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‘Let my people go’: diaspora mobilization for the human rights of political prisoners

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ABSTRACT

Diaspora mobilization to influence homeland conflicts has been explored extensively. What has been considered less is the role diasporas play as ‘long distance human rights advocates’ in mobilization for political prisoners. Adding to the increased attention on diasporas as human rights advocates, this inquiry conceptualizes and compares the mobilization of the American Jewish and Vietnamese diasporas during the Cold War to release political prisoners in the Soviet Union and in Vietnam. Jewish and Vietnamese diasporas created influential, special purpose human rights organizations, employed successful framing strategies and mobilized grassroots members through contentious action. The Jewish diaspora further utilized transnational advocacy coalitions and symbolic politics to great effect. This inquiry argues that diaspora human rights NGOs provide critical advantages to human rights advocacy, including through the provision of information about political prisoners, considerable resources for grassroots mobilization and by acting as legitimizing agents for external interventions.

KEYWORDS

Diaspora; non-governmental organizations; human rights; social movements; Jewish; Vietnamese

Introduction

At the nexus of Cold War domestic and international politics, the Jewish and Vietnamese American diasporas mobilized to free political prisoners abroad from grave human rights abuses by the governments of the Soviet Union and Vietnam, respectively. Between the 1960s and 1980s, American Jewish organizations and grassroots movements engaged in sustained advocacy to release Jews in the Soviet Union imprisoned for demanding the right to emigrate, known collectively as ‘refuseniks’. Cold War politics also served as backdrop for the American Vietnamese diaspora between the 1970s and 1990s, which began advocating for the release of Vietnamese imprisoned in reeducation camps by the North Vietnamese government as alleged collaborators with American forces, as well as writers, professionals and others deemed threats to the regime. How did both diasporas prove integral to the eventual release of these political prisoners, particularly the latter given its recent settlement and limited resources?

In recent years, hundreds of Armenian diaspora members in California mobilized for imprisoned opposition activists jailed by the Armenian government; in Europe, the Kurdish diaspora has organized protests in response to the hunger strike of Kurdish journalist Mohammad Sediq Kaboudvand; and similarly, the Ukrainian community has campaigned for the release of Oleh

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Sentsov and Oleksandr Kolchenko held by Russian authorities. Despite the public record detailing decades of human rights campaigning on the part of diasporas to release political prisoners, there remains little attention to mobilized diaspora actors in the literature as non-governmental, human rights organizations (NGO).

To address this shortcoming, this paper compares the mobilization of the American Jewish and Vietnamese diasporas for imprisoned co-ethnics and, in parallel, to allow their emigration from the USSR and Vietnam. The theoretical section begins by conceptualizing the Jewish and Vietnamese diasporas, human rights organizations and political prisoners, advancing that diaspora organizations in this context should be conceptualized as human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Having defined these actors, the next section delves into the existing literature on diaspora mobilization to develop an analytical framework to compare Jewish and Vietnamese mobilization in these cases, with a focus on the strategies they employed to gain access to political opportunity structures. This is followed by a detailed description of each case. The final section discusses variations and similarities in mobilization strategy, arguing that both diasporas employed successful direct lobbying, framing and contentious action strategies, with the Jewish diaspora also engaging in transnational advocacy and symbolic politics. Jewish and Vietnamese diasporas brought a number of critical advantages to advocacy, including networks through which to derive information, large numbers of grassroots activists and as legitimizing agents. In conclusion, this paper argues both diasporas were impactful human rights advocates, in spite of the Vietnamese diaspora's recent arrival. Diaspora NGOs should therefore be better integrated into human rights scholarship and more often considered in NGO coalitions advocating for human rights, particularly those mobilized for political prisoners.

Diasporas as actors in human rights campaigning to release political prisoners

The American Jewish and Vietnamese diasporas were mobilized in these cases for the same purpose: To secure the release of co-ethnics imprisoned by repressive governments abroad and to secure their right to emigrate. However, as outlined below, the marked contrast in the extent of institutional sophistication between the Jewish and Vietnamese communities suggests that even less advanced diaspora communities pursuing effective strategies have the ability to influence government decision-making. Using a cross-case, most-different comparative analysis, the below highlights the parallel effectiveness of the strategies adopted by two, dissimilar diasporas.¹ This section begins by conceptualizing the Jewish and Vietnamese diasporas and their contrasting levels of organization. It then explores diaspora mobilization, arguing that diaspora NGO advocacy for political prisoners is part of a turn in scholarship considering diasporas as actors in human rights advocacy. Finally, it discusses what types of human rights organizations both diasporas created to release prisoners, regardless of how they were defined by other human rights actors.

