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Tom Buchanan

‘The Truth Will Set You Free’: The Making of Amnesty International

Although I was no longer at the Bar I would go down to Chambers each day to lend a hand with the work of ‘Justice’. It was on the 19th November 1960 as I was reading in the Tube — rather uncharacteristically ‘The Daily Telegraph’ — that I came on a short paragraph that related how two Portuguese students had been sentenced to terms of imprisonment for no other offence than having drunk a toast to liberty in a Lisbon restaurant. Perhaps because I am particularly attached to liberty, perhaps because I am fond of wine this news-item produced a righteous indignation in me that transcended normal bounds. At Trafalgar Square station I got out of the train and went straight into the Church of St Martin’s-in-the-Fields [sic]. There I sat and pondered on the situation. I felt like marching down to the Portuguese Embassy to make an immediate protest, but what would have been the use? Walking up the Strand towards the Temple my mind dwelt on World Refugee Year, the first of these years dedicated to international action. What a success it had been! The DP [Displaced Persons] camps in Europe had been finally emptied. Could not the same thing be done for the inmates of concentration camps, I speculated? What about a World Year against political imprisonment? (Peter Benenson, 1983)¹

Peter Benenson, a barrister and recent convert to Catholicism, wasted little time in realizing this vision. He assembled a group of like-minded lawyers and intellectuals, and plans were made for the launch of an appeal on behalf of what came to be termed the world’s ‘Prisoners of Conscience’. The campaign would culminate in a ceremony on 10 December 1961, the thirteenth anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On Sunday, 28 May 1961, Benenson’s full-page article on ‘The Forgotten Prisoners’ was published in the *Observer*’s weekend review, marking the formal launch of the ‘Appeal for Amnesty, 1961’. The article, reproduced in newspapers worldwide, provoked a remarkable response. Many people wrote or called to offer their support and local groups began to be set up both in Britain and abroad. Within a few weeks, when a small gathering representing a number of countries met in a restaurant in Luxembourg, it became clear that there was the potential for a permanent international voluntary organization composed of

I am grateful to the International Secretariat of Amnesty International for allowing me to consult its archives, and to Chris Catton and Jone Garmendia for their kind assistance during my research. Versions of this article have been presented to seminars at the Universities of Oxford and York and at the London School of Economics. I am grateful to the following for reading the draft manuscript: Tricia Feeney, Dr David Lewis, Dr Martin Conway, Dr David Grylls, Dr Jon Lunn, and Dr Andrew Shacknove. I am also grateful for the comments of two anonymous readers.

¹ Amnesty International Archives, Oral History Pilot Project (AIA), Peter Benenson’s memoir accompanying interview transcript, November 1983, 7 (henceforward referred to as ‘Benenson memoir’). On this episode see also footnotes 6 and 33.

individual national sections. In September 1962 a second, and far more substantial, international conference was held in Belgium at which the title of 'Amnesty International' was adopted² and a statute was discussed. Thus, within barely two years, one of the largest and most successful voluntary campaigning organizations of the postwar era had been conceived, born and had grown to a degree of institutional maturity.

Such is the standard account of the origins of Amnesty International, which is to be found in some form in all of the existing literature.³ Perhaps not surprisingly, those who have written about Amnesty have tended to be far more interested in the organization's achievements, for which it was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977, than in its origins and formation. Jonathan Power, for instance, goes so far as to state that 'origins of movements are always impossibly difficult to plumb', and that Amnesty is no exception.⁴ It is true that organizations tend to develop versions of their past which serve their current needs and purposes, and in this respect Amnesty is certainly no exception.⁵ However, previous histories of Amnesty have been at fault in not testing these 'official' versions. In practice they have done little more than follow the account that has been given over many years by Amnesty's founder, Peter Benenson, elements of which, such as the story of the Portuguese students cited above, do not always stand up well to close historical scrutiny.⁶ This

2 This took the place of 'AMNESTY (International Movement for Freedom of Opinion and Religion)', the title under which the organization's first annual report was issued.

3 The literature on Amnesty's early history is not vast, and none of the following are scholarly works: Egon Larsen, *A Flame in Barbed Wire: The Story of Amnesty International* (London 1978), chap. 1; Jonathan Power, *Against Oblivion: Amnesty International's Fight for Human Rights* (Glasgow 1981), chap. 1. In Power's recent book *Like Water on Stone: The Story of Amnesty International* (Harmondsworth 2001), the section on Amnesty's early history is essentially unchanged, 119–32; David Winner, *Peter Benenson: The Lawyer who Campaigned for Prisoners of Conscience and Created Amnesty International* (Watford 1991), 5–28. See also 'Amnesty International', *Amnesty International, 1961–1976. A Chronology* (London 1976); Martin Ennals, 'Amnesty International and Human Rights' in Peter Willetts (ed.), *Pressure Groups in the Global System: The Transnational Relations of Issue-oriented Non-governmental Organisations* (London 1982). For an important recent contribution, not dealing specifically with Amnesty's early years, see Ann Marie Clark, *Diplomacy of Conscience: Amnesty International and Changing Human Rights Norms* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford 2001).

4 Power, *Against Oblivion*, op. cit., 218.

5 See, for example, 'Amnesty International — A Brief History' on the organization's website.

6 I have been unable to locate the news item about the Portuguese students in *The Daily Telegraph* for 19 November 1960, or indeed for the whole of November and December. The first documented references to this episode come in 1962, and do not mention the infamous toast to liberty. In a radio broadcast for the BBC on 4 March 1962 (entitled 'Liberty to the captives'), Peter Benenson gave the date of his tube journey as 19 December 1960 and commented that: 'The only evidence against them was that over the dinner table they'd conspired to overthrow the government. I thought then, what a crazy world this is, when two friends can't have dinner together without being arrested' (text in AIA, B11, 9). In the organization's first annual report, for 1961–2, Chairman Lionel Elvin wrote that Benenson had 'recalled how one morning, travelling in the tube to work, he read about two Portuguese friends dining in a restaurant in Lisbon. A remark that they passed that was critical of the Portuguese government was overheard, and the next thing was

account has two key components: first, an emphasis on one man's flash of inspiration, exemplified in the passage that began this article; and second, the sense that Amnesty emerged due to a particularly propitious moment in world politics. Peter Benenson himself has always emphasized the timing of Amnesty's launch, occurring as it did in a brief window in the Cold War: 'There was only one time when Amnesty could have been born, and that was in the exhilarating, brief springtime in the early sixties', marked by the conjunction of three liberalizing world leaders — Kennedy, Khrushchev and Pope John XXIII.⁷ This article seeks to provide a fuller social, political and intellectual context for the emergence of Amnesty, and to use the wealth of documentary material now available to provide a new interpretation of the first phase of the organization's life.⁸

Peter Benenson was born in 1921 to a formidable mother of Russian Jewish origin and a British ex-army officer who died when he was young.⁹ He was educated at Summer Fields, Eton and Balliol College, Oxford, and this élite background stood him in good stead when launching the Amnesty appeal. For instance, when writing to the office of Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in 1961 Benenson did not hesitate to point out that he, like Macmillan, was a

that they were arrested and imprisoned for treason against the Government.' It is also worth noting that at no point were these students' names — nor their eventual fate — publicized by Amnesty, and they were not amongst the prisoners chosen for publicity when the appeal was launched. Unlike *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times* for this period is full of items concerning political imprisonment in Portugal: reports concern the jailing of eight printers (11 November 1960), nine alleged members of an illegal secret society (17 November 1960), a glassworker jailed for promoting meetings and contacts with members of an alleged illegal secret society (19 November 1960), six artisans (25 November 1960), a glassworker (28 November 1960), and a man and a woman jailed for engaging in subversive activities and crimes against the security of the state between 1953 and 1956 (19 December 1960). Thus, there was a great deal of repression in Portugal in this period, primarily directed against alleged communists who, if convicted, were automatically assumed to be guilty of subversion (see Peter Archer and Lord Reay, *Freedom at Stake: A Background Book*, London 1966, 99–106).

