Interview – Mark Hurst

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Mark Hurst is a Lecturer in the History of Human Rights at Lancaster University. His research focuses on human rights organisations and activists during the Cold War, and more broadly in the history of human rights, dissent, and political activism, especially in Russia and the Soviet Union. His book *British Human Rights Organizations and Soviet Dissent, 1965–1985* was published in 2017 by Bloomsbury.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates in the discourse around human rights?

I think there are two major issues that are being grappled with. The first relates to the history of human rights. There have been many interventions on the so-called 'breakthrough' moment, when human rights transitioned from the political fringes to the centre stage. Shifting perspectives on when this occurred range from the 1940s to the 1970s, and more recently to the 1990s. This changing perspective shapes current understandings of human rights – a powerful notion that often underpins international politics. Being critical of how we understand human rights offers huge potential for understanding the modern world. What is clear in these debates is that the self-evident notion that human rights have a long and entrenched history is anything but stable. In the context of issues such as 'fake news', global pandemics and the increasing importance of social media as a news source, understanding where human rights have come from has huge potential to reshape contemporary political discourses. It might seem like a stretch, but our understanding of the history of human rights can reshape the way we see events such as Brexit, the rise of populist governments around the world, and China's role in international affairs amongst others. In each of these cases, the age-old question of what the relationship between the citizen and the state should be is key. The intervention that human rights have made on this issue in the later twentieth century was dramatic, and understanding where this change came from and the implications it had is likely to help us understand politics for many years to come.

The second is in the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the influence that often-uncredited actors can have on human rights issues. Whilst scholars are well aware of the impact of soft power and the influence of non-state actors, I think the time is right for exploring these areas in much greater depth. For example, in the case of recent events in Russia, the influence of these non-state actors is hugely significant. The investigations of the poisonings of the Skripals and Alexei Navalny were driven by the journalists at Bellingcat, rather than traditional state actors. Whilst there are clear echoes here of activist campaigns in the Cold War, the extent to which journalists, academics and human rights activists can use tools such as social media to influence the political landscape is utterly fascinating. There has been some excellent work unpicking this space, such as Barbara Keys' work on the role of the telephone in human rights campaigns and Sarah Snyder's research on the importance of activist networks in the final years of the Cold War. I think the potential for further work in this space is huge, and again likely to have particular importance in understanding contemporary politics.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

As a contemporary historian I am both blessed and cursed by the way in which shifting international events impact the history that I study. I often feel rather envious of my colleagues working on earlier time periods, as they at least have some stability! In the course of writing my book *British Human Rights Organizations and Soviet Dissent,*

1965-1985, my interests in the response to political dissidents in the Soviet Union were shaped by contemporary events such as the murders of Anna Politkovskaya and Aleksandr Litvinenko, and the Pussy Riot case. Seeing Madonna perform a concert in Moscow with 'Free Pussy Riot' written on her chest has echoes of a previous era, where individuals like the playwright Tom Stoppard and the actor David Markham used their celebrity status to draw attention to human rights issues. In this regard, I have become acutely aware of how contemporary events shape how the past is understood, and how history can help make sense of current events. Seeing this play out in real time has been both worrying and mesmerising in equal measure, and the intertwined nature of past and present (and possibly future too) has really shaped the way I see the importance of history.

In terms of scholars, I have found the work of Samuel Moyn and Barbara Keys to be influential on the way in which I understand human rights in international relations. Challenging unchallenged notions of what rights are and where they come from is doubtless a difficult space, but doing so is essential for understanding the power of human rights. Stephen Hopgood's provocative work on the 'endtimes' of human rights has made me think critically about the political power of ethics, and how it can be used/abused in intentional and unintentional ways.

Finally, the way in which I understand how we can influence the world around us and make sense of political events has been shaped by the work of the political dissidents that have formed the bedrock of my research for over a decade. Andrei Sakharov's call for international collaboration in the face of Cold War pressures, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's insistence that we 'live not by the lie' have driven my interests in morality, ethics and truth, and the power that these concepts hold. Recognising this power and how it can be utilised remains a key challenge in my research, and I am sure that my understanding of this will continue to evolve.

