

## PETER BENENSON

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Peter Benenson was a champion of “prisoners of conscience” and founder of Amnesty International. During his six years at its helm, he developed an approach to campaigning that provided a blueprint for the human rights movement. He was ambitious, innovative, and occasionally reckless, sparking controversies that would cast a shadow over the organization he had founded.

Peter James Henry Solomon Benenson was born in London on 31 July 1921. His mother was of Russian Jewish extraction; his father, a British Army officer, died when Peter was young. He enjoyed a privileged upbringing: after being tutored by W.H. Auden, he was educated at Eton College (where he raised funds to rescue young Jews from Germany) and then Balliol College, Oxford. During the war, he worked in military intelligence at the Bletchley Park code-breaking center; after it, he was called to the English Bar and unsuccessfully stood for Parliament as a Labour Party candidate. In 1954 he traveled to Spain on behalf of the Society of Labour Lawyers to observe the trial of Basque trades unionists. Two years later he visited the British colony of Cyprus to advise lawyers representing those who had fallen foul of the authorities. During this period, he founded Justice, the British section of the International Commission of Jurists, and converted to Catholicism – thereafter a strong influence on his life.

### **The founding of Amnesty**

In 1960 Benenson read that two students had been jailed in Portugal for the “crime” of toasting freedom, and decided to campaign on behalf of those imprisoned for their beliefs. Assisted by influential friends such as fellow lawyer Louis Blom-Cooper, Quaker Eric Baker and editor David Astor, he launched Amnesty in *The Observer* newspaper on 28 May 1961 (“The Forgotten Prisoners,” p. 21). The campaign proclaimed that it would work impartially on behalf of “prisoners of conscience”, rising above the Cold War fray by taking on cases equally from the East, the West, and the third world. As Benenson explained in the book *Persecution 1961*: “If [Amnesty] were ever to fall under the control of one country, ideology or creed, it will have failed in its purpose” (p. 152).

The campaign soon gathered momentum. In 1962, already thinking on international lines, Benenson traveled to Paris and New York to drum up support for new sections. Meanwhile, other senior figures in Amnesty dispersed to other places abroad to plead the case of prisoners: Seán MacBride to Czechoslovakia, Louis Blom-Cooper to Ghana, Neville Vincent to Portugal and Prem Khera to East Germany. At the same time, fledgling groups of activists mounted letter-writing campaigns on behalf of prisoners from each of the world’s power blocs. The following year, Amnesty embarked on an investigation in southern Africa, paid £90 (U.S.\$252 at 1963 rates) a month to prisoners’ families in *apartheid* South Africa, and sent several parcels of clothes to Spain.

Despite his pledge of organizational independence, and unbeknownst to its membership, Peter Benenson also began to offer advice to, and gain support from, a partisan entity – the British government. During the 1960s the United Kingdom was still in the process of withdrawing from its colonies, and civil service departments such as the Colonial Office and the Foreign Office welcomed information from those familiar with human rights issues. The relationship between Amnesty and Whitehall was placed on a more solid

footing in 1963, when the Foreign Office wrote to overseas missions urging “discreet support” for Amnesty: discreet, because its public endorsement would have seriously undermined the campaign’s credibility. It also explained that Amnesty would remain “independent”, in the sense that officialdom would not be responsible for its activities, “some of which might from time to time embarrass us” (National Archives, Kew, U.K.: LCO 2/8097, Intel: “Amnesty International,” 9 May 1967, which recaps the 1963 decision).

Benenson thrived as a go-between. In 1963 he wrote to Lord Lansdowne, the Colonial Office Minister, about an Amnesty proposal to install a “refugee counsellor” in the British protectorate of Bechuanaland (present-day Botswana). The aim was to assist people fleeing across the border from neighboring South Africa, but not those actively engaged in the struggle against *apartheid*. “I would like to reiterate our view that these [British] territories should not be used for offensive political action by the opponents of the South African Government,” he wrote. “Communist influence should not be allowed to spread in this part of Africa, and in the present delicate situation, Amnesty International would wish to support Her Majesty’s Government in any such policy” (National Archives, Kew, U.K.: CO 1048/570, Benenson to Lansdowne, 26 September 1963). The following year, the organization dropped anti-*apartheid* activist Nelson Mandela as a “prisoner of conscience” because he had been convicted for an act of violence – namely, sabotage.

### **Trip to Haiti**

In 1964, Benenson asked the Foreign Office to assist him to obtain a visa to Haiti, the impoverished Caribbean nation ruled by President François (“Papa Doc”) Duvalier, so that he might conduct an investigation of human rights abuses. The Foreign Office obliged, and cabled its Port-au-Prince representative Alan Elgar to say that “we support the aims of Amnesty International” (National Archives, Kew, U.K.: FO 371/174252, FO to Port-au-Prince, 18 December 1964). Benenson was to travel under his own name but with a false identity as a painter, enabling him to meet the regime’s opponents without attracting the attention of Duvalier’s security force, the Ton Ton Macoutes. This ploy would also disguise the fact that the investigation was being carried out with the official blessing of Whitehall. As Minister of State Walter Padley reminded him before he left: “We shall have to be a little careful not to give the Haitians the impression that your visit is actually sponsored by Her Majesty’s Government” (National Archives, Kew, U.K.: FO 371/174252, Padley to Benenson, 18 December 1964).

