diplomacy of Conscience, 8 f., 124; Rabben: Fierce Legion, 188; Breij/Van Oosterhout: Het verhaal van Amnesty International, 34.
47. Wong: Centralizing Principles, 118, 139; Hopgood: Keepers of the Flame, 23, 74, 104, 107.
48. Rabben: Fierce Legion, 177; Breij/Van Oosterhout: Het verhaal van Amnesty International, 13, 32; Larsen: A Flame in Barbed Wire, 19-21, 26 f.; Keys: Reclaiming American Virtue: 191 f.
49. Buchanan: Amnesty in Crisis, 267-274; Buchanan: The Truth, 595; Clark: Diplomacy of Conscience, 14.
50. Hopgood: Keepers of the Flame, 72; Wong: Centralizing Principles, 60, 107, 130; Rabben: Fierce Legion, 187.
51. Hopgood: Keepers of the Flame, 92 f., 95 f.; Baehr: Amnesty International, 6, 11, 20; Grant: Amnesty's Achievements, 12.
52. Ripp: Transnationalism and Human Rights, 5-21; Thompson: Beyond Expression, 327-334; Hopgood: Keepers of the Flame, 99, 119 f., 182 f., 200; Dorsey: Managing Change, 201; Eckel: Die Ambivalenz, 43, 352.
53. Hopgood: Keepers of the Flame, 92.
54. Hurst: British Human Rights Organizations, 147, 150; Hopgood: Keepers of the Flame, 101, 106 f.
55. Hopgood: Keepers of the Flame, 14, 74, 97, 104.
56. Van Troost: Introduction, 2 f.; Breij/Van Oosterhout: Het verhaal achter Amnesty International, 30.
57. Miedema: Not a Movement of Dissidents, 32 f., 95-100, 245 f.
58. Winston: Assessing the Effectiveness, 31 f.; Hopgood: Keepers of the Flame, 59, 98.
59. Bell/Carens: The Ethical Dilemmas, 308; Rabben: Fierce Legion, 178; see also Keys: Reclaiming American Virtue: 32 f.
60. Eckel: Humanisierung, 607 f.; Eckel: The International League, 183-186.
61. Eckel: Die Ambivalenz, 351 f.; Eckel: The International League, 194; Snyder: Exporting, 789 f.
62. Miedema: Not a Movement of Dissidents, 95-100, 166, 245-251.
63. Ibid., 93-95.
64. Moyn: The Last Utopia, 4 f., 130-132, 212 f.
65. Ibid., 121, 147; Eckel: Die Ambivalenz, 401-403, 808; Eckel: The International League, 199-201, 204; Eckel: Humanisierung, 632.
66. Sellars: The Rise and Rise, 139; Keys: Reclaiming American Virtue: 179, 184.
67. Moyn: The Last Utopia, 4; Hurst: British Human Rights Organizations, 147.

68. Hopgood: *Keepers of the Flame*, x f., 59, 67 f., 147-153, 168-175; Buchanan: *The Truth*, 589 f.; Ripp: *Transnationalism and Human Rights*, 42; Breij/Van Oosterhout: *Het verhaal van Amnesty International*, 32 f.
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71. Eckel: *Die Ambivalenz*, 378-380.
72. Soysal: Nobel Lecture; Eckel: *Die Ambivalenz*, 347.
73. Soysal: Nobel Lecture.
74. Hopgood: *Keepers of the Flame*, p. 54.
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76. McVeigh: *Amnesty International*.
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Zitation

Christie Miedema: Peter Benenson's "The forgotten prisoners" (1961), in: Quellen zur Geschichte der Menschenrechte, herausgegeben vom Arbeitskreis Menschenrechte im 20. Jahrhundert, Februar 2020, URL: www.geschichte-menschenrechte.de/the-forgotton-prisoners/