What is the utility of history in interpreting current events?

It is all too easy in the face of 24-hour news coverage to get caught up in the here and now. Especially so in international relations, where major events quickly grab media attention and fail to be assessed in any depth before the media bandwagon shifts rapidly on to the next event. Context is essential; international relations is shaped by its past. Contemporary history offers a nuanced and critical lens through which to understand events, drawing on the immediate relevance of international relations, whilst being grounded in the historical context. This approach offers case studies to assess how international relations functions, offering context to diplomatic issues that can often be lost. Whilst this doesn't offer a perfect model for what should/shouldn't be done, it does open up the space to engage with what might be effective.

Taking recent events in Ukraine for example, understanding this solely from what is happening on the ground now misses out the context that explains why things are happening in the way they are. There is a compelling case to be made that recent events in Eastern Europe are a direct echo of the end of the Cold War, where unresolved tensions from the collapse of the Soviet Union have returned to the surface. This can also be clearly seen in Vladimir Putin's rhetoric on the invasion, which is littered with historical references ranging from Peter the Great through to the Nazis. These links are sometimes dismissed in the press, but these references offer an insight into the rationale (no matter how flawed) for the military action taking place. I don't think these can be effectively understood without a historical perspective, which goes beyond offering the background to recent events. Instead, it grounds our understanding of them, and explains why they are happening.

Your research focuses on the role of non-state actors, such as NGOs or British trade unions, in human rights debates during the Cold War. Can you tell us how these organisations, often on the political left, came to occupy such an important position in the ideological fight against communism?

The important issue here is motivation. The efforts of a myriad of NGOs and activists concerned with human rights in the Cold War can be seen as a clear campaign against Soviet communism. This, however, comes from a post-Cold War vantage point, where we know the Soviet Union collapses. This, combined with the challenge of identifying the 'breakthrough' moment for human rights means that we often read this history backwards, rather than seeing it as it was. Many of the activists working on what we now understand as 'the fight for human rights' in the Soviet Union wouldn't necessarily use the language of human rights to describe their efforts. Many were motivated to do what they

thought was right, which often happened to conveniently fit alongside anti-communist, or anti-Soviet narratives of the day. It is also worth noting that these non-state actors came from a broad political church. Trade unionists that were especially active in supporting Soviet human rights issues were often on the right wing of the trade union movement, such as Frank Chapple and the Electrician's union (the EETPU). That said, the challenges that events such as the Hungarian Uprising in 1956 and the 1968 Prague Spring posed to left wing politics internationally doubtless influenced the struggle against communism.

In terms of their importance, I think the reason that non-state actors came to be particularly influential in these campaigns is that they filled a political space that state actors could not. In the latter years of the Cold War, state actors had to toe a diplomatic line that their non-state counterparts could ignore. This allowed them to obtain information and expertise on human rights issues that offered them particular influence. This dovetailed with broader changes in politics in Britain, where the NGO and experts became increasingly significant in Westminster. They were, however, still limited by the political 'desirability' of their expertise: when human rights were not seen as a significant factor in international relations, these NGOs were largely overlooked. However, following the human rights breakthrough, these groups gained political traction, largely because their efforts went in the same direction as government policy.

So, whilst these non-state actors were very influential in shaping human rights debates, I think we need to be careful in overstating their position. They shaped the nature of these debates, and informed the impetus behind them, but relied on the politics of the day to open up the space for their acceptability.

Did disputes over human rights significantly impact – or even define – East-West relations during the Cold War, or were human rights seen as detached from a wider geopolitical struggle?