7 *Observer*, 25 May 1986.

8 It is essential here to pay tribute to the work of Professor Andrew Blane, a member of the Amnesty International Executive Committee, and Priscilla Ellsworth, in carrying out a major oral history project in the 1980s. Sixteen of Amnesty's earliest activists were exhaustively interviewed and transcripts of the taped interviews were submitted for their approval. In addition, Peter Benenson submitted an 18-page typescript memoir, dated November 1983, giving an account of his early life and the origins of Amnesty. This is an extremely significant document, although, as will be shown, it is not a wholly reliable guide. Blane and Ellsworth also assembled a collection of documents from early members, and these papers form a vital counterpoint to the oral history. All subsequent references to Amnesty International Archives (AIA) refer to this collection.

9 On the family's history see Flora Solomon and Barnett Litvinoff, *Baku to Baker Street. The Memoirs of Flora Solomon* (London 1984). Solomon (Benenson's mother) had known Kim Philby in the 1930s, and subsequently denounced him to British intelligence; see Peter Wright, *Spycatcher: The Candid Autobiography of a Senior Intelligence Officer* (New York 1987), 172, 173.

'Colleger and Balliolman', and that this made the Prime Minister's sympathy for the appeal 'in the ultimate analysis, understandable'.¹⁰ Benenson's first political experience was at Eton, where he was profoundly affected by the Spanish Civil War and established a Spanish relief committee, personally 'adopting' a Spanish child. In the late 1930s he also took part in the rescue of Jewish children from Nazi Germany, and Marlys Deeds, the sister of one such child, became an early stalwart of Amnesty. His university career was cut short by the coming of war in 1939 and he received a degree after only one year. During the war Benenson worked initially in the Ministry of Information, before serving in Military Intelligence at Bletchley Park, where he met his first wife, Margaret. Unable to leave the army until 1947, he studied law and became a barrister. In the late 1940s and 1950s he was an active member of the Labour Party and the Society of Labour Lawyers, and stood unsuccessfully for Labour in a number of elections as a parliamentary candidate.

Benenson's pre-war interest in Spain was rekindled in 1947 when he was asked by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) to attend a political trial, the first of a number of such visits to Spain that he made during the 1950s.¹¹ In 1959 he played a leading role in the foundation of the Labour Party's 'Spanish Democrats' Defence Fund Committee', an organization set up to seek fair trial for opponents of the Franco regime and to provide relief for their dependants.¹² In 1956, Benenson's international interests significantly broadened when, on his initiative, the organization JUSTICE was created to campaign for fair trials and the rule of law.¹³ He had become increasingly frustrated with the existence of separate bodies of Labour, Liberal and Conservative lawyers, and envisaged a cross-party organization that would send observers to all political trials, irrespective of the political complexion of the regime — a precursor of the model adopted in Amnesty. The opportunity for this co-operation came with the conjunction of political trials in Hungary and South Africa in 1956. In 1957, JUSTICE became the British section of the International Commission of Jurists and was run from Benenson's chambers by his friend Tom Sargent, eventually sharing office space with Amnesty. Benenson also took an interest in colonial matters and spent time in Cyprus, where he established a practice. He wrote an introduction to *Gangrene*, a translated text that alleged torture by the French authorities in Algeria. Through his interests in Cyprus he came

10 AIA, B6, Benenson to Philip Woodfield, 4 June 1961.

11 See, for example, *Daily Worker*, 27 February, 20 March and 20 April 1953; see also Benenson's 'Report on a journey to Spain, 27th-31st December 1958', Marx Memorial Library, London, International Brigade Memorial Archive, Box D-3, File B/5.

12 For Benenson's role in this organization see Tom Buchanan, 'Receding Triumph: British Opposition to the Franco Regime, 1945-59', *Twentieth-Century British History*, 12, 2 (2001), 180-3.

13 With a touch that would become familiar in his work for Amnesty, Benenson devised JUSTICE as an acronym for 'Joint Union of Societies to Insure Civil Liberties in England and Elsewhere'. On JUSTICE see Helen Roberts, 'Witness: The Origins of Justice', *Paragon Review* (Brynmor Jones Library, University of Hull), 6 (November 1997), 20-4.

into contact with Eric Baker, a Quaker who would become his most significant collaborator and foil in Amnesty. Baker, who died in 1976 aged 55, had run a Quaker centre in Delhi (1946–8) before becoming General Secretary of the National Peace Council (1954–9) and helping to establish the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND).¹⁴

In the late 1950s there was an increasing interest on the British Left in the question of political imprisonment, especially under right-wing regimes in Spain, Portugal and Greece. The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) had a long-standing involvement in cases such as that of the Greek communist trade unionist Tony Ambatielos, who had been in prison since 1947. Ambatielos had already had a death sentence commuted, in part due to an international campaign headed by his Welsh wife, Betty.¹⁵ The communist *Daily Worker* consistently reported, and campaigned on behalf of, prisoners in Franco's Spain and other right-wing dictatorships during this period. The non-communist *New Statesman* also gave increasing coverage to political imprisonment at this time.¹⁶ The Left's interest in political imprisonment was, however, flawed because, while sincerely intentioned, it was essentially *parti pris*. Supporting prisoners in countries such as Spain represented a means of embarrassing otherwise powerful repressive regimes at a time when they were seeking to be identified with the West (for instance, by seeking membership of NATO, the EEC and other multi-lateral bodies). Such support also boosted the morale of the internal opposition, and could be used to create broad coalitions of international solidarity in the western democracies. Crucially, however, such campaigns had always been seen as a part of the political struggle — hence, a victory for the campaign in the form of a released prisoner would automatically be seen as a defeat for the regime that had held them. Moreover, despite the Universal Declaration of 1948, there was, in practice, still no common language of human rights. British communists refused to acknowledge the existence of political prisoners under Soviet-bloc regimes, and support for prisoners in Eastern Europe was typically left to Catholic or right-wing organizations. It was precisely this politicization that Benenson sought to transcend when launching his 'Appeal for Amnesty' by emphasizing *the fact of political imprisonment for a belief* rather than the cause for which the prisoner was imprisoned. As Eric Baker subsequently explained it, 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'.¹⁷

Benenson's simple but revolutionary insight challenged and eventually

14 *The Times*, 23 July 1976.

15 Ambatielos' case was taken up by Benenson's 'Appeal for Amnesty', and his wife spoke at its opening press conference. However, although he was mentioned in the May 1961 *Observer* article, he was left out of Benenson's book, *Persecution 1961*.

16 See, for example, the substantial articles on Portugal in the *New Statesman* by Kingsley Martin (2 March 1957) and Paul Johnson (2 November 1957).

17 AIA, A1, letter to *The Guardian*, 13 September 1961.

transformed the conventional politics of political imprisonment, as exemplified by a series of communist initiatives in the late 1950s. In 1959, a campaign was launched by the CPGB demanding an amnesty for Spanish political prisoners, ostensibly marking the twentieth anniversary of the end of the Spanish Civil War, and similar campaigns were subsequently launched on behalf of prisoners in Portugal and Greece.¹⁸ This 'Appeal for Amnesty in Spain' was a classic popular frontist organization, sponsored by a wide range of figures in public life, including the journalist John Arlott, the historian Hugh Trevor-Roper and the sculptor Henry Moore. Amongst those more actively involved were the artist Michael Ayrton and the recently-elected Liberal MP Jeremy Thorpe, the latter of whom would also be involved with the work of Amnesty International. However, the Secretary, Eileen Turner, was a long-standing member of the CPGB,¹⁹ and there is no doubt that the Labour Party and TUC were correct in regarding the organization as being under communist control. The idea of appealing for an amnesty had originated with the Spanish Communist Party and was unacceptable to the exiled Spanish Socialist Party and trade unions (the PSOE and UGT). Even so, the campaign developed momentum, and in March 1961 there was a major international conference in Paris, attended by more than 60 British delegates, which launched a worldwide campaign. This specific campaign for a Spanish amnesty therefore predated Benenson's appeal of May 1961, and ran alongside Amnesty International until fading from public view in the mid-1960s.