Conceptualizing Jewish and Vietnamese diasporas

Armstrong divides diasporas into two types: Archetypal and situational.² He considers the American Jewish diaspora an archetypal diaspora given its permanent association to a mythologized homeland and, by this definition, the American Vietnamese diaspora's mythologizing of a non-communist Vietnam also renders them archetypal.³ Braziel's taxonomy further categorizes diasporas through their migratory patterns, such as colonial settlers, postcolonial emigres, refugees, detainees and economic migrants (Braziel, 2008). Given that Jews have migrated to the United States for centuries under a variety of circumstances, it is impossible to exclusively categorize

their diaspora type, but undoubtedly many Jewish migrants include refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants.⁴ Unlike the Jewish diaspora, Vietnamese migration is far more rapid and recent, with the vast majority arriving as asylum seekers and refugees during a relatively short window of time.⁵ With regard to Jewish detainees in the USSR and Vietnamese imprisoned in reeducation camps specifically, both of these are clear examples of detainees.

Finally, Dufoix adds a number of ideal types to construct collective experience in the host country: centropерipheral, atopic, enclave and antagonistic.⁶ Of these four, the much more settled, organizationally robust and professionally established Jewish diaspora best represents the first ideal type, centropерipheral.⁷ During the period of interest in this inquiry, the Vietnamese diaspora was far more recent, smaller and less settled and had yet to form comparable community infrastructure with capacity for similar public affairs advocacy. Both of these diasporas had a demonstrably antagonistic relationship toward the state responsible for human rights abuses against their kin abroad, the Soviet Union for the Jewish diaspora and Vietnam for the American Vietnamese.

Diaspora mobilization

Diaspora mobilization has been researched extensively in recent years and scholars have identified several motivations for why diasporas choose to engage in collective activism. Diaspora organizations are often concerned in the first instance with their conditions in the host country and are limited in sophistication due to their recent arrival (Rubenzer & Redd, 2010); diasporas can continue to play an economic role in the homeland through the remittance of resources, often to family members⁸; and, diasporas have a long history of engagement as actors in conflicts taking place in their homeland in what has been termed 'long-distance nationalism', principally through fundraising, lobbying their host country government and sending diaspora members to engage in combat in the homeland.⁹

While there has been much debate over the last two decades on the desirability of diaspora involvement in homeland conflicts, what has been less discussed is the involvement of diasporas in human rights advocacy. In addition to the above motivations for diaspora mobilization, recent scholarship argues that aggrieved diaspora communities engage in advocacy due to an overarching sense of injustice and often do so on behalf of kin living in homelands with repressive regimes to redress instances of human rights abuses (Koinova, 2018). This scholarship primarily discusses post-conflict scenarios and has therefore conceptualized diasporas as actors in processes of transitional justice, characterized by mobilization for the recognition of war crimes, genocide and processes for memorializing conflict trauma abroad.¹⁰ Elsewhere, transitional justice scholarship has sometimes included the release of prisoners as a constituent component of these processes (David & Choi, n.d.; Van der Merwe & Lamb, 2009). However, these two strands of investigation have not yet been brought together; whereby diasporas are analysed as human rights NGOs mobilized for the release of prisoners.

Diaspora organizations as human rights NGOs

Contemplating diaspora organizations mobilized for political prisoners as human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) firstly requires embedding them into recently expanded conceptualizations of human rights advocacy and, secondly, demarcating between considerations of 'prisoners of conscience' and 'political prisoners'. The below concludes this theoretical section by arguing that the Jewish and Vietnamese diaspora organizations mobilized for political prisoners

are best defined as ‘equality NGOs’ engaged in predominately ‘political’ rather than legal mobilization and that their advocacy on behalf of imprisoned kin, regardless of whether they are considered prisoners of conscience or not, distinguishes them from conventional human rights organizations.

Recent scholarship has argued for expanded considerations of mobilization for human rights, arguing that the emphasis until now on the diffusion and adoption of international laws has left less room for implementation and the political, non-legal forces which advocate for, monitor and pressure governments to improve the human rights.¹¹ Studying diaspora NGOs contributes to this growing exploration of non-legal, ‘pragmatic’ approaches to human rights advocacy and is best situated into the ‘politics’ stream identified by Sharp.¹² In addition to over-attention on legal advocacy, this inquiry also addresses the perceived lack of attention to non-elite mobilization, alliances and solidarity. Both empirical cases discussed below are analysed through these political and mobilization lenses.

Conceptually, Bell and Keenan discuss three types of human rights NGOs: The ‘classic’ type of NGO is core mandated with the promotion of internationally defined human rights, often working through international networks on a range of issues affecting many communities (see Bell & Keenan, 2004). A second type are ‘equality’ NGOs focused on the claims of a specific marginalized community defined by their identity (i.e. gender, race, religion). Finally, some NGOs may have a mandate broader than human rights, wherein human rights are a component of activism on larger issues, such as democratization or development.

Van Tuijl borrows from Anna Vakil to define human rights NGOs as ‘self-governing, private, not-for-profit organizations that are geared toward improving the quality of life of disadvantaged people’. They are non-governmental, civil society entities often engaged in monitoring and reporting on government behaviour, creating international institutions to hold governments to account and to rectify abuses; and, can be ‘operational’ and/or ‘advocacy’ oriented, with the former involving the provision of social services and the latter oriented toward lobbying and pressuring decision-makers (van Tuijl, 1999). Berkovitch and Gordon argue that ‘service’ organizations are better defined as humanitarian organizations, while those which seek to end rights abuses are human rights NGOs (see Berkovitch & Gordon, 2008).

