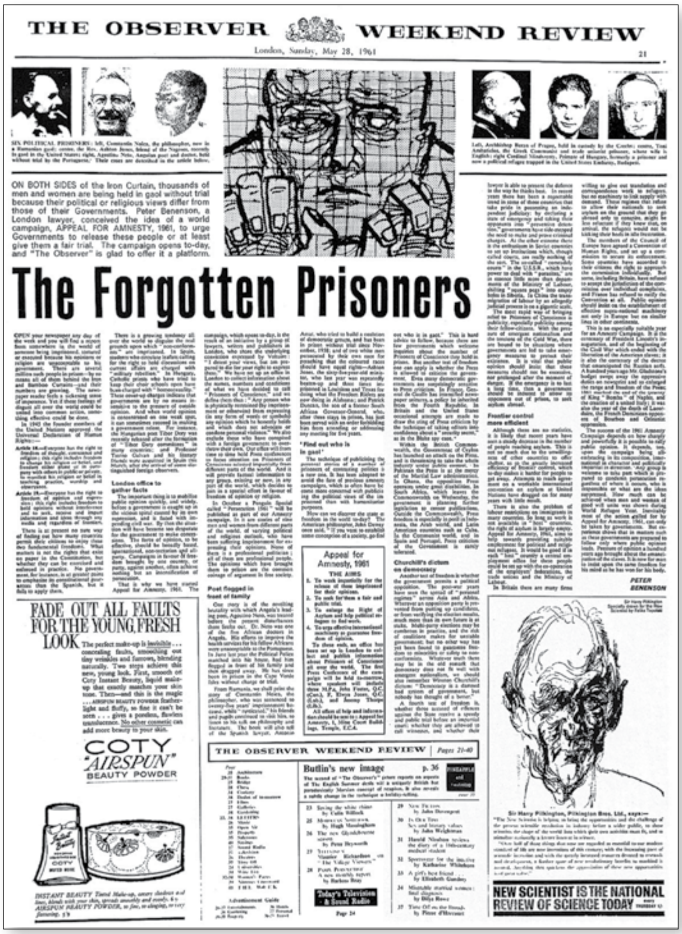
PETER BENENSON'S ARTICLE IN *THE OBSERVER*


THE OBSERVER WEEKEND REVIEW

London, Sunday, May 28, 1961

The Forgotten Prisoners

Below is the actual text of Peter Benenson's article *The Forgotten Prisoners*

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28 May 1961

SIX POLITICAL PRISONERS: left, Constatin Noica, the philosopher, now in a Rumanian gaol*: center, the Rev. Ashton Jones, friend of the Negroes, recently in gaol in the United States; right, Agostino Neto, Angolan poet and doctor, held without trial by the Portuguese. Their cases are described in the article below.

Left, Archbishop Beran of Prague, held in custody by the Czechs; centre, Toni Ambatielos, the Greek Communist and trade unionist prisoner, whose wife is English; right, Cardinal Mindszenty, Primate of Hungary, formerly a prisoner and now a political refugee trapped in the United States Embassy, Budapest.

ON BOTH SIDES of the Iron Curtain, thousands of men and women are bing held in gaol without trial because their political or religious views differ from those of their Governments. Peter Benenson, a London lawyer, conceived the idea of a world campaign, APPEAL FOR AMNESTY, 1961, to urge Governments to release these people or at least give them a fair trial. The campaign opens to-day, and *The Observer* is glad to offer it a platform.

THE FORGOTTEN PRISONERS

OPEN your newspaper any day of the week and you will find a report from somewhere in the world of someone being imprisoned, tortured or executed because his opinions or religion are unacceptable to his government. There are several million such people in prison - by no means all of them behind

*gaol = jail

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the Iron and Bamboo Curtains - and their numbers are growing. The newspaper reader feels a sickening sense of impotence. Yet if these feelings of disgust all over the world could be united into common action, something effective could be done.

In 1945 the founder members of the United Nations approved the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

ARTICLE 18

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion: this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom either alone or in company with others in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

ARTICLE 19

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression: this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

There is at present no sure way of finding out how many countries permit their citizens to enjoy these two fundamental freedoms. What matters is not the rights that exist on paper in the Constitution, but whether they can be exercised and enforced in practice. No government, for instance, is at greater pains to emphasize its constitutional guarantees than the Spanish, but it fails to apply them.

There is a growing tendency all over the world to disguise the real grounds upon which "non-conformists" are imprisoned. In Spain, students who circulate leaflets calling for the right to hold discussions on current affairs are charged with "military rebellion." In Hungary, Catholic priests who have tried to keep their choir schools open have been charged with "homosexuality." These cover-up charges indicate that governments are by no means insensitive to the pressure of outside opinion. And when world opinion is concentrated on one weak spot, it can sometimes succeed in making a government relent. For instance, the Hungarian poet Tibor Dery was recently released after the formation of "Tibor Dery committees" in many countries; and Professor Tierno Galvan and his literary friends were acquitted in Spain this March, after the arrival of some distinguished foreign observers.