The existence of this campaign, that both preceded and paralleled the work of Amnesty International, has been ignored by previous historians. However, it deserves to be seen as part of the context of Amnesty International for a number of reasons. First, the coincidence of the choice of names is surely noteworthy, and was both commented on and somewhat resented at the time. For instance, Benenson's article in the *Observer* produced one complaint that 'it was a pity that Mr Benenson had chosen a name . . . so similar as to be confused with the name Appeal for Amnesty in Spain, already in use'.²⁰ 'Amnesty' was clearly not, as Benenson later commented, a 'rarity [sic] in the English language'²¹ in 1961. Second, there is evidence that the founders of Amnesty were fully aware of the Spanish-oriented organization. In his *Observer* article, Peter Benenson had stated that the method that the new appeal would adopt would overcome the problems encountered by 'previous amnesty campaigns',

18 On the 'Appeal for Amnesty in Spain' see Bill Alexander, *No to Franco. The Struggle Never Stopped, 1939–1975* (London 1992), 71–4. For an analysis of the broader communist strategy concerning these campaigns, see the unattributed document of May 1963 in the TUC archives, University of Warwick Modern Records Centre (MRC), Mss 292B/863/4.

19 According to her CPGB personnel file, Turner, who had a Swiss mother, had joined the French Communist Party in 1947 and the CPGB in 1948 (National Museum of Labour History, Manchester, CPGB papers). I am grateful to Andrew Flynn for locating this document.

20 AIA, B1, Charles Davy (of the *Observer*) to Benenson, citing a letter from a Christopher Birch, 2 June 1961.

21 AIA, Benenson memoir, 1983, 7.

namely that the political views of the imprisoned became more important than the fact of their imprisonment. Furthermore, Benenson privately commented in reference to a correspondence with Salvador de Madariaga that the distinguished Spanish intellectual 'rightly rejects . . . those Amnesty campaigns, like the recent Spanish one, whose real object is to boost the CP'.²² When establishing Amnesty, Benenson ran into problems in gaining the support of the Socialist International because the Spanish Socialist Party disapproved of the communist-backed amnesty campaign in Spain. Revealingly, Benenson wrote in response: 'I took a fairly active role behind the scenes in supporting the PSOE line on that [March 1961] Paris Conference, and incidentally opposed British participation in it.'²³ Benenson and the founders of Amnesty, at least publicly, did not regard the 'Appeal for Amnesty in Spain' as a rival organization, and indeed local Amnesty groups consistently turned to it for expert advice on individual political prisoners until relations between the two organizations were ruptured in 1963.²⁴ However, the TUC and Labour Party consistently guided their members to support Amnesty International, once they were satisfied with the quality of its work, rather than organizations tainted with communist involvement.²⁵ Thus, it is clear that the founders of Amnesty were familiar with the 'Appeal for Amnesty in Spain', and that in certain respects it represented a model — if only in terms of how not to campaign for human rights.

Part of the context for the formation of Amnesty International, therefore, relates to the increasing prominence of political imprisonment and the abuse of human rights as an issue during the 1950s. However, in the same period Peter Benenson's career had sharply altered course, and changes in his personal life and his political and religious views also need to be taken into account. In 1958 Benenson had converted to Catholicism, and his profound and intense faith was evident in his subsequent writings and actions. In 1959 he became ill with a coeliac illness, initially misdiagnosed as tropical sprue. He ceased to practise as a barrister, and in 1960 undertook a convalescence in Italy, including at least a month in Sicily, where he enjoyed the period of sustained self-reflection that is captured in two long and revealing letters to his friend Eric Baker.²⁶ These letters show a dialogue not only about Cyprus, in

22 AIA, A1, Benenson to Baker, 4 April 1961.

23 AIA, B6, Benenson to Albert Carthy (Socialist International), 10 June 1961.

24 On 3 December 1963 Eileen Turner wrote to Amnesty's General Secretary, Bert Lodge, to complain about the amount of work that Amnesty was generating for her organization, and also protesting at Amnesty's methods in giving out the names and addresses of the families of Spanish prisoners (AIA).

25 MRC, Mss 292B/863/4, memorandum by JA Hargreaves, 12 December 1962; George Woodcock to SF Greene, 3 April 1963.

26 The exact chronology here is difficult to establish. In his 1983 memoir, Benenson described how at the end of 1959 he was compelled to take six months leave from the Bar and went to Italy to recuperate, and the letters from Sicily are both dated March 1960. However, the archives of JUSTICE show that he remained very active in that organization, visiting Geneva in mid-February on its behalf and then attending meetings in London in May and June. He was definitely back in

which both men took a keen interest, but also about Frank Buchman's Moral Re-Armament (MRA) movement which was making its presence felt on the island. Benenson was clearly fascinated by MRA, and, despite his 'instinctive antipathy', paid it the tribute that it had 'attracted more generous-hearted men and women into the work of raising social standards and lowering race-barriers than any other recent religious movement'.²⁷ In a subsequent letter Benenson also signalled his departure from socialism, and his adoption of a new credo based on the spiritual transformation of the individual. 'Time here, alone', he wrote from Mondello, Sicily,

... has confirmed my growing conviction that the quest for an outward and visible Kingdom [of God] is mistaken. . . . The attempt to construct a just society by altering the external framework is, I am sure, doomed to failure. Look on the Socialist Parties the world over, ye mighty, and despair. When each citizen is individually on the road to the Kingdom, then I believe that there will be a just society on earth without need for the intervention of Parliament. And if only a few of our leading citizens trod that path, then I believe that we would be nearer the goal than if 51% of the electors voted for laws designed to promote social justice.

Intriguingly, he realized that his views were now 'not so far removed that I can lightly condemn MRA for wishing to change people, and especially leading people'. Conceding to Baker that these views may seem like 'heresy' from one who was recently a Labour Party candidate, Benenson concluded that 'I still seek the same ends, but by different methods'.²⁸ As we shall see, the idea of a movement for spiritual transformation influenced Benenson's thinking in the creation of Amnesty, even after the appeal had been launched in May 1961.²⁹

This point is strengthened by another significant aspect of this correspondence — Benenson's interest in the work being carried out in Sicily by the social activist, Danilo Dolci. MRA, he noted, was doing 'on a much larger scale what, so I believe, Dolci is trying to do here in Sicily'. However, he had not met Dolci, who was at that point visiting England, and lamented that his

London by 11 October (see University of Hull, DJU/2/1, minutes of the Executive Committee and Council of JUSTICE).

27 AIA, A1, Benenson to Baker (from Sicily), 4 March 1960. Moral Re-Armament was founded in 1938 by the American evangelist Frank Buchman, growing out of his earlier work with the 'Oxford Group'. It attained considerable influence in postwar Europe, not least due to its anti-communism. By the late 1950s MRA was closely involved with the conciliation of ethnic and religious conflicts such as that in Cyprus. Buchman died in August 1961, soon after the launch of the Amnesty appeal. For an informative account by one of Buchman's adherents see Garth Lean, *Frank Buchman: A Life* (London 1985).