The comparative analysis of diaspora NGOs involved in the release of Jewish and Vietnamese political prisoners focuses in particular on the American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry (AJCSJ), the Union of Councils for Soviet Jewry (UCSJ) and the Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association (FVPPA). These organizations are broadly suited to the definition of human rights organizations as non-governmental, primarily voluntary, civil society organizations monitoring government behaviour and holding governments to account. In regard to the distinction between operational and advocacy orientation, the FVPPA was indeed dedicated solely to Vietnamese detainee release and migration, but it should be noted that while the AJCSJ and the UCSJ were principally involved in advocacy, they were composed of and worked in partnership with permanent Jewish community service organizations, owing to the more settled nature of the Jewish diaspora. In respect of Bell’s typology and for the purposes of this inquiry, the UCSJ, AJCSJ and FVPPA are best described as equality NGOs. They resemble classical human rights NGOs as their sole identification was with the human rights of repressed Jews and Vietnamese in the USSR and Vietnam, however, their focus is also solely on their ethno-religious constituents, rather than of all detainees within these states.

Another consequential distinction between traditional human rights NGOs and the diaspora NGOs considered here is the inclination for the latter to advocate for the release of *all* of their kin imprisoned by the USSR and Vietnam, rather than only those defined as ‘prisoners of conscience’.

Political imprisonment did not become part of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, but instead was taken up by then-newly established nongovernmental organizations, especially Amnesty International (AI). Part of its establishment involved the introduction and first usage of the term ‘prisoner of conscience’, which is ‘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’ (Kaufman, 1991). Their definition includes those detained on identity protected grounds, such as race, gender, religion and creed, as well as those who are detained as a consequence of advocacy for freedom of movement.

The terms ‘prisoner of conscience’ and ‘political prisoner’ are often used interchangeably (see Llorente, 2016; Seymour, 1979). However, from the perspective of Amnesty International, a prisoner of conscience cannot have used or advocated violence. While this distinction is of less consequence in the case of Jewish prisoners, many of whose cases were adopted by Amnesty International, the Vietnamese diaspora did not make a distinction between those Vietnamese prisoners who were former combatants and those which had not taken part in the war. AI only advocated for those it considered prisoners of conscience. For this reason, this inquiry refers to advocacy on behalf of ‘political prisoners’ as neither diaspora used this designation as a filter for which prisoners to mobilize for.

Strategies of diaspora mobilization

As noted above, diasporas mobilize transnationally to effect change in their homeland or for kin located elsewhere abroad. This is particularly a feature in cases such as those discussed here where diaspora kin are subject to repressive regimes which prohibit mobilization domestically, in what has been termed the ‘boomerang effect’ (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Adamson argues that one of the methods employed by diasporas to effect change in this manner is to influence host country foreign policy toward repressive regimes (Adamson, 2013). The institutional foreign policy environment within which diaspora NGOs seek to achieve access is referred to as political opportunity structures, which Tarrow defines as the ‘relative openness of institutionalized politics’ (Giugni, 2004, p. 27). It also involves elites’ preferences, specifically the extent to which the interests of mobilized actors converge with those of policymaking elites (Rubenzer & Redd, 2010, p. 7). This section discusses some of the strategies available to diasporas NGOs seeking to influence American government foreign policymaking, with a focus on direct lobbying and contentious action, the formation of transnational advocacy coalitions, framing and the use of symbolic politics.

Firstly, diaspora NGOs often mobilize in the form of interest groups, whether through longstanding organizations, temporary groups for issue specific purposes or as a coalition of existing organizations brought together to address a temporary issue. McAdam et al. introduce the concept of a ‘special purpose association’, which is a collective action actor formed for issue specific purposes, rather than more longstanding organizations which exist in perpetuity (McAdam et al., 2009, p. 281). Through organizations, diasporas are able to provide important information to legislators and policy elites which might not be otherwise available (Grasse & Heidbreder, 2011; Hall & Deardorff, 2006). Through the provision of information and ongoing engagement, organizations may seek to form alliances with political elites, creating institutional ‘advocates’, who are viewed as critical to advancing an issue onto the agenda (Baumgartner et al., 2009, p. 9).

Secondly, as with other interest groups, diaspora organizations may seek to engage in public demonstrations. Tarrow, Tilly and McAdam define contentious politics as, ‘public, collective making of consequential claims by connected clusters of persons on other clusters of persons or on major political actors, when at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a

third party to the claims' (McAdam et al., 2009, pp. 13, 261). In most cases of diaspora NGO contentious action, governments are the principal object of claims making and diasporas have been known to utilize this strategy.

Thirdly, in addition to the inherently transnational nature of diasporas, diaspora organizations may also cooperate across borders for shared political ends as transnational advocacy coalitions (McAdam et al., 2009, pp. 13, 25), such as the Tamil diaspora's creation of the Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam or the creation of the World Sikh Organization.¹³ Adamson discusses diaspora transnational networks in the form of violent, often nationalist groups engaged in homeland conflict such as the Tamil Tigers and Al Qaeda, allowing them to circumvent domestic security barriers. These cases demonstrate similar phenomena, but rather for the advancement of human rights (Adamson, 2005).

