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Review of: The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism by Daniel C. Thomas

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The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism by
Daniel C. Thomas

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The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism. By Daniel C. Thomas. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. xii, 308 pp. Appendix. Notes. Index. \$49.50, hard bound. \$18.95, paper.

What brought about the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union? By now, this should seem like a question that has been completely spent, exhausted by an endless number of doctoral dissertations and retrospective explanations of the inevitability of collapse. Daniel C. Thomas's addition to this literature, however, comes not from the traditional "area studies" perspective but rather from the realm of international relations, where questions of political transition have been less widely explored. Thomas argues that the collapse of the Soviet bloc had less to do with economic crises or the (non-) leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev than with the development of international norms through the Helsinki Final Act Agreement of 1975, in which both east and west agreed to a basic set of standards for the protection of human rights.

Although the Soviet Union may have seen the Helsinki Act as a way to garner legitimacy in the international system, particularly in the eyes of the west, the agreement served to create a norm and language for domestic activity among opposition forces across eastern Europe that catalyzed their mobilization. Communism collapsed, Thomas argues, because the Helsinki accord gave opponents the tools they needed to bring it down. By way of conclusion, Thomas argues that dominant views of international relations fail to consider the ways in which international institutions and the norms they carry can transform domestic politics.

Thomas's work is thus valuable for a number of reasons. First, it serves as an excellent analysis of the emergence of the Helsinki process and its interpretation in the west and east. In addition, Thomas reminds us of the ways in which this language became an important part of the dissident movement and the emergence of civil society across the Soviet bloc. Finally, Thomas uses this discussion to challenge traditional thinking on international relations and the role of ideas, seeking to apply these lessons more broadly to the field. If I were to voice any quibbles, they would center around the puzzle of differing forms of mobilization across eastern Europe. There is no doubt that the language of Helsinki influenced dissident movements in central Europe; in the Balkans, however, civil society was much weaker and more fragmented. This may simply be a question of the use of repression. Another answer, however, may be that the power of transnational norms in domestic politics is not only a function of a state's desire to seek legitimation in the international system, but the extent to which a country's historical experience with the rule of law provides the conditions or groundwork with which new legal concepts can be understood and used by state and society. There is no doubt that the international facet of communism's decline matters; a more systematic discussion of the nature of state-society relations seems warranted, however. But this may be beyond Thomas's objectives. In the end, he asks us to consider the intersection of international ideas, domestic politics, and regime change—an intersection that resonates far beyond eastern Europe in 1989.

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Comrades No More: The Seeds of Change in Eastern Europe. By Renée de Nevers. BCSIA Studies in International Security. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003. xii, 305 pp. Notes. Index. Figures. Tables. Map. \$25.00, paper.

Perhaps it is best to get the minor concerns—the ones an east European historian is supposed to voice—out of the way first. It is exasperating, in a study of late communism in eastern Europe, to find no familiarity with any language of the region besides Russian; to find no use of materials from any of the six case studies, except as cited in western publi-