28 AIA, A1, Benenson to Baker, 26 March 1960.

29 See pp. 593–4. These letters also show that Benenson had been closely re-reading the works of Iulia de Beausobre (1893–1977), a Russian exile who came to Britain in 1934 and published an autobiographical account of her experiences in Soviet labour camps (*The Woman Who Could Not Die*, London 1938). She later returned to the Russian Orthodox faith, and married the historian Sir Lewis Namier (see Constance Babington Smith, *Iulia de Beausobre: A Russian Christian in the West* (London 1983).

poor Italian made it impossible to observe his work 'at first hand'. Dolci was a northern Italian who had moved to a poor Sicilian village in 1952 and established a campaign against poverty based on collective self-help. When thwarted by the authorities (facing trial and imprisonment on a number of occasions), he had resorted to Gandhian fasts and civic disobedience. By 1960 Dolci had established a centre in Sicily which eventually acted as the base for some 60 Italian and foreign social workers and experts, supported by an international network of committees in Britain and elsewhere. Dolci's example was clearly an inspiration to Benenson,³⁰ and his model of voluntary social activism appears, like that of MRA, to have suggested itself to Benenson as a possible model for the development of Amnesty in its early stages.³¹

Convalescence in Italy also gave Benenson the opportunity to evaluate his work with JUSTICE. In 1983 he wrote that he had come to the conclusion that JUSTICE, as an organization for lawyers, would always be 'excessively cautious and would never catch the public imagination'. Accordingly, he began to think in terms of 'an all-embracing organisation to fight for Civil Liberties' that would differ crucially from JUSTICE in that, being open to the general public, it would allow the lawyers to be 'democratically over-ridden'. The National Council for Civil Liberties, created in 1934, could not, he believed, fulfil this function as it was communist-dominated. 'It was with these thoughts in mind', he added 'that I returned to London in October 1960.'³² Thus, the evidence suggests that while the emphasis on political imprisonment had not yet been decided, many of the elements of the 'Appeal for Amnesty' were in Benenson's mind by the time of his return. He was already thinking of launching a campaign for civil liberties that would appeal to lay people rather than working within the confines of a profession, that would have spiritual goals (and which might share MRA's ambition to 'change' its participants), and which would be above party politics.

On his return to London, Peter Benenson clearly experienced some form of 'revelation' in November 1960 that allowed the various ideas and insights that had been fermenting in his mind in Italy to be brought more sharply into focus, making possible the remarkable unleashing of energy and imagination that made the Amnesty campaign so successful.³³ Even so, much of the exact

30 Dolci was originally considered for inclusion as one of the studies in Benenson's *Persecution 1961*, and was one of the distinguished contributors of a message to the 1962 Amnesty publication *A Time to Keep Silence . . . and a Time to Speak*. For a good summary of Dolci's career and ideas see Michael Bess, *Realism, Utopia and the Mushroom Cloud: Four Activist Intellectuals and their Struggles for Peace, 1945-1989* (Chicago and London 1993).

31 See p. 594.

32 AIA, Benenson memoir, 1983, 6.

33 See note 6 about the difficulty of establishing the exact nature of that experience in November 1960. It is worth noting that with hindsight Benenson chose to describe this as above all a *religious* experience. In an interview (12 November 1983) he said: 'I was going through a very active religious period in my life', and that it was a natural impulse to go to a church (AIA,

form of the campaign remained to be determined, and emerged from discussions with friends and colleagues in the ensuing weeks. Benenson first turned to the lawyer Louis Blom-Cooper,³⁴ who put him in touch with the *Observer* and its proprietor David Astor (who had a particular interest in civil liberties in former British colonies). Another important early contact was Peter Archer, a future Labour MP and Solicitor-General, who suggested the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 10 December as the culminating point for the campaign. It is not clear, however, at which point the name 'Amnesty' was formally adopted. It has often been noted that the title 'Amnesty' is inappropriate for such an organization, given that an amnesty assumes that some form of crime has been committed. Amnesty also had unfortunate connotations in countries such as France and Belgium, where 'amnesty' campaigns were typically organized on behalf of wartime collaborators. Indeed, some of the early continental supporters of Amnesty represented precisely these groups. Peter Benenson recalls alighting from a train in Dijon and being heartened to see graffiti that read 'Vive l'amnestie!', until he realized that this meant amnesty for the OAS, the right-wing terrorists.³⁵ However, this criticism misses the point of what Benenson was attempting to achieve. The initial working-title, 'Armistice', gives a clearer guide, as Benenson was really calling for an armistice in the Cold War — a unique worldwide opening of the prison doors for those jailed for their beliefs. When 'Armistice' was abandoned for fear of antagonizing the British Legion, 'Amnesty' was adopted to convey the sense of a similarly epochal event. Remarkable as it may seem, one of Eric Baker's initial responses to Benenson's idea was to ask 'what happens when they have all been released?'³⁶ This supports the view that, to some extent, Amnesty was initially envisaged as a fixed-term project, which might well achieve its objectives within its allotted time. This initial fluidity is apparent in the first documentary reference to the campaign, a correspondence between Benenson and Baker in mid-January 1961. On 13 January Benenson wrote to Baker that:

I am working on a scheme to make this year (anniversary of US Civil War & Emancipation of Serfs in Russia) an occasion for launching a general appeal for an Amnesty for all political prisoners everywhere. The appeal will be made on 11th November to link up with the idea of the Armistice. The *Observer* is offering its centre supplement on 12th November for the occasion, & I am finding a great deal of goodwill everywhere for the scheme. If you know of any people willing to undertake a little work on their own in this connection, I wd. be grate-

transcript, 49). He also said that he attached considerable importance to the half hour that he spent reflecting in St Martin-in-the-Fields: 'It was then and there that what I have always envisaged to be a collective concern with the suffering of those who strive for change in the world was dedicated to our Lady, *Mater Mundi*? ('Dedication', 28 February 1989, bound with 1983/4 interview transcripts).

34 Author's interview with Louis Blom-Cooper, London, 28 September 1999.

35 Author's interview with Peter Benenson, Oxford, 29 October 1997.

36 AIA, B4, Baker to Benenson, 15 January 1961. On the choice of name for the campaign see AIA, Benenson memoir, 63–71.

ful. I am compiling a list of all pol. prisoners in each country for publication on Amnesty Day, and am looking for people who would undertake the responsibility of getting as much information about one or more countries, thus dividing the labour into compartments.

Baker replied on 15 January that ‘your “amnesty” proposal sounds interesting’. Thus, the title ‘Amnesty’ had clearly begun to emerge by this stage, but the idea of some form of connection with the Armistice had still not been abandoned.³⁷

The involvement of Eric Baker as, in Benenson’s words, ‘a partner in the launching of the project’³⁸ was important in clarifying the nature of the campaign. In reply to Benenson’s approach, Baker had posed the important question of how a ‘political’ prisoner was to be defined. Benenson’s reply on 18 January was that the appeal would concern ‘a person denied full freedom of movement for a cause the substance of which is the advocacy of any course except violence either orally at a meeting or in writing, or without any cause being assigned’. It was at Baker’s suggestion that the now-famous term ‘Prisoner of Conscience’ was adopted and became central to the Amnesty appeal. Baker’s definition of the aims of Amnesty, first sketched in a letter to Benenson of 11 April 1961, with a more explicit repudiation of violence, was politely questioned by Benenson. He commented that Baker’s draft suggested that

. . . we deny anyone the right to express a view which is intended to stir up violence or antagonism? We don’t go so far as that, do we? All we mean to say is that we see no reason to rub the flesh off our knuckles getting a man out of gaol, when his purpose is to put other people into gaol.

However, Baker’s tougher view prevailed, and the *Observer* article would commit Amnesty to support ‘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’. There was also an addendum to this, excluding ‘those who have conspired with a foreign government to overthrow their own’. It is interesting to note that the question of violence, which subsequently proved highly controversial within the organization in connection with prisoners such as Nelson Mandela, does not appear to have been a significant issue at the time of its launch.³⁹

37 AIA, A1, Benenson to Baker, 13 January 1961; AIA, B4, Baker to Benenson, 15 January 1961.

38 AIA, Benenson memoir, 1983, 8. Sean MacBride’s reference to Baker as a ‘brake’ on ideas is also significant (AIA, transcript of interview with MacBride, 8 June 1984, 46).