Fourthly, framing is a common tool used by advocacy coalitions to achieve influence, in particular as a means of aligning group objectives with the target government (Ambrosio, 2002; Keck & Sikkink, 1999, p. 13). In her analysis of Lebanese and Albanian diasporas, Koinova points to their use of framing to capitalize on political opportunity structures (Koinova, 2011).

Finally, a key mobilizing strategy used by diaspora NGOs is symbolic power, particularly in movements to free political prisoners (Keck & Sikkink, 1999, p. 13; Koinova & Karabegović, 2017, p. 8). For instance, the wider struggle for Irish republicanism was symbolically personified by Bobby Sands and nine other men, all of whom died during a collective hunger-strike, galvanizing public opinion against British authorities (Moen, 2000; O'Hearn, 2009). Individual political prisoners have often symbolized not only the cause of fellow detainees, but also larger political movements, generally tied to the rationale for their imprisonment as demonstrated by South African anti-apartheid leader, Nelson Mandela (Klein, 2009).

The mobilization of Jewish and Vietnamese diaspora NGOs for political prisoners

Having now conceptualized diaspora NGOs as human rights advocates for political prisoners and developed the above analytical framework, the upcoming section begins by offering background on the two cases of interest: The mobilization of the American Jewish and Vietnamese diasporas to release prisoners abroad and for their right to emigrate.

'What we did for POCs, we did for refuseniks': Jewish diaspora NGO campaigning for prisoners in the USSR (Friedman & Chernin, 1999, p. 177)

Following the death of Joseph Stalin, Soviet leadership continued to vigorously repress Jewish religious and cultural expression, encourage anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, and reinforce discrimination in employment, housing and education. Between 1956 and 1963, 354 of 450 remaining synagogues were closed by Soviet officials and from 1961 to 1964 the Soviet government unleashed a concerted propaganda campaign against 'economic crimes', essentially turning the Jewish population into scapegoats for the USSR's severe economic challenges, leading to the arrest and trial of hundreds of Jews (Friedman & Chernin, 1999, p. 29). As the climate of fear grew and policies of persecution continued, many Soviet Jews became openly desirous of emigration. An American Jewish Committee report in 1959 brought to the American public's attention in stark terms the USSR's steadfast opposition to any emigration. This firm opposition became the basis for massive, elite level and grassroots mobilization on the part of the transnational Jewish diaspora to put pressure on the United States to, in turn, pressure the USSR to allow Jews to emigrate.¹⁴

Early contentious action was inspired in large part by the arrest of Jewish activists in the USSR such as Dr. Pechersky and Natan Tzurilni-kov, who were imprisoned for involvement in Jewish education. Protests were likewise organized by the American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry (AJCSJ) for Boris Kochubiyevsky who was arrested in 1969 for ‘anti-Soviet slander’ (Friedman & Chernin, 1999, p. 15). Political imprisonment was again the vehicle that hoisted the issue of Jewish emigration onto the world’s agenda in 1970, when a group of Soviet Jews and other dissidents hijacked a plane bent on diverting it to Israel. The hijackers were caught and several were sentenced to death. Additionally, nineteen other Jews were arrested with the attempted hijacking as a pretext (Beckerman, 2011, p. 199; Friedman & Chernin, 1999, pp. 15, 68; Harris, 2007, p. 15).

The campaign for the release of Jewish detainees was inextricably linked with and tied to mobilization to permit the emigration of Soviet Jews from the USSR. The principal effort was to force the issue of emigration into wider bilateral issues and to include, as a condition of opening up further trade with the Soviet Union, its relenting on the emigration of Soviet Jewry (Cullen, 1986). The campaign to put pressure on the Soviet government to release more Jews culminated in the 1970s with the passage of the Jackson-Vanik agreement as an amendment to the *Trade Reform Act* in 1974. The aim of the agreement was to tie the expansion of US-Soviet trade ties, which was a key policy preference on the part of the USSR, to permitting the emigration of individuals from the Soviet Union. This condition had direct implications for the ability of Soviet Jews to emigrate (Perkovich, 1988).

In response to those imprisoned for the hijacking and to compel action from the US government on the issue of emigration, dozens of Jewish organizations dedicated to the cause of Soviet Jewry came together to form the special purpose organization, the Union of Councils for Soviet Jewry (UCSJ) in 1971 (Hägel & Peretz, 2005). Intense contentious mobilization driven by this largely grassroots coalition included 125 rallies, marches, and vigils in at least 90 cities and elite level lobbying culminated in a meeting between the American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry (AJCSJ) with State Department officials as well as meetings between American Jewish leadership and President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger.¹⁵

American Jewry and their transnational advocacy coalition partners achieved a number of important outcomes. Firstly, the eventual commutation of the sentences of the detained hijackers proved that the Soviet Union was not immune to international pressure and was seen as a landmark achievement for the Soviet Jewry movement. Secondly, the passage of the Jackson-Vannik agreement, whose legacy remains controversial, was nevertheless also viewed as a major policy achievement given its demand was antithetical to the Nixon administration’s stated policy goal of rapprochement with the USSR (Cullen, 1986, p. 16). Thirdly, the transnational campaign to release Jewish prisoners climaxed in 1986 with the release of Natan Sharansky, who had become a symbolic figurehead of the movement to liberate Soviet Jewry; as the US-USSR détente continued, most prisoners were released by 1987 (Johns & Lerner, 2018, pp. 15, 238). Finally, the wider campaign to allow Soviet Jews to emigrate resulted in the emigration of some 1.2 million Jews leaving the USSR and its successor states between 1968 and 1994, one of the largest migrations of the twentieth century (Friedman & Chernin, 1999, pp. 15, 95).