Benenson arrived in Port-au-Prince in January 1965 and began his investigation. Elgar introduced him to prominent expatriates such as the American ambassador, the Canadian *chargé d'affaires*, and “reliable people” in the business community. (Benenson noted that of these individuals, the ambassador was the only apologist for Duvalier.) His mission in Haiti remained a secret while he was there, but on the way home he called a press conference in Paris. Assuming it was an off-the-record briefing, he revealed his cover as a “painter”, with unpredicted consequences. *The Times* named him as the Amnesty representative who had traveled to Haiti, and the *New York Times* told how he had “obtained his entry visa as an ‘artist’ and circumvented restrictions on internal travel by a ruse.”

Foreign Office officials were none too pleased: Elgar, for example, declared himself to be “shocked by Benenson’s antics”. Benenson apologized to Walter Padley, but blamed the newspapers. “I really do not know why the *New York Times*, which is generally a responsible newspaper, should be doing this sort of thing over Haiti,” he wrote. “I can only suppose that some of the editorial staff are rather indignant about the present regime on the island and are using every opportunity to shake the US administration into action.” (National Archives, Kew, U.K.: FO 371/179555, Benenson to Elgar [Haiti], 24 January 1965).

### **Report on Aden**

More drama followed. In July 1966 Dr. Selahuddin Rastgeldi of Amnesty’s Swedish section traveled to the British colony of Aden to investigate allegations of torture at the Ras Morbut interrogation center. Hans Goran Franck, chairman of the Swedish section, then contacted Prime Minister Harold Wilson. “Dr Rastgeldi has gathered reliable information on the practice of torture in the British interrogation centres in Aden,” he wrote. This included: “Undressing the detainee and letting him stand naked during interrogation... forcing the prisoner to sit on a pole entering his anus... hitting and twisting his genital organs... extinguishing cigarettes on his skin... keeping him in filthy toilets with the floor covered with faeces and urine” (National Archives, Kew, U.K.: PREM 13/1294, Franck to Wilson, 18 October 1966).

Amnesty released the Franck letter in October 1966, but not Rastgeldi’s report. There were conflicting explanations for the delay. Benenson claimed that the Amnesty general secretary Robert Swann had suppressed it in deference to the Foreign Office. But according to co-founder Eric Baker, both Benenson and Swann had met Foreign Secretary George Brown in September and told him that they were willing to hold up publication if the Foreign Office “made concessions about procedure which would ensure that no such incidents could recur” (Amnesty International circular: “Aden”, October 1966). A memo by Lord Chancellor Gerald Gardiner to Harold Wilson in November states that “Amnesty held the Swedish complaint as long as they could simply because Peter Benenson did not want to do anything to hurt a Labour government” (National Archives, Kew, U.K.: PREM 13/1294, Lord Chancellor to Prime Minister, 4 November 1966).

That same month, Benenson traveled to Aden, and was shocked by what he found there. “During many years spent in the personal investigation of repression... I never came upon an uglier picture than that which met my eyes in Aden,” he wrote to Gerald Gardiner, adding that he was sickened by ‘the deliberate cruelty and affronts to the human dignity of the Arab population.’ Regarding Rastgeldi’s report, he admitted that “there is to say the least a strong possibility that some if not all the rather horrifying allegations are correct” (National Archives, Kew, U.K.: LCO 2/8097, Benenson to Gardiner, 6 January 1967) Later in the House of Commons, George Brown denounced what he called the “wild allegations” contained in Rastgeldi’s report (*Hansard*, Commons, Vol. 738, 19 December 1966, Col. 1007).

### **The ‘Harry’ letters**

Further controversy followed in spring 1967, with the revelation that the International Commission of Jurists had been founded and covertly funded by the CIA through an American affiliate, the American Fund for Free Jurists Inc. Its Secretary-General Seán

MacBride (who was also head of Amnesty's international secretariat) denied knowledge of this covert support. Then, shortly after, a similar scandal hit Amnesty.

Polly Toynbee, then a twenty-year-old volunteer and later a prominent British journalist, contacted the press with evidence suggesting that Amnesty was being covertly funded by the British government. In 1966, she had traveled first to Nigeria and then to Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) with the organization. During her six weeks in Salisbury (now Harare), she and other volunteers dispensed funds to detainees' families and tried to arrange legal aid for prisoners. Money seemed to be no object – "I could go to the bank and pull out £200 [U.S.\$560 at 1966 rates] at a time, there was no one to check up" – and rumors circulated about the source of it (Duff Hart Davis). When Benenson paid a visit to Salisbury, he had apparently admitted to her that the money had come from the British government.