39 However, the issue was raised by Victor Gollancz who, in response to the appeal stated that, though a pacifist, he disliked the blanket exclusion of those who condoned or advocated ‘personal violence’ (Gollancz papers, MRC, Mss 157/3/AI/1, Gollancz to Baker and Benenson, 30 May 1961). See also the Liberal journalist Honor Balfour’s comment that the ‘conscience clause’ in the appeal ‘smacks of a form of political Buchmanism’ and might put some off (AIA, B7, Balfour to Benenson, 19 June 1961).

Baker's collaboration also had a highly practical dimension. Penguin, the publishers, had commissioned Benenson to write a book that was published in October 1961 as *Persecution 1961*. (An intended companion volume on human rights, by Peter Archer, was shelved.) Benenson's idea of presenting case studies of nine prisoners required a great deal of research, and the frequent correspondence between the two men shows how much work Baker put into both the research and the final shape of the book, allowing Benenson to spend more time in promoting the appeal. There were a number of problems in assembling *Persecution 1961*. The book was on a tight timetable as it was not commissioned until January 1961 and had to be published before the planned end of the campaign in order to secure maximum impact. Thus, at times there was a scramble for information, which often was not easily obtainable. Benenson was, for instance, unable to secure much material on Agostinho Neto, the Angolan leader, and was aware that this was the most insubstantial chapter. Another problem was of how to achieve balance between prisoners on the Left and the Right, and in the West, East and Third World. Prisoners in the West posed a particular problem. Benenson and Baker were unable to find a suitable prisoner in Northern Ireland, as they all advocated violence.⁴⁰ They were also hard pressed to find an appropriate case study in the USA, settling somewhat uneasily on the white anti-segregationist Rev. Ashton Jones, who Benenson described as an amiable 'screwball'. He kept open the option of including, instead, Dr Willard Uphaus, who had refused to divulge names to the FBI. Despite his best efforts, Benenson was aware that the majority of case studies concerned liberal or leftist intellectuals, even if in some cases, such as that of the persecuted intellectuals Olga Ivinskaya and Hu Feng, they were imprisoned by Marxist regimes. The other prisoners included Maurice Audin, a young French Algerian communist presumably murdered by the French authorities, Antonio Amat, a Spanish socialist, Luis Taruc, the Filipino 'Huk' leader who had now renounced violence, and Patrick Duncan, a white anti-apartheid campaigner.⁴¹ Benenson felt that the only non-leftist on the list was the Romanian philosopher, Constantin Noica. Accordingly, it was decided to leave out deserving cases such as the Greek communist, Tony Ambatielos. Two clerics who had featured prominently in the original *Observer* appeal were also not included — Archbishop Beran of Prague and the Hungarian Primate, Cardinal Mindszenty. (However, Archbishop Beran was the subject of one of the first Amnesty foreign visits when Sean MacBride travelled to Prague on his behalf in February 1962.)

The writing of *Persecution 1961* was completed by Peter Benenson in Italy in

40 However, Amnesty retained an interest in Northern Ireland. A letter on 10 December 1961 to the Ulster Agent in London drew the following dusty response of 3 January 1962 from Brian Faulkner: '... this letter has been written under a serious misapprehension as to the position in Northern Ireland. The Government of this country has never at any time deprived persons of their liberty on account of their opinions or religion' (AIA, B13).

41 Benenson was already familiar with the Amat case from his work with the Spanish Democrats' Defence Fund, and with the Audin case through his work on *Gangrene*.

the spring of 1961. However, as the book was not scheduled to appear until the autumn, there was also a tremendous amount of groundwork for the appeal which was launched on 28 May. How are we to account for its success, and what were the main characteristics of the appeal? Firstly, it is important to note that all of his colleagues paid tribute to Peter Benenson's remarkable charisma and energy in the initial phase of Amnesty's work. He was also impulsive, scornful of bureaucratic procedures and capable of poor judgment, but these flaws only became seriously damaging once Amnesty had become established. The oral history assembled in the mid-1980s captures very effectively the profound impact (as well as the very heavy demands) that Benenson made on the early, predominantly female, group of Amnesty workers and volunteers. As one put it, 'for those who were working with him he was like part of a volcano . . . [like Mao Tse-tung he] could never stop making the revolution'.⁴² In the words of another, 'Amnesty was Peter'.⁴³ One factor in Benenson's success was that, while too eclectic in his thinking to be seen as a profound intellectual, his true genius lay in fashioning memorable (often religious) symbols and images. Thus, 1961 was not any old year — it was the anniversary of the emancipation of the serfs in Russia and the outbreak of the American Civil War. If 1861 marked the freedom of the body from bondage, 1961 would mark the freedom of the mind.⁴⁴ For the famous Amnesty symbol, the candle in barbed wire, first drawn by the artist Diana Redhouse, Benenson had supplied the idea of the Chinese proverb 'Better light a candle than curse the darkness' (but also insisted on the candle as a Catholic symbol).⁴⁵ Although a public relations adviser was hired, the Congregationalist minister John Pellow, many of the eye-catching ceremonies were inspired by Benenson's ideas. For instance, for the first Human Rights Day at St Martin-in-the-Fields, celebrities Cy Grant and Julie Christie were tied together and their bonds burnt through by the 'Amnesty candle', lit by the resistance heroine Odette Churchill. The candle was then burnt during a vigil, surrounded by exiled former prisoners of conscience.⁴⁶ Under Benenson's guidance, Amnesty consistently favoured thought-provoking tableaux such as this rather than the mass protests and direct action associated with contemporary campaigns such as CND.

One of the most important tasks confronting Benenson was to galvanize support amongst political leaders both in Britain and abroad.⁴⁷ On 29 May,

42 AIA, transcript of interview with Peggy Crane, 17 June 1985, 28 and 8.

43 AIA, transcript of interview with Christel Marsh, 7 November 1983, 22.

44 This was subsequently taken to extremes by Benenson, with allusions to the centenaries of Gladstone's 1861 budget, the death of the Dominican Fr Lacordaire, and the overthrow of King 'Bomba' of Naples: *Observer*, 28 May 1961.

45 AIA, transcript of interview with Diana Redhouse, 4 June 1985, 37.

46 AIA, Benenson memoir, 10.

47 An attempt to create a worldwide group of famous sponsors, including Ilya Ehrenberg, President Bourguiba, Albert Schweitzer, Eleanor Roosevelt and Salvador de Madariaga proved problematic. De Madariaga refused to work alongside any communists, while a leading African cleric wrote that he believed in fundamental human rights, but not for anti-Christians and atheists. The scheme was quietly abandoned (AIA, A1, Benenson to Baker, 4 April 1961).

coinciding with the *Observer* article, Benenson and Baker circulated a letter to politicians and opinion-formers, warning of the worrying trends in world politics in 1961. These ranged from the violence of apartheid in South Africa and the repression of constitutional opposition in emerging African states, to disregard for civil liberties in Cuba and the reintroduction of the death penalty for political offences in the USSR.⁴⁸ A prompt, if non-committal, reply was received from Harold Macmillan's office, stating the Prime Minister's interest and pointing out that the value of movements such as Amnesty lay precisely in their not having any direct links with governments. Benenson replied that this should not prevent the campaign 'from having private understandings, or for its ultimate objectives from being those of Her Majesty's Governments'. Interestingly, Benenson also acknowledged his 'friendly contacts' with the 'Research Information Department' of the Foreign Office prior to the launch of the appeal (presumably a reference to the Information Research Department (IRD), the anti-communist propaganda unit set up during the early stages of the Cold War).⁴⁹

A more thoughtful response came from the Labour Party leader, Hugh Gaitskell, who offered to 'do what I can' to support the appeal, but raised a number of objections. Firstly, he felt that too much attention had been paid in the *Observer* article to the non-communist world, when communist regimes 'in their very nature' did not allow the free expression of opinions. Indeed, in well-established communist regimes there was the possibility that people had become too 'brainwashed' to hold views at all, and therefore the very concept of the prisoner of conscience might only have a reality in the 'relatively free world'. Secondly, he objected to 'perfectly normal security measures' against espionage being equated with repression of all opposition. Few, he suggested, would swallow the Soviet spy George Blake's being presented as a prisoner of conscience. Finally, he felt that the 'mere balancing' of cases from the communist world and elsewhere did not 'adequately reflect the true world situation To put France alongside the Soviet Union [as had been done in the circular] without further explanation is surely a little grotesque.'⁵⁰ Gaitskell's comments illustrate the discomfort that Amnesty's aspiration for impartiality would cause amongst even sympathetic western politicians during the Cold War.

