

Christina Isajiw. *Negotiating Human Rights: In Defence of Dissidents during the Soviet Era. A Memoir.* Edmonton and Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2014. xxx, 407 pp. Foreword by Bohdan Nahaylo. Introduction. Illustrations. Appendices on separate CD-Rom. Index. Paper.

Christina Isajiw's memoir under review provides an overview of almost two decades of professional human rights activism in support of Ukrainian dissidents within the framework of the 1975 Helsinki Accords. Under the slightly misleading title *Negotiating Human Rights*, the author convincingly demonstrates how the lobbying of Western governments and diplomats by human rights NGOs (non-governmental organizations) contributed to the success of an agreement that many feared would remain a dead letter. Isajiw was an early believer in the effectiveness of acting within the framework of the Helsinki Accords, which the Soviet Union had willingly endorsed and could therefore be convinced to abide by. She posits that the regular and steadfast NGO presence at international conferences and the CSCE (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe) meetings helped buttress Western delegations' demands for human rights observance from the Eastern Bloc and maintained pressure on Western politicians to keep human rights on the agenda of disarmament and other strategic negotiations. Her memoirs constitute a powerful illustration of the role of the "Helsinki network" on both sides of the Iron Curtain in the democratization and ultimate fall of the Soviet Union.

Isajiw's narrative begins in 1975, with the UN International Women's Year Conference in Mexico, and ends in late 1991, with the Moscow CSCE Conference on the Human Dimension, which preceded the dissolution of the Soviet Union. She recounts her participation in a number of UN and CSCE conferences as a representative of several Ukrainian diaspora organizations, but primarily the Human Rights Council (HRC) of the World Congress of Free Ukrainians (WCFU). Her story is mainly one of individual transnational activism. She describes her own learning process, which involved creativity and a constant tweaking of methods of action; she used her membership in various organizations and the selection, in turn, of the most efficient "vehicle" (49) to achieve her goals and get her message across to various audiences in the US, Canada, and Europe.

Isajiw's story is also one of interactions, encounters, influence, and collective action. Because the "messianic zeal" (95) of one individual could only bear fruit with the backing of like-minded supporters from the NGO community and allies within political and diplomatic circles, Isajiw needed to build delegations and coalitions and organize her "human resources" in the most effective way. Moreover, she also had to overcome opposition and

skepticism towards her approach, not only from Soviet delegates, who sought to counter her claims at CSCE conferences, but also within her own camp. In order to secure funding for her activities, she had to convince the Ukrainian diaspora and the WCFU that relying on the Helsinki Process and lobbying for the respect of individual human rights was a better strategic course of action than pursuing group rights, such as national self-determination. Within Canada (her adopted homeland) Isajiw successfully lobbied for the creation of a Standing Committee on Human Rights. By making the case for Canada's greater involvement in the CSCE, she helped win over a cautious Canadian government that tended to favour "quiet diplomacy." Among her allies were the US government and other Eastern European diaspora NGOs. She also had the support of the Ukrainian dissidents whose cause she actively defended: in 1979 they designated the WCFU as their official representative in the West. However, difficulties arose after 1990, when the new legitimate Ukrainian authorities began to assert their authority and relegated the diaspora to a subordinate position. Isajiw describes the challenges of adapting to this new order and convincing Ukraine's representatives of the value of her experience and work.

The book under review constitutes a precious contribution to the history of the Helsinki Accords and the Helsinki network, which had hitherto focused more on institutional negotiations than the role of NGO actors. The originality of Isajiw's memoir also lies in the fact that she records the events of the Helsinki Process from a number of peripheral perspectives, which illuminate the process in a new way. As an American living in Canada and lobbying in both countries, she emphasizes the differentiated attitudes towards the Helsinki Process within North America. As a member of the Ukrainian diaspora, she sheds light on the little-known plight of Ukrainian dissidents, as well as the role of diaspora communities in the Helsinki network. Better suited for a specialized audience familiar with the intricacies of the CSCE Process, Isajiw's book is an important tool for the historian: besides an index, it also includes a CD with scanned versions of over a hundred appendices—virtually every document mentioned in the text. The lay reader, on the other hand, will appreciate the lively writing, the occasional amusing anecdotes, the numerous illustrations, and the author's effort to provide necessary historical background information.

The book under review does, however, suffer from some minor construction flaws. Although it is organized chronologically, repetitions and occasional jumps back and forth in time tend to confuse the reader. Flipping through the book is also complicated by the fact that the table of contents lists only chapters, often with ill-phrased titles, omitting the more

enlightening, although poorly hierarchized, subchapter titles. The author could have made her thesis more convincing by reflecting explicitly in the structure of the book the idea of linear progress conveyed by her text. Furthermore, a broader apparatus, including, for instance, a chronology of CSCE conferences and a glossary of Ukrainian diaspora organizations, would also have given the lay reader a means by which to better navigate the book. Finally, one could object to the outmoded heroic depiction of dissidence and Isajiw's Manichean views on the Cold War struggle; however, these conceptions, shared by dissidents on the other side of the Iron Curtain, testify to the inner psychological trigger for human rights activism.

Overall then, *Negotiating Human Rights* represents a must-read for scholars of the Helsinki network and a fascinating, yet challenging, read for a broader audience.

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