LONDON OFFICE TO GATHER FACTS

The important thing is to mobilise public opinion quickly, and widely, before a government is caught up in the vicious spiral caused by its own repression, and is faced with impending civil war. By then the situation will have become too desperate for the government to make concessions. The force of opinion, to be effective, should be broadly based, international, non-sectarian and all-party. Campaigns in favour of freedom brought by one country, or party, against another, often achieve nothing but an intensification of persecution.

That is why we have started Appeal for Amnesty, 1961. The campaign, which opens to-day, is the result of an initiative by a group of lawyers, writers and publishers in London, who share the underlying conviction expressed by Voltaire: "I detest your views, but am prepared to die for your right to express them." We have set up an office in London to collect information about the names, numbers, and conditions of what we have decided to call "Prisoners of Conscience;" and we define them thus: "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." We also exclude those people who have conspired with a foreign government to overthrow their own. Our office will from time to time hold Press conferences to focus attention on Prisoners of Conscience selected impartially from different parts of the world. And it will provide factual information to any group, existing or new, in any part of the world, which decides to join in a special effort in favor of freedom of opinion or religion.

In October a Penguin Special called "Persecution 1961" will be published as part of our Amnesty campaign. In it are stories of nine men and women from different parts of the world, of varying political and religious outlook, who have been suffering imprisonment for expressing their opinions. None of them is a professional politician; all of them are professional people. The opinions which have brought them to prison are the common coinage of argument in free society.

POET FLOGGED IN FRONT OF FAMILY

One story is of the revolting brutality with which Angola's leading poet, Agostino Neto, was treated before the present disturbances there broke out. Dr. Neto was one of the five African doctors in Angola. His efforts to improve the health services for his fellow Africans were unacceptable to the Portuguese. In June last year the Political Police marches into his house, had him flogged in front of his family and then dragged away. He has since been in the Cape Verde Isles without charge or trial.

From Rumania, we shall print the story of Constatin Noica, the philosopher, who was sentenced to twenty-five years' imprisonment because, while "rusticated," his friends and pupils continued to visit him, to listen to his talk on philosophy and literature. The book will also tell of the Spanish lawyer, Antonio Amat, who tried to build a coalition of democratic groups, and has been in trial since November, 1958; and of two white men persecuted by their own race for preaching that colored races

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should have equal rights - Ashton Jones, the sixty-five-year-old minister, who last year was repeatedly beaten-up and three times imprisoned in Lousiana and Texas for doing what the Freedom Riders are now doing in Alabama; and Patrick Duncan, the son of a former South African Governor-General, who, after three stays in prison, has just been served with an order forbidding him from attending or addressing any meeting for five years.

'FIND OUT WHO IS IN GAOL'

The technique of publicising the personal stories of a number of prisoners of contrasting politics is a new one. It has been adopted to avoid the fate of previous amnesty campaigns, which so often have become more concerned with publicising the political views of the imprisoned than with humanitarian purposes.

How can we discover the state of freedom in the world to-day? The American philosopher, John Dewey, once said, "If you want to establish some conception of a society, go find out who is in gaol." This is hard advice to follow, because there are few governments which welcome inquiries about the number of Prisoners of Conscience they hold in prison. But another test of freedom one can apply is whether the Press is allowed to criticise the government. Even many democratic governments are surprisingly sensitive to Press criticism. In France, General de Gaulle has intensived newspaper seizures, a policy he inherited from the Fourth Republic. In Britain and the United States occasional attempts are made to draw the sting of Press criticism by the technique of taking editors into confidence about a "security secret," as in the Blake spy case.*

Within the British Commonwealth, the Government of Ceylon has launched an attack on the Press, and is threatening to take the whole industry under public control. In Pakistan the Press is at the mercy of the Martial Law administration. In Ghana, the opposition Press operates under great disabilities. In South Africa, which leaves the Commonwealth on Wednesday, the government is planning further legislation to censor publications. Outside the Commonwealth, Press freedom is especially in peril in Indonesia, the Arab World, and Latin American countries such as Cuba. In the Communist world, and in Spain and Portugal, Press criticism of the Government is rarely tolerated.

CHURCHILL'S DICTUM ON DEMOCRACY

Another test of freedom is whether the government permits a political opposition. The post-war years have seen the spread of "personal regimes" across Asia and Africa. Wherever an opposition party is prevented from putting up candidates, or from verifying election results, much more than its own future is at stake. Multi-party elections may be cumbrous in practice, and the risk of coalitions makes for unstable government; but no other way has yet been found to guarantee freedom to minorities or safety to non-conformists. Whatever truth there may be in the old remark that democracy does not fit well with emergent nationalism, we should also remember Winston Churchill's dictum: "Democracy is a damned bad system of government, but nobody has thought of a better."