Despite Benenson's good relations with the Labour Party, it took some time for Amnesty to win Labour's full support, not least because of lingering suspicion and confusion over the existing communist-backed amnesty campaigns.

48 There is a copy of the circular letter in the Victor Gollancz papers, MRC, Mss 157/3/AI/1.

49 AIA, B6, Benenson to Philip Woodfield, 4 June 1961, replying to Woodfield's letter of 2 June. Despite this reference to collusion with the IRD, however, it is noteworthy that while Benenson was certainly willing to use anti-communism to build support for Amnesty in certain quarters (such as the TUC), there is no archival evidence to support the widely-held view in the communist world that Amnesty was a 'front' organization for western political interests.

50 AIA, B6, Gaitskell to Benenson, 30 May 1961. Gaitskell said that he had already read the *Observer* article with 'great interest'.

Only in July 1963 did the party's National Executive Committee, on the recommendation of David Ennals, Secretary of the Overseas Department, agree to allow Amnesty International to approach constituency parties, precisely as a way of channelling members' activities away from the other 'amnesty' campaigns.⁵¹ Benenson's approach to the TUC for moral support and sponsorship in the autumn of 1961 was also greeted with an initial coolness, on the grounds that Amnesty was a 'young organization that had yet to prove its worth'.⁵² By 1963, however, the TUC was stating its confidence in Benenson's leadership and even seeing Amnesty as the 'most suitable channel for assistance'.⁵³ The only British political party that gave almost immediate and unconditional support was the Liberal Party, which passed an emergency resolution backing the appeal on 9 June 1961. The Liberal International also backed the appeal, although feeling that the word 'amnesty' was a 'misnomer at best and a political error at worst' for assuming the guilt of prisoners.⁵⁴

Benenson's leadership during Amnesty's early years was effective precisely because there was a cohort of people prepared to be led. While much research remains to be done on the local activists, the Amnesty archives do allow some interesting observations to be made. The appeal struck a chord initially with two distinct groups. One was preponderantly male and constituted Benenson's peers — lawyers, academics and social activists. Such people were willing to play a leadership or advisory role in Amnesty, but many lacked the time to devote themselves wholly to the project. Some may already have been thinking along the same lines as Benenson, such as the Irish statesman Sean MacBride, perhaps the most eminent early respondent to the appeal.⁵⁵ Others were already involved in related fields. Norman Marsh, a former Oxford law don, was General Secretary of the International Commission of Jurists. Louis Blom-Cooper, legal correspondent on the *Observer*, had known Benenson since the mid-1950s and was involved in campaigns for penal reform. Peter Archer had met Benenson in the 1950s through the law and the Labour Party. Neville Vincent, who was appointed Treasurer, was a lawyer and businessman, working in his family construction firm. Andrew Martin had been active at the Hungarian Bar and became involved in JUSTICE through the 'Save Hungary' committee. A number of these constituted Amnesty's informal senior advisory group known as the 'Godfathers'.⁵⁶

A second group, comprising those who actually ran the organization, was predominantly female.⁵⁷ Although there were a few paid jobs, most were vol-

51 MRC, Mss 292B/863/4, memorandum 1962/3 by Ennals.

52 MRC, Mss 292B/863/4, 23 November 1961 memorandum of Benenson's meeting with TUC International Secretary, J.A. Hargreaves.

53 MRC, Mss 292B/863/4, Hargreaves to Mrs A. Storrow.

54 AIA, B6, 20 June 1961, D. Mirfin to Benenson.

55 AIA, A1, MacBride to Benenson, and reply, 6 and 9 June 1961.

56 Norman Marsh defined the 'Godfathers' as Lionel Elvin, Andrew Martin, Sean MacBride, Eric Baker and himself (AIA, transcript of interview, June 1984, 65).

57 The following paragraph is derived from information in interview transcripts, AIA.

untary workers and some had little prior experience. One who did was Peggy Crane, born in South Africa, who had been active in South Kensington Labour Party where she met Benenson. She subsequently worked in the Labour Party's Research Department from 1954 to 1961. She had already ceased working for the Labour Party and was touring the USA when she read the appeal, and Benenson offered her a post as paid Executive Officer on her return. Christel Marsh, who was given the task of collecting information on political prisoners, had been born in Germany and arrested by the Gestapo before marrying Norman Marsh in 1939. She had worked with Oxfam and the National Council for Women. Marlys Deeds was a German-born Jew who came to Britain in 1938 and who had personal links to Benenson through her brother Edward. A teacher in the 1950s, she then worked for the Africa Bureau in 1960, and joined Amnesty in 1962 to take over responsibility for organizing the local groups. (Her husband, Leonard, joined the Executive of Amnesty.) Dorothy Warner, of the local Amnesty group in Eltham, had also been born in Germany to a Protestant-Jewish father and a Catholic mother, and survived arrest and forced labour in 1944. Diana Redhouse was an English woman of Jewish descent who had experienced antisemitism both at her convent school and when she worked in local government. The interview transcripts show certain common features. The women speak of their immediate, highly personal response to Benenson's appeal, which often chimed with their own experiences of persecution and loss. For many, Amnesty offered something worthwhile and meaningful — for Diana Redhouse, Amnesty 'took over my whole life'.⁵⁸ All speak with pride of their work for Amnesty, but this is tempered by an awareness of the immense demands that were made of them (Norman Marsh recalled his wife working through the night) and the frustrations caused by the lack of organizational structures. Peggy Crane recorded in her diary for December 1962 that 'working with him [Benenson] became almost impossible . . . and I'm tired of just being a dog's body'.⁵⁹ There was also resentment at the gender division within the fledgling organization, especially as Benenson made a succession of weak male appointments to the post of 'General Secretary'.⁶⁰ With the exception of the barrister Hilary Cartwright, who soon left to work in Geneva, women generally played a subsidiary role in the campaign. None of the leadership positions were held by women, nor were the early foreign missions carried out by women.

In this early phase, Amnesty was a movement in a constant state of evolution: as Benenson himself wrote in January 1962, a 'publicity campaign' was turning into a 'fully-fledged international movement'.⁶¹ Indeed, Amnesty's work has consistently evolved (with a new emphasis on torture in the 1970s and on the death penalty in the 1980s) away from the agenda at the time of the appeal's launch. There was, for instance, a heavy emphasis on the right of

58 AIA, transcript of interview with Diana Redhouse, 4 June 1985, 48.

59 AIA, transcript of interview with Peggy Crane, 17 June 1985, 20.

60 AIA, transcript of interview with Marlys Deeds, 17 June 1985, 51.

61 *Amnesty*, 3 January 1962.

asylum in Amnesty's initial publicity. Similarly, one should also note the central role accorded to religion and religious persecution in Peter Benenson's early thinking. This was made explicit in *Persecution 1961* in which he defined Amnesty as an 'international movement to guarantee the free exchange of ideas and the free practice of religion'.⁶² The campaign was launched with two conferences, one in London on political persecution and one in Paris in June 1961 on religious persecution. There were representatives of the Protestant and Catholic churches and of the Grand Rabbi (while Benenson also scoured Paris for a representative Buddhist). Subsequent separate conferences on the persecution of scientists, intellectuals and trade unionists do not appear to have materialized. Benenson wrote of the Paris conference that Christianity was not on the defensive but 'on the offensive', placing Amnesty in the context of a new muscular Christianity by mobilizing lay idealism. However, while Christians remained a vital source of Amnesty's support, this special emphasis on religious persecution soon began to recede and religious issues were subsumed into the generic concept of the 'Prisoner of Conscience'.