‘[FVPPA’s] steadfast support encouraged me to persist in these negotiations until we reached our goal’:¹⁶ Vietnamese diaspora NGO mobilization for political prisoners

After the Fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War, the communist government in Hanoi began imprisoning tens of thousands of former combatants and others perceived as a risk to the regime. Having begun using reeducation camps in the 1960s, the number of detainees may have reached as many as 200,000 and they were housed in upwards of 80 camps at its peak in the late 1970s (Sagan & Denney,

1982). The conditions in the camps varied widely and prisoners were moved frequently between types of camps, but many reported intensive indoctrination processes; forced confessions; hard physical and often hazardous labour, including the clearing of minefields without protection; severe malnutrition; untreated diseases such as malaria and dysentery; and, torture through solitary confinement, prolonged shackling, beatings and other human rights abuses often leading to death or lifelong debilitation.

Due to how recently the Vietnamese diaspora had immigrated to the United States, it was not involved initially in mobilizing for the release of reeducation camp prisoners. Instead, early advocacy on behalf of prisoners was undertaken by non-diaspora organizations, such as Amnesty International (AI), which produced some of the first reports on the camps and their conditions. However, AI did not take on the cases of all detainees as some were considered postwar combatants who did not meet their definition of a prisoner of conscience (Demmer, *n.d.*, pp. 18, 140). In order to advocate for those detained who fell outside of AI's mandate, non-Vietnamese activist Ginetta Sagan created the Aurora Foundation, which released a comprehensive and widely read report on the reeducation camps which first set the issue onto the Regan administration agenda.

It was not until the early 1980s that the Vietnamese diaspora itself began to mobilize in earnest on behalf of prisoners. Working alongside Aurora, the Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association (FVPPA) was cofounded by Khuc Minh Tho in the mid 1970s and was originally only engaged in compiling profiles of detainees and gathering information. The association worked for the release of prisoners and for their humane treatment during incarceration. By 1984, FVPPA itself began to petition Congress and lobbied the State Department with these objectives in mind.

The mobilization of the Vietnamese diaspora in the form of the FVPPA, despite its very recent settlement in the US, can argue that a number of decision-making outcomes aligned with its preferences. Firstly, the 1989 agreement between Vietnam and the US to allow former prisoners and families to resettle in the US was a milestone bilateral agreement between the two countries and opened the door for the vast majority of remaining Vietnamese detainees, as many as 3000, to be freed and to emigrate to the United States.¹⁷ Secondly, as conversations continued apace in the early 1990s to normalize relations, the FVPPA with the support of Senator John McCain worked to ensure that normalization was conditional on the resettlement of all detainees (Demmer, *n.d.*, p. 271). Leading bipartisan Senators responded and introduced a resolution to that effect; the 12-page roadmap to normalization published in 1991 did include a condition for the release of all remaining reeducation camp detainees and their resettlement in the US, if desired. Finally, the FVPPA's last major challenge came with an unexpected policy change when the American government excluded from the returnee policy unmarried children under the age of twenty-one. The FVPPA demanded a return to the previous policy of admitting children over the age of twenty-one and again lobbied the State Department and its congressional allies earnestly (Demmer, *n.d.*, p. 318). After years of campaigning, FVPPA ally and Republican Senator John McCain introduced Amendment No. 5064 to a foreign appropriations bill (the 'McCain amendment') which reestablished the eligibility of unmarried children of former reeducation camp detainees over twenty-one; the amendment passed and credit was given again to the FVPPA (Demmer, *n.d.*, p. 333).

Discussion

Motivations for Jewish and Vietnamese NGO mobilization

Unlike the focus of much of the existing literature on diaspora mobilization for co-nationals abroad, the Jewish and Vietnamese diasporas were not mobilized to advantage one side of a

conflict. They are better described as ‘long-distance human rights advocates’ engaged in a human rights campaign motivated by the human rights of those imprisoned and refused emigration abroad.

In the case of Soviet Jewry, Amnesty International did consider those imprisoned for having advocated for the emigration of Jews from the USSR as ‘prisoners of conscience’. However, AI did not include all refuseniks, those who were attempting to leave the country but were refused in its advocacy efforts, as they were not imprisoned (Kaufman, 1991, p. 11). This designation was also not simple for detained Vietnamese, as many of those detained in reeducation camps in Vietnam were former combatants in the Vietnam War. Although AI did eventually come to advocate for some of those detained in Vietnam, its definition strictly prohibits activism on behalf of those involved in conflict or advocating violence (Demmer, n.d., pp. 18, 15). Given the limited approach to advocacy by Amnesty International in both cases, diaspora human rights mobilization was critical to addressing imprisonment and migratory injustices experienced by Jews and Vietnamese abroad. Furthermore, given both their motivation for mobilization and the strategies as outlined below, organizations such as the AJCSJ, UCSJ and the FVPPA meet the criteria for consideration as human rights NGOs.