This is a million-dollar question! I'm really interested in the implications of this question for how scholars understand broad periods of historical change. There has been some fascinating work done on the potential of removing the Cold War lens from the history of international relations in the late C20th, and the impact this can have on the way we understand this period. I think the same can be said of the history of human rights. Trying to understand the Cold War without the human right lens is all but impossible given the importance of things like the Helsinki Accords, the campaigns for Soviet dissidents, and the shift to more morally-framed foreign policies from the late 1970s onwards. Stephen Jensen has persuasively argued for the need to look beyond the superpowers in order to effectively understand human rights in the Cold War. However, the challenge in breaking this issue down into manageable areas is the impossible challenge of trying to assess *everything* in order to make any claims. This is clearly an impossible task, but is the position we end up in if we follow this through to its logical conclusion. Human rights issues undoubtedly impacted and shaped key moments of the Cold War, but at the same time we should keep in mind that they also have their own historical lineage that is both close and apart from international relations in this period.

I think the way ahead on this issue is to be aware of the overlapping nature of human rights and the Cold War and the impossibility of separating these issues, whilst at the same time being open what divorcing them for the sake of analysis can offer us in understanding this period. I have recently explored this approach in assessing the work of Keston College beyond the Cold War lens. Keston was founded in order to monitor the position of religion in 'Communist Lands', something that meant its efforts were clearly linked to those of the Cold War. However, to reduce them to nothing more than Cold Warriors misses the subtleties of the organisation's motivations, which so often came from places beyond a bipolar reading of international relations.

Today, in many ways, human rights represent a growing fracture in international politics. They are being denied or even weaponised around the world, notably by figures in the Russian intellectual elite, such as Alexandr Dugin. Does this disagreement, in the context of Russia and the West, have precedent, and what are the implications for epistemological and political stability?

This is a fascinating question that I think helps reveal a lot about both human rights and broader notions of political power. Human rights are, by their very nature, a fluid concept. This makes them especially suited for framing persuasive political narratives – after all, who would disagree with human rights? Herein lies their power, and the

reason we should be critical of how we understand them. The challenge is to draw on the important aspects of these concepts, without being lured in uncritically by their promise – something that is incredibly difficult given their inherent flexibility! We are likely to see politicians around the world follow Dugin's example of using these fluid ideas to push political agendas, with the consequence of further muddying the waters of how human rights are understood. Whether this will lead to political instability is difficult to judge, but I think we have to be conscious that it is not only unpalatable political regimes that use these techniques.

In terms of historical precedent, I think there are some parallels here with the challenge that the Scientific Revolution posed to religious dogmas. Enlightened thinkers challenged a variety of long-held and unchallengeable concepts of divinity, and were often viciously attacked for doing so. Many of these ideals had much value for individuals, in much the same way that human rights clearly have an important role. This, however, does not mean that we should be uncritical of them. Awareness of the clear benefits of attempts to protect humanity must be balanced against the potential for this pursuit to be distorted for political ends, knowingly or unknowingly.

What, if anything, can the story of human rights during the Cold War tell us about their future in the twenty-first century? Will this be determined by the actions of nation states, or by non-state actors?

As a historian, I feel duty-bound to be cautious of making predictions for the future! That said, I think the history of human rights in both the Cold War and beyond offers an important insight into how ideals that we hold as sacrosanct can come and go with relative ease. Just because human rights are the current *lingua franca* of international relations, that does not mean that they will remain in this position. Indeed, efforts from myriad governments around the world to remove human rights acts from the statute books suggests that another ideology may take their place in the near future. Whether this will be in the form of nationalism, totalitarianism or something else is difficult to see. The history of human rights does, however, highlight that seemingly-entrenched ideals are often anything but.

As for the state/non-state question, this again is difficult to judge. In the last century, non-state actors have had significant and increasing influence on politics, and this position is unlikely to fade. However, many governments are also becoming increasingly strident, often pushing political agendas against the advice of experts and the support of public opinion. The future of human rights is likely to be shaped by both state and non-state actors, with the level of influence that both sides have to be determined by broader political developments. Whilst the state will doubtless continue to hold the political reins, non-state actors have shown their abilities in influencing policy during the Cold War and beyond – something that is unlikely to disappear.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of history and international relations?

Be curious. Trust your instincts as to why something is interesting, as they are often right.