Plans for the forthcoming campaign were laid over a series of lunchtime meetings, attended by Benenson, Baker, Hilary Cartwright and others. All that survives from these meetings in the archives is a napkin that served as an agenda:

AGENDA

- 1) What we hope to do next year
 - 2) Minimum staff
 - 3) Budget
- [The following points a-d came under section (1)]
- a) library
 - b) Threes
 - c) Investigators
 - d) Int side [sic]⁶³

This supports the view given by Benenson in his 1983 memoir that from the outset 'Groups of Three' should be set up, adopting three prisoners respectively from the East, the West and the Third World. However, it does not necessarily support his contention that 'this was intended to be and has since always been the basis of "Amnesty's" organisation',⁶⁴ not least because it was far from clear that a mass voluntary base would actually materialize in response to the appeal. If it had not done so, then Amnesty would indeed have been essentially a year-long publicity campaign. The oral history testimonies illustrate the degree to which the local groups were forced to be self-reliant. Diana Redhouse, a co-founder of the first Threes group in Hampstead, was scathing about the lack of central direction and help that they received — they

⁶² *Persecution 1961*, op. cit., 152.

⁶³ Original in AIA, A1. In his 1983 memoir Benenson wrote that at these meetings 'plans were always drawn up on paper napkins; wine always encouraged the flow of ideas'.

⁶⁴ AIA, Benenson memoir, 1983, 9.

became 'very bored [waiting for] something to start'.⁶⁵ Dorothy Warner, who co-founded the Eltham group, recalled the confusion of the early years, when they identified their own prisoners and undertook their own research. By 1963, a 28-strong group had adopted some 29 prisoners, and on one occasion adopted an East German who really was a criminal. A woman called Mrs Pym, who ran the League for Democracy in Greece, worked closely with the Eltham group on behalf of Greek prisoners without actually being a member of it.⁶⁶

Much of the confusion stemmed from the fact that the Amnesty appeal was trying to do everything at once, with scant resources. Benenson was trying to create a unique bank of information on political prisoners at the same time as creating the voluntary movement to support them. The hard work in this initial scramble for information fell to women such as Christel Marsh, who acted as the first volunteer 'librarian'. Marsh assembled a card index from existing organizations such as PEN International, and she also wrote without success to missionary societies. She drew on advice from regional experts such as Francis Noel-Baker (on Greece) and Hugh O'Shaughnessy (on Latin America).⁶⁷ There was also a qualitative and investigative aspect to her work, deciding which cases fell into the category of 'prisoners of conscience'.

The Threes groups became the best-known aspect of Amnesty's work, and succeeded in reaching out to sections of British society that had either become disillusioned with party politics (including ex-communists),⁶⁸ had never been involved in public life, or who were seeking to express their religious beliefs in a different way. For such people, Amnesty could be profoundly empowering. Keith Siviter, a Congregationalist minister who helped to set up the Eltham group and subsequently resigned to work for Amnesty full-time, recalled that until Benenson's appeal there had seemed to be nothing that could be done: 'We were reading the papers, so much of it, all the Russian business. . . . We were hearing of dreadful things happening in Europe — East Germany, Hungary, Rumania — terrible lot of oppression.'⁶⁹ Now a clear and simple method of action had been presented. Benenson threw himself into promoting the local groups, touring the country and especially targeting the universities. However, tensions emerged between the centre and the periphery, and Benenson was soon doubtful about the value of the local work. In a memorandum of December 1961 he argued that there was still little prospect of translating the 'emotional' response of the local activists into genuine pressure for prisoner release. He suggested that more limited objectives should be undertaken by the groups, such as educational work in schools and fund-raising. If an estimated £5000 could not be raised to fund this level of activity, the campaign should be closed at the end of July 1962. This paper was dis-

65 AIA, transcript of interview with Diana Redhouse, 4 June 1984, 22–31.

66 AIA, transcript of interview with Dorothy Warner, 18 June 1985, 9–15.

67 AIA, transcript of interview with Christel Marsh, 7 November 1983, 18–28.

68 See, for example, the obituary of Clarinda Peto, *The Guardian*, 19 July 1997.

69 AIA, transcript of interview with Keith Siviter, 5 June 1984, 24.

cussed at the second meeting of a newly-formed 'Policy Committee' on 12 December, and referred back on the grounds that those who had joined in order to work for prisoner release would not want 'to become involved in educational and fund-raising activities as well'.⁷⁰

This episode seems to indicate a clash between the idealism of the local groups and Benenson's pragmatism. The reality, however, was more complex, as Benenson's early thinking about the development of Amnesty, partly influenced by the remarkable success of the appeal, was at times highly ambiguous. Indeed, in the early months he came to see Amnesty as precisely the vehicle for the wider movement for social and spiritual change that he had envisaged in 1960. This was revealed very starkly in two remarkable documents: a memorandum of 5 June 1961, entitled 'First Notes on Organisation',⁷¹ and a private letter to Eric Baker of 9 August 1961. Both documents make clear that Benenson's fundamental vision was not only for a movement that would free prisoners, but one that would transform the lives of those who became drawn into the campaign. In the first document, Benenson argued that the success of the appeal was not due to the quality of the article, but to

... the wavelength on which it was transmitted. 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 co-operate. It is designed in particular to absorb the latent enthusiasm of great numbers of such idealists who have, since the eclipse of Socialism, become increasingly frustrated; similarly it is geared to appeal to the young searching for an ideal, and to women past the prime of their life who have been, unfortunately, unable to expend in full their maternal impulses. If this underlying aim is borne in mind, it will be seen that, à la longue, it matters more to harness the enthusiasm of the helpers than to bring people out of prison. With regard to the latter, as a friend pointed out to me, the real martyrs prefer to suffer, and, as I would add, the real saints are no worse off in prison than elsewhere on this earth, for they cannot be prevented by stone or bars from spiritual conversation. From this last point stems the motto of the campaign 'The Truth will set you free' [John 8, 32]. Those whom the Amnesty Appeal primarily aims to free are the men and women imprisoned by cynicism, and doubt.

In the letter of 9 August he wrote:

To me the whole purpose of AMNESTY (using the movement in its broadest sense) is to re-ignite a fire in the minds of men. It is to give to him who feels cut off from God a sense of belonging to something much greater than himself, of being a small part of the entire human

⁷⁰ AIA, Benenson's 'report on the first 6 months' for Peggy Crane, n.d.; papers and minutes of Policy Committee, item 6b.