Jewish and Vietnamese diaspora mobilization strategies

Jewish and Vietnamese diasporas mobilized using a range of strategies to gain access to political opportunity structures in the United States and both faced some opposition during the pursuit of their aims. In the case of the Jewish diaspora, it was hindered during the 1970s by the agenda of the Nixon government, which sought to build stronger ties with the Soviet Union and for whom the issue of Jewish emigration ran counter to its objectives. In the case of the Vietnamese diaspora, which similarly sought to tie the release and emigration of their kin to wider bilateral issues, they had to contend with business interests which put considerable pressure on the Bush administration in the late 1980s to normalize relations with Vietnam.

Beginning with direct lobbying, the American Jewish diaspora began a concerted campaign in the 1960s, with the American Jewish Committee joining a number of other established Jewish organizations to form the special purpose AJCSJ; it enlisted early institutional advocates in the form of two Senators who championed the rights of Soviet Jewry to emigrate (Beckerman, 2011, pp. 16, 60). Later, Jewish elites were able to support institutional advocate Democratic Senator Henry Jackson, who pressured the Nixon administration and rallied colleagues to support the passage of the Jackson-Vanick agreement. As in the case of the Vietnamese diaspora, the UCSJ kept extensive databases of thousands of prisoners and refuseniks and their families, providing detailed information on individual prisoners to lawmakers (Friedman & Chernin, 1999, pp. 15, 245).

Similarly, the FVPPA special purpose organization began its outreach programme to legislators through building detailed case files for every prisoner and their family with the aim of assisting their release and relocation outside the country. Due to their strong networks with the family members of detainees both in Vietnam and the United States, the FVPPA was able to access and offer information on detainees unavailable to the US government and other NGOs, securing their position of influence throughout the campaign. Their engagement efforts with political leaders was exceptional, securing meetings with President Reagan and Vice President Bush Sr., various arms of the US State Department and its refugee assistance units as well as leading Senators, diplomats and international NGOs. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the association organized numerous major, high profile events to raise the profile of the organization and the issue. Like the Jewish

diaspora, the FVPPA was very effective in securing the support of institutional advocates, particularly Republican Senator John McCain and Democratic Senator John Kerry.

Contentious lobbying was also a consequential strategy employed by the American Jewish diaspora. At the grassroots level, massive protests across the United States were organized throughout the 1960s and 1970s with a number of grassroots organizations formed to champion Russian Jewish emigration. The FVPPA, which became the principal interlocutor between the Vietnamese diaspora and US officials, submitted petitions from grassroots and other diaspora organizations on their behalf (Demmer, *n.d.*, pp. 18, 281). With regard to other, outside activism and demonstrations, the wider Vietnamese diaspora began concerted protest movements beginning only in the late 1980s when they were able to turn their attention toward homeland issues having just settled in the US (Ong & Meyer, 2008, p. 6). Demonstrations reached their peak during the debate around the normalization of relations with Vietnam, but large protests were also motivated by the admittance of more Boat People and the conditions in refugee camps.¹⁸

Transnational advocacy coalitions were formed at both the elite level and at the grassroots level by the Jewish diaspora. To further the campaign congressionally, Congressman John Porter founded the Congressional Human Rights Caucus (CHRC) in the 1980s, with a view to providing information to Congress on the plight of the refuseniks and he built a coalition with Jewish groups such as the UCSJ and the AJCSJ (Johns & Lerner, 2018, pp. 15, 230). The group escalated its efforts to the transnational level through the founding of the International Parliamentary Group for Human Rights in the Soviet Union which included parliamentarians from Canada and Western Europe; at its peak it had a multi-partisan membership of 600 (Johns & Lerner, 2018, p. 234). The same transnational advocacy coalitions developed at the grassroots level, with the UCSJ joining together to share information, resources and campaign frames with organizations such as the Women's 35 in the United Kingdom and the Toronto Council for Soviet Jews (Hägel & Peretz, 2005, p. 16; Rich, 2015). This global network of activists linked groups outside of the USSR, as well as the network with Jews in the USSR.

There is much less evidence of formal, transnational advocacy by Vietnamese diaspora groups as there were few Vietnamese diasporas outside the United States settled and organized to the same extent. However, domestically, the FVPPA's cooperation with the Aurora Foundation, AI and other groups was integral to first hoisting the issue of detainees onto the political agenda, particularly where the Vietnamese diaspora was not sufficiently organized in the early years of their arrival.