A fourth test of freedom is, whether those accused of offences against the State receive a speedy and public trial before an impartial court: whether they are allowed to call witnesses, and whether their lawyer is able to present the defence in the way he thinks best. In recent years there has been a regrettable trend in some of those countries that take pride in possessing an independent judiciary: by declaring a state of emergency and taking their opponents into "preventative detention," government shave side-stepped the need to make and prove criminal charges. At the other extreme there is the enthusiasm in Soviet countries to set up institutions which, though called courts, are really nothing of the sort. The so-called "comradely courts" in the U.S.S.R., which have the power to deal with "parasites," are in essence little more than departments of the Ministry of Labor, shifting "square pegs" to empty holes in Siberia. In China the transmigration of labor by an allegedly judicial process is on a gigantic scale.

The most rapid way of bringing relief to Prisoners of Conscience is publicity, especially publicity among their fellow-citizens. With the pressure of emergent nationalism and the tensions of the Cold War, there are bound to be situations where governments are led to take emergency measures to protect their existence. It is vital that public opinions should insist that these measures should not be excessive, nor prolonged after the moment of danger. If the emergency is to last a long time, then a government should be induced to allow its opponents out of prison, to seek asylum abroad.

FRONTIER CONTROL MORE EFFICIENT

Although there are no statistics, it is likely that recent years have seen a steady decrease in the number of people reaching asylum. This is not so much due to the unwillingness of other countries to offer shelter, as to the greatly increased efficiency of frontier control, which to-day makes it harder for people to get away. Attempts to reach agreement on a workable international convention on asylum at the United Nations have dragged on for many years with little result.

There is also the problem of labour restrictions on immigrants in many countries. So long as work is not available in "host" countries, the right of asylum is largely empty. Appeal for Amnesty, 1961, aims to help towards providing suitable employment for political and religious refugees. It would be good if in each "host" country a central employment office for these

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people could be set up with the co-operation of the employers' federations, the trade unions and the Ministry of Labour.

In Britain there are many firms willing to give out translation and correspondence work to refugees, but no machinery to link supply with demand. Those regimes that refuse to allow their nationals to seek asylum on the ground that they go abroad only to conspire, might be less reluctant if they knew that, on arrival, the refugees would not be kicking their feet in idle frustration.

The members of the Council of Europe have agreed a Convention of Human Rights, and set up a commission to secure its enforcement. Some countries have accorded to their citizens the right to approach the commission individually. But some, including Britain, have refused to accept the jurisdiction of the commission over individual complaints, and France has refused to ratify the Convention at all. Public opinion should insist on the establishment of effective supra-national machinery not only in Europe but on similar lines in other continents.

This is an especially suitable year for an Amnesty Campaign. It is the centenary of President Lincoln's inauguration, and of the beginning of the Civil War which ended with the liberation of the American slaves; it is also the centenary of the decree that emancipated the Russian serfs. A hundred years ago Mr.Gladstone's budget swept away the oppressive duties on newsprint and so enlarged the range and freedom of the Press; 1861 marked the end of the tyranny of King "Bomba" of Naples, and the creation of a united Italy; it was also the year of the death of Lacordaire, the French Dominican opponent of Bourbon and Orleanist oppression.

The success of the 1961 Amnesty Campaign depends on how sharply and powerfully it is possible to rally public opinion. It depends, too, upon the campaign being all-embracing in its composition, international in character and politically impartial in direction. Any group is welcome to take part which is prepared to condemn persecution regardless of where it occurs,who is responsible or what are the ideas suppressed. How much can be achieved when men and women of good will unite was shown during World Refugee Year. Inevitably most of the action called for by Appeal for Amnesty, 1961, can only be taken by governments. By experience shows that in matters such as these governments are prepared to follow only where public opinion leads. Pressure of opinion a hundred years ago brought about the emancipation of the slaves. It is now for man to insist upon the same freedom for his mind as he has won for his body.

Peter Benenson

APPEAL FOR AMNESTY, 1961: THE AIMS

1 To work impartially for the release of those imprisoned for their opinions.

2 To seek for them a fair and public trial.

3 To enlarge the Right of Asylum and help political refugees to find work.

4 To urge effective international machinery to guarantee freedom of opinion.

To these ends, an office has been set up in London to collect and publish information about Prisoners of Conscience all over the world. The first Press Conference of the campaign will beheld tomorrow, where speakers will include three M.P.s, John Foster, Q.C. (Con.), F. Elwyn Jones, Q.C. (Lab.), and Jeremy Thorpe (Lib.).

All offers of help and information should be sent to: Appeal for Amnesty, 1, Mitre Court Buildings, Temple, E.C.4.

NOTE:
WHAT HAPPENED TO THE SIX POLITICAL PRISONERS PICTURED?

Constantin Noica: pardoned after 6 years as part of a general amnesty and released in August 1964.

Rev. Ashton Jones: released.

Cardinal Mindszenty: released.

Archbishop Josef Beran: released. In 1967 he celebrated his freedom by lighting an Amnesty International candle in Rome.

Toni Ambatielos: released in 1963.

Dr Agostino Neto: placed under house arrest from which he escaped. He went on to become the first President of Angola.