⁷¹ Although this paper (AIA, A4) is not signed by or formally attributed to Benenson, its authorship is not in doubt. This must be the document that he referred to in the letter to Baker of 9 August: 'Sometime before Diana first went to Paris, which must have been at the beginning of June, I wrote for her to take with [sic], a paper describing the long-term objects of AMNESTY. Among many mistakes I assumed that merely by writing these on paper, they would become both clear and agreeable to her. Certainly in the first, and possibly in the second, I assumed in error.' There are also many common themes in both documents, such as the idea of a world political party.

race. If, God willing, this fire stays alight, then each one with the spark burning inside of him will use it in his own way . . . my work consists of trying to hand on the spark in many different shapes, in altered ways, to divers people. What they do next, they must decide themselves . . . if the spark of AMNESTY has any power, it is to convince each of us that everything is in his power.⁷²

These documents also show how, buoyed up by the appeal's initial success, Benenson was quick to plot a course for its future development. In the memorandum of 5 June he envisaged a 'launching base' which would fire off four 'rockets', each financially self-supporting: a 'Central Office of Information', preferably sited on neutral ground alongside the UN; the 'Threes'; a 'collective endeavour' for the world's artists; and a 'World Party' that would campaign for a 'workable Charter of Human Rights with enforcement machinery', to be launched in late-1961. The Threes groups' 'principal aim (unpublished) is to get people of different opinions, class etc. to work together in the same direction, and to learn to co-operate. *Thus, it does not matter so very much what they do, so long as they do something*' [my emphasis]. While initially they would work towards the release of prisoners, enthusiasm might soon 'pall' if they were unsuccessful and it was important to have a 'more enduring object "up-the-sleeve"'. This would probably take the form of Threes groups acting as a support base for young 'volunteer service workers'. (Here Benenson's thinking appears to have been influenced by the example of Dolci in Sicily.) By 9 August these ideas had altered somewhat. Now Benenson envisaged Amnesty breaking into three permanent organizations at the end of the year: 'The Prisoner of Conscience Library; The International Enquiry about Liberty [IEAL]; and the Newspaper, which will link the two, being owned by the former and directed by the latter.' The IEAL (the fourth 'rocket' of 5 June), which should be located in the Netherlands, would become 'the first International Political Party', and would eventually be challenged by a 'second World Party'. In conclusion, Benenson commented on his and Baker's future roles in Amnesty. Baker would be the 'engineer' who would concentrate on establishing the Library, possibly becoming the permanent Librarian. Benenson would be the 'navigator', who had 'no talent for organisation, only for inspiration' and should take no permanent administrative post. With reference to Frank Buchman, who had died three days previously, he warned against being given the 'sort of personal influence' which the American evangelist had enjoyed over MRA — 'as bad for the institution as it was for the man'.

This final comment carried an element of prophecy, as these documents illuminate not only the formative early phase of the Amnesty appeal, but also some of the problems that Amnesty International would experience in subsequent years, culminating in Benenson's resignation as President of Amnesty International following a bitter internal crisis in 1966–7.⁷³ For it is clear that

72 AIA, A1, Benenson to Baker, 9 August 1961. See also Peggy Crane's comment cited below, p. 597.

73 The crisis, the details of which lie beyond the scope of this article, is covered in Power, *Against Oblivion*, op. cit., 25–39 and Larsen, *Flame in Barbed Wire*, op. cit., 32–5.

Benenson was consistently aiming higher than creating what Sean MacBride described as a kind of 'Red Cross' for political prisoners.⁷⁴ Benenson was not particularly interested in creating an increasingly professionalized and bureaucratic non-governmental organization. His ultimate goal was not to tackle the symptoms of political imprisonment, but the root causes — to create, in his words, an 'awakened and vigilant world consciousness'.⁷⁵ He had believed that the world could be changed, and he had seen Amnesty as the vehicle. This fundamental difference of approach surfaced at the 1964 Amnesty meeting in Canterbury. A gloomy Benenson emphasized that torture, intimidation and execution were on the increase and that 'we have made no impact at all!' It was left to Sean MacBride to rally the delegates by pointing to the release of prisoners in Eastern Europe and Spain — '[Amnesty's] influence is obvious'.⁷⁶ In a sense, both men were correct, but it was MacBride and the other Amnesty leaders who were more in touch not only with what was possible but also with what the many thousands of volunteer members actually wanted to do. With hindsight it is clear that Benenson's chiasm, combined with his well-known aversion to organizational conventions and restraints, meant that only the timing and the exact nature of Amnesty's internal crisis remained to be determined.

Understandably, Amnesty's early success was concentrated in Britain, where the great majority of the 70 branches mentioned in the first annual report were located. Within the context of British politics, Benenson's appeal had introduced a genuine element of novelty at a time of political adjustment and declining party allegiance. For those concerned at the apparent decline in respect for human rights abroad, and disheartened by the failure of the domestic political parties to confront such issues at a time of rising prosperity and consumerism, Amnesty was attractive precisely because it seemed so distinct from traditional politics. Indeed, while there are clearly similarities between Amnesty and CND, founded in 1958, Amnesty marked a far more thorough break with conventional British forms of protest. Like CND, it offered a simple moral message that offered to transcend the Cold War, and which appears to have appealed particularly to the middle class.⁷⁷ Unlike CND, however, Amnesty carried no left-wing political baggage, and possessed a genuinely universal attraction. It appealed to the young — especially students — but also to

74 AIA, transcript of interview with Sean MacBride, 8 June 1984, 21. Similarly, Maurice Cranston described Amnesty as a 'Red Cross of the Cold War' in *Human Rights Today* (London 1962), 104, fn.

75 AIA, Benenson to Peggy Crane, December 1961. The idea of fundamental change continued to appeal to Benenson, and in the 1980s he established the organization 'Nevermore' committed to the abolition of war (Power, *Like Water on Stone*, op. cit., 131).

76 Larsen, *A Flame in Barbed Wire*, op. cit., 25–6.

77 On CND's social composition see Meredith Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain: Romantic Protest, 1945–1980* (Cambridge 1994), 127, fn 23.

idealists of all ages and political and religious backgrounds. Its campaigns showed an acute awareness of the power of symbols and the potential for using the media (including television) to shock an apathetic public.⁷⁸ Above all, Benenson's Amnesty appeal offered to empower its volunteers, allowing ordinary men and women to feel that in a small but concrete way they were able to make a difference on an issue of increasing international concern. Undoubtedly many would find that their intense commitment to Amnesty's cause changed their lives — if not necessarily in exactly the way or on the same scale as Benenson had once hoped.

The growth of Amnesty was far slower and more patchy outside Britain, where much depended on identifying reliable contacts to form the nucleus of national sections. Peter Benenson travelled tirelessly in both Europe and the USA to promote the movement, but by the end of 1961 Amnesty's representation in many countries still consisted of isolated individuals. Even so, healthy and active groups had been created in West Germany, the Netherlands, and in the Scandinavian countries.⁷⁹ In September 1962, Amnesty's second international conference at the Château de Male, Sisjle, Belgium, was attended by more than 60 delegates, primarily from Europe. The Sisjle meeting was far grander than the Luxembourg gathering a year earlier: the conference opened with a message of welcome from the Belgian Minister of State, and concluded with the delegates being made the guests of the Provincial Governor of West Flanders in Bruges. The formal business included drawing up an International Code of Conduct for political prisoners, and calls for greater rights to asylum, a world human rights fund, and the international commemoration of human rights on 10 December. In the final session, Amnesty's own constitution was discussed, and at the suggestion of Andrew Martin, the title 'Amnesty International' 'met with considerable approval'.⁸⁰ The mood of the conference was self-congratulatory. As Peter Benenson put it, for the price of a Rolls Royce 'we had been able to build up an organization that, even if only in a small way as yet, was beginning to influence governments, and had already played some part in the release of a number of prisoners of conscience'. Thus, within barely a year of its launch, Amnesty had succeeded in establishing itself as an actor on the international stage. In the years ahead there would be tremendous success — the membership would grow worldwide, many prisoners would be released, and Amnesty would be increasingly integrated into the international legal and non-governmental machinery for protecting human rights (gaining consultative status at the Council of Europe in 1965). For those who attended, the Sisjle conference was a powerfully moving experience. Peggy Crane wrote in her diary:

78 See AIA files B11 (on projects using radio) and B12 (on television).

79 See AIA, Benenson memoir, 11–16; 'Report on the growth of the Amnesty movement abroad', prepared for the first meeting of the Policy Committee, 14 November 1961, AIA, A1.

80 Formal report on the conference in AIA.

Somehow I think that we were all a little mad, but with the madness that has inspiration behind it — and this is almost entirely due to Peter himself. A prophet someone called him. That is not the right word, I think, but certainly an evangelist with a divine spark.⁸¹

In this comment lay the key to both the strengths and weaknesses of Amnesty International in its earliest years.

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81 Cited in transcript of interview with Peggy Crane, 17 June 1985, 12.