Advocacy on behalf of Soviet Jewry was framed early on as a wider struggle for human rights, which led to support from a number of other communities including civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King (Friedman & Chernin, 1999, pp. 15, 59). The Jewish diaspora adopted two frames to appeal to both sides of the political spectrum. The early associations with the civil rights movement and the focus on political prisoners appealed to liberals, while alternative framing of the campaign elicited support from conservative ranks as well, who were keen to put pressure on the 'evil empire' (Friedman & Chernin, 1999, p. 103; Johns & Lerner, 2018, pp. 15, 226). These duelling frames brought bi-partisan support for both the freedom of prisoners and for Jewish emigration from the USSR. By the late 1980s, President Reagan had adopted the cause of the refuseniks to elicit concessions from the USSR (Friedman & Chernin, 1999, p. 236).

In like manner, issue framing was a critical component to the success of the Vietnamese diaspora's asserting reeducation detainees onto the political agenda. During the Reagan years, the campaign to free Vietnamese prisoners adopted two similar frames. The first derived from the Reagan administration's prioritization of family values; Vietnamese campaigners and institutional advocates tied the need to reunite Vietnamese detainees with their families to this wider thematic

frame (Demmer, *n.d.*, pp. 18, 130). Secondly, Reagan's staunchly anticommunist agenda and his more aggressive stance against the Soviet Union created another favourable policy frame through which to advocate for the freedom of detainees as their continued imprisonment was another example of communism's crimes. Additionally, the human rights and moralistic frame adopted by the Jewish diaspora to appeal to liberals also garnered the FVPPA Democratic support.

Finally, the symbolic power of prisoners of conscience as a mobilizing force was instrumental in Jewish mobilization. Grassroots mobilization was galvanized by campaigns to release specific Jewish prisoners, such as Mark Nashpitz and Boris Tsitlyonok. Their mothers visited the US and spoke at Jewish community events to spur engagement. However, no prisoner came to symbolize the emigration of Soviet Jewry more than Natan Sharansky; a massive San Francisco rally in 1983, and many others like it, came to symbolize his mobilizing power, with his wife acting as a key campaigner mobilizing the grassroots in the US (Friedman & Chernin, 1999, pp. 15, 187, 202). In the case of the Vietnamese diaspora, there was little need to use symbolic politics to mobilize the diaspora as many in the diaspora had familial ties to those interned. Additionally, when it came to interfacing with political elites, the use of imprisonment symbolism was similarly less essential as FVPPA advocates were able to bring to bear emotional appeals through their personal connection to the issue.

Diaspora NGO contributions to human rights advocacy

As demonstrated by the above cases, diaspora NGOs are influential forces in advocacy for human rights, particularly for political prisoners and they bring to mobilization a number of advantages. Firstly, the literature on human rights NGO advocacy has noted the critical importance of information provision. Jewish and Vietnamese NGOs worked assiduously to record and compile the cases of detainees made possible through their connections with those imprisoned and their families. This information served to mobilize campaigners and was conveyed to American government officials negotiating for the release of prisoners. Secondly, Jewish and Vietnamese NGOs mobilized thousands of members of the grassroots Jewish and Vietnamese diasporas to attend demonstrations, write letters to politicians and to provide resources for campaigning. These extensive reserves would have been far harder to develop by traditional, non-diaspora human rights NGOs. Finally, diaspora NGOs should be included in human rights advocacy as their involvement helps to address long-standing criticisms of human rights advocacy being mostly 'top-down' exercises driven by Western elites (Bell & Keenan, 2004, p. 9). While diasporas such as the Jewish and Vietnamese in the United States are not resident in countries where oppression is taking place, their participation in the campaigns to release prisoners are processes led by victimized populations who share kinship-based solidarity with the repressed. This relationship had a demonstrable impact on appeals to decision-makers, who championed their causes with emotional commitment.

Conclusion

This inquiry set out to make the case that diaspora mobilization on behalf of political prisoners should be better incorporated into scholarship on human rights, particularly the mobilization of human rights NGOs. With respect to diasporas, while previous scholarship on diaspora advocacy for kin abroad has often focused on their intervention into conflict scenarios, Jewish and Vietnamese advocacy for detainees was motivated by redressing human rights abuses. In this way, the Jewish and Vietnamese NGOs mobilized to release prisoners should be investigated as human rights NGOs.

The Jewish and Vietnamese diasporas both developed special purpose organizations. In so doing, these organizations were able to provide information unavailable to conventional human rights groups and to legislators, identify and engage influential advocates within the decision-making process and to organize demonstrations and petitions in the form of contentious action. The Jewish diaspora developed transnational organizations and alliances with groups in other countries, including the International Parliamentary Group for Human Rights in the Soviet Union, to unite efforts across many countries. This tactic was less consequential for the Vietnamese diaspora, but domestic coalitions were important in this case, especially with the Aurora Foundation. Framing was an essential strategy for both groups, as both the Jewish and Vietnamese diasporas appealed to Democratic politicians through a human rights lens, while focusing on the distaste amongst Republicans for communism. Finally, symbolic politics was especially important for the Jewish diaspora, which galvanized mobilization through the plight of individual political prisoners such as Natan Sharansky. These strategies proved effective for both diasporas, particularly in the case of the Vietnamese diaspora, which was much less well-organized and resourced in comparison to the longer-established Jewish diaspora.

