

Belgrade and human rights – success or failure?

By H. Gordon Skilling

To assess the success or failure of the recently-concluded Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) in Belgrade is difficult, owing to the paucity of information about its proceedings as well as the extraordinary diversity of opinion on its outcome. In a quite positive review of the conference, Moscow's *Pravda* (March 10, 1978) concluded that the meeting had "fulfilled the mandate" defined at Helsinki and "demonstrated the determination of the European nations to follow further along the path" opened by its predecessor. *Rudé právo* (March 11), the organ of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, which might have been expected to complain of the censure of its country at Belgrade, echoed *Pravda*, declaring that the conference had achieved "a very important positive result". The *Sunday Times* of London (March 12) thought that, as "a human rights conference," Belgrade was "a success for the West".

At the other extreme, the Swiss delegate was quoted as estimating the balance of success as 1 per cent and of failure as 99 per cent. According to West Germany's *Die Zeit* (March 3), the conference ended with "a failure – and a setback for *détente*". Striking a more even balance, the London *Times* (March 10) headed its leading article "Disappointment, Not Disaster". The *New York Times* (March 9), under the title "The Unending Human Rights Review", concluded that Belgrade "marks a modest but significant accomplishment". In somewhat similar vein, Canadian diplomats have spoken of "a disappointment but not a failure", but calculated the results as a 70 percent success.

The evaluation of any international conference is difficult, and can hardly be measured with any degree of assurance, let alone with mathematical exactitude. Criteria for assessment are bound to be imprecise and ambiguous, and to differ widely from country to country and from person to

person. Yet at first sight a largely negative verdict seems warranted on a meeting that occupied some 400 representatives of 35 countries for five months, from October 4, 1977 to March 8, 1978 (after a preparatory meeting of eight weeks from June 15 to August 5), and produced a final document of a few hundred words containing almost nothing of substance – "a mouse," as one German newspaper called it.

No proposals adopted

Moreover, not one of the over 100 concrete proposals for implementation of the Helsinki agreement was adopted. All foundered, as did the proposals for a substantial concluding statement, on the rock of the "consensus" required for adoption. The sessions, it is true, produced a torrent of words and a mountain of paper on every subject mentioned in the 135-page Helsinki Final Act, including the contentious issue of human rights. All this, alas, occurred behind closed doors, so that the general public remained in almost total ignorance of what took place, and had a deep suspicion that, in fact, nothing of any significance happened. The media of the world, restricted to the occasional press release or regular press briefings, virtually ignored the proceedings, with a few notable exceptions in Europe. Not a single Canadian newspaper or radio and television network sent a representative to Belgrade for the entire conference, and only one newspaper, *Le Devoir*, provided regular and well-informed coverage.

The inability of the Belgrade conference

No comprehensive Canadian newspaper or network coverage

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