When Toynbee and others were expelled from Rhodesia in March 1966, she brought with her correspondence that she claimed to have found abandoned in a safe, which included letters from Benenson's address to Amnesty's general secretary Robert Swann and others working in Rhodesia. These appeared to indicate that Amnesty had asked "Harry" (Harold Wilson's Labour government) for money for its work in the country, and that "Harry" had paid up in late January 1966.

When the press published excerpts from the "Harry" letters in March 1967, Amnesty formally denied knowledge of the payments. Benenson, however, conceded that the government *had* provided secret funds, but claimed they were a direct gift to prisoners and their families in Rhodesia, and not funds for the organization. A private letter written by Benenson to Gerald Gardiner two months before Toynbee's revelations revealed that the British government had asked a third party, Charles Forte, the owner of the catering and hotel chain, to donate £10,000 (U.S.\$28,000 at 1966 rates) to the Rhodesian work. Benenson suggested that in return for the donation, "it was not altogether unlikely that the name of such a well-known caterer would appear on a future honours list" (National Archives, Kew, U.K.: LCO 2/8097, Benenson to Gardiner, 6 January 1967).

Whatever the truth of the matter, Benenson decided to return the money. He wrote to Gardiner that "rather than jeopardise the political reputation of those members of the Government involved in these secret payments, I had decided to sell sufficient of my own securities to repay the secret donor". His motive, he explained, was "to clear the record so that it could be said that the money sent for succour to HM loyal subjects in Rhodesia came from a... private person with a known interest in the cause". Benenson was also keen to divest himself of unspent Foreign Office funding for two other human rights organizations with which he was involved: Justice, and the Human Rights Advisory Service, which he had set up in January 1966 and which was also active in Rhodesia. "In my view," he wrote, "under present circumstances it would be better if the money went back whence it came" (UK National Archives, Kew: LCO 2/8097, Benenson to Gardiner, 6 January 1967).

In addition to his nervousness about a possible scandal over the covert funds, Benenson also expressed his bitter disappointment over the British Government's handling of human rights issues. "I believed on the evidence of my friends' record and their public declarations that they would set an example to the world in the matter of human rights," he wrote to Gardiner. "Alas, such an example has been set, but it is not a good example" (National Archives, Kew, U.K.: LCO 2/8097, Benenson to Gardiner, 6 January 1967).

## **Benenson's departure from Amnesty**

At the height of the controversy over the "Harry" letters, Amnesty staffer Stephanie Grant wrote to G.C. Grant in Salisbury: "Peter Benenson has been levelling accusations... which can only have the result of discrediting the organisation which he has founded and to which he dedicated himself." She continued: "All this began after soon after he came back from Aden, and it seems likely that the nervous shock which he felt at the brutality shown by some elements of the British army there had some unbalancing effect on his judgment" (National Archives, Kew, U.K.: FCO 36/100, S. Grant to G. C. Grant, 7 March 1967). Benenson resigned as Amnesty's president on the grounds that its London office was bugged and infiltrated by the secret services, and announced that he could no longer live in a country where such activities were tolerated.

In March 1967, Amnesty delegations from Europe and America gathered for a conference in Elsinore, Denmark. Chairman Seán MacBride submitted a written report that referred pointedly to Benenson's "erratic actions" and "unilateral initiatives" (Power, p. 17). Benenson did not attend, but submitted a resolution demanding MacBride's resignation on the grounds that a section of the International Commission of Jurists had been funded by the CIA. After the conference, Amnesty's leadership passed to a caretaker, Eric Baker.

The relationship between Amnesty and the British Government was suspended. Amnesty vowed that in future, it "must not only be independent and impartial but must not be put into a position where anything else could even be alleged" (Peter Burns, "Elsinore: Mandate for Change," *Air* [Amnesty International Review], 19 May 1967). In May 1967 the Foreign Office reversed its 1963 instructions about the organization and cautioned that "for the time being our attitude to Amnesty International must be one of reserve" (National Archives, Kew, U.K.: LCO 2/8097, Intel: "Amnesty International," 9 May 1967).

Peter Benenson withdrew from the scene but re-emerged in the 1980s as the champion of new causes. He chaired the Association of Christians Against Torture, founded organizations to aid fellow sufferers of celiac disease and manic depression, organized aid for Romanian orphans, and spoke out for Mordachai Vanunu (the technician imprisoned for revealing some of Israel's nuclear secrets). In the meantime he mended fences with Amnesty International, which grew into one of the world's leading human rights groups, with sections in sixty-four countries. When he died in Oxford on 25 February 2005, the organization paid fulsome tribute. "Peter Benenson's life was a courageous testament to his visionary commitment to fight injustice around the world," said secretary-general Irene Khan. "He brought light into the darkness of prisons."

[*See also:* Amnesty International; Colonialism; Haiti; International Commission of Jurists; Seán MacBride; Refugees; Religious Freedom; South Africa; Torture: International Law; *and* Zimbabwe.]

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