In conclusion, while this article adds to the human rights literature through discussing diaspora mobilization for political prisoners, there remains scope for further research. The literature could be expanded to include a within-case analysis discussing the dynamics and potentially different outcomes involved in diaspora mobilization for non-conflict, human rights issues in contrast to mobilization for conflict-related issues. Additionally, a fruitful path for further investigation would be a micro-level exploration of the intra-coalition dynamics between special purpose diaspora organizations and non-diaspora organizations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

Notes

1. For more on J.S. Mill's comparative Method of Agreement, see van Heuveln (2000).
2. 'Archetypal' diasporas are where members permanently associate themselves as being a part of a diaspora, such as the American Jewish or Greek diasporas, whereas 'situational' diasporas are where the extent of belonging is more fluid and less permanent such as the American German diaspora. Diasporas with a mythologized homeland are more likely to be archetypal, see Armstrong (1976).
3. For a similar discussion of diaspora mythologization of a 'golden age', see Cohen (2008).
4. Jewish communal life in the United States began at the outset of European arrival and early settlers established the first congregation in 1654 in New York, originally refugees fleeing Brazil. The American Jewish Committee was founded in 1906 to respond to Jewish persecution in Russia and Eastern Europe. For more on Jewish communal history and organizations, see Levitan (1996, pp. 15, 230) and Wertheimer (2007, p. vii).
5. By the early 2000s, the Vietnamese diaspora had grown to 1.5 million people and recent data suggests that the diaspora has transitioned from its status as refugees to fully engaged participants in the democratic process with 60 per cent registered to vote. Organizationally, the number of Vietnamese diaspora aid societies in California is larger than for any other ethnic group, listing 46 such groups in 2003. For more on the settlement of the American Vietnamese diaspora see Ong and Meyer (2008).
6. See Dufoix (2008, p. 68). 'Centroperipheral' mode refers to a diaspora with a national identity that has established robust, representative institutions in the host country; an 'atopic' mode is where a diaspora mythologizes an as yet non-existent homeland, and 'antagonistic' mode describes a diaspora which is hostile to the government in their homeland and who may not recognize its legitimacy.
7. Economically, by the 1970s Jewish Americans were well-represented in the upper echelons of a number of sectors and the long tradition of giving to Jewish philanthropic and community organizations, such as the United Jewish Appeal (UJA), created large and robust communal infrastructure, see Brenner

- (1986, p. 65). In comparison, the Vietnamese diaspora in the 1980s was much less integrated and settled than the Jewish diaspora, with many not yet having attained citizenship and with little knowledge of the political system.
8. Diasporas support members of their community in the homeland financially, such as through remittances from host country diaspora members to the home country. These have now reached the hundreds of billions and are a crucial part of the economy in places like the Philippines and Mexico. For more on this see Brazier (2008, p. 1) and Baser and Swain (2009).
 9. See Anderson (1998, pp. 58–74) and Brubaker (2005). See also Smith and Stares (2007); Orjuela (2008).
 10. Recent contributions to this debate include, Koinova and Karabegović (2017), Orjuela (2018), Koinova (2019), Stokke and Wiebelhaus-Brahm (2019).
 11. For criticism of a reliance on ‘positivist’ or ‘legalistic’ emphases on human rights, see Hopgood (2013), Posner (2014, p. 6). Similar criticism specific to transitional justice can be found in Dudai (2012).
 12. Sharp argues that scholars considering mobilization for human rights have not sufficiently considered advocacy outside of strictly legal contexts, such in the cases discussed in this inquiry, and calls for more attention to the application of norms in the ‘real world’ or advocacy, see Sharp (2018).
 13. Amarasingam (2015, p. 143); See Fair (2005). For a theoretical discussion on transnational advocacy coalitions, see Keck and Sikkink (1999, p. 12).
 14. See, Harris (2007). By 1983, as many as 300,000 Soviet Jews had expressed a desire to leave the USSR, with 10,000 of those identified as refuseniks, which were those applicants who had attempted to leave at least twice, see Johns and Lerner (2018, p. 233).
 15. Beckerman (2011, pp. 16, 69, 214). The Jewish diaspora was not always homogeneous in its advocacy, for instance, there was tension between ‘grassroots’ collective actors and elite-level leadership as well as disagreement in policy, as evidenced during debates about the Jackson-Vannik agreement. However, the impetus for mobilization never varied; for a further discussion on intra-diaspora dynamics, see Friedman and Chernin (1999, p. 15).
 16. Demmer (n.d., p. 255). Statement by Robert Funseth, Senior Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Refugee Affairs at FVPPA annual dinner, August 5, 1989.
 17. Indeed, at the FVPPA’s annual event in Washington, DC, Robert Funseth gave the keynote address and all but acknowledged that the FVPPA was the reason the issue remained a priority, see (Demmer, n.d., pp. 18, 254).
 18. ‘Boat People’ is the accepted euphemism given to Vietnamese refugees who fled mostly to North America in the 1970s and 1980s, many of whom made treacherous passage in open ocean in small craft vessels.

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