
PETER BENENSON

Two articles that changed the world

One day in 1960 Peter Benenson was reading his newspaper on the tube in London when he saw an article about two Portuguese students who had drunk a toast to liberty in a Lisbon restaurant. At the time Portugal was governed by a dictator. The students had been overheard, arrested, and given seven-year prison sentences for their simple gesture.

Benenson was outraged. When he got off the train he went straight into the church of St Martin-in-the-Fields, Trafalgar Square, to think hard about what could be done to prevent such appalling suppression of free speech. As a lawyer he realised that there was a limit to how much lawyers could do to protect human rights in undemocratic countries. What was needed was a campaign "which would harness the enthusiasm of people all over the world who were anxious to see a wider respect for human rights".

A few months later, in May 1961, *The Observer* published Benenson's article on "The Forgotten Prisoners" - the people imprisoned, tortured or executed in many countries because their opinions or religion were unacceptable to their governments. He proposed a one-year "Appeal for Amnesty" to obtain their release. In his article Peter Benenson announced that the new campaign office in London would collect names and information about those imprisoned for their opinions but who had not advocated violence, and he coined the term "Prisoners of Conscience" to describe them.

Thousands of readers responded to this appeal, and not just from Britain. Within a short time an international meeting of supporters decided to establish Amnesty International as a permanent human rights organisation.

Sympathisers were encouraged to form small groups at work, at church, school or college. Each group was allocated three prisoners of

conscience: one from the west, one from an "Iron Curtain" (Communist) country, and one from a developing country. In this way Amnesty demonstrated that it was politically impartial. Group members wrote letters asking the authorities to release their "adopted" prisoners and, if possible, corresponded with the

prisoners to comfort and encourage them. This created strong bonds between people from different countries. It gave individual citizens a sense of their power to change things, and pioneered a new way of using international protest to secure human rights.

Light in dark places

Within a few months the Amnesty campaign already showed results, as some of the first adopted prisoners were released. This indicated how even repressive governments could be shamed into a response when their human rights abuses were brought out into the open, illuminated by the glare of international publicity.



*"I have lit this candle, in the words of Shakespeare, 'against oblivion' - so that the forgotten prisoners should always be remembered.
We work in Amnesty against oblivion."*

On 10th December 1961, Human Rights Day, Amnesty International acquired a powerful new symbol - a candle surrounded by barbed wire - which Peter Benenson lit outside St Martin-in-the-Fields. He said later: "Once the concentration camps and hell-holes of the world were in darkness. Now they are lit by the light of the Amnesty candle; the candle in barbed wire. When I first lit the Amnesty candle, I had in mind the old Chinese proverb: 'Better light a candle than curse the darkness.'"

A lifelong campaigner

That proverb sums up the do-it-yourself philosophy that Peter Benenson exemplified throughout his life, for Amnesty International was not the first or only cause he took up when he saw a need. He was the son of an army officer who died when Peter was very young, while his mother was the daughter of a Russian-Jewish banker. As a pupil at Eton, Benenson's complaints about the terrible school meals provoked a letter warning his mother that her son had "revolutionary tendencies".

At the age of 16, Benenson supported a relief committee for war orphans of the Spanish Civil War, and "adopted" a child himself, contributing to its upbringing. Next, he persuaded his school friends to help Jews persecuted in Nazi Germany by raising £4,000 to bring two young German Jews to safety in Britain.

During the Second World War Peter Benenson was one of the code-breakers at Bletchley Park, deciphering German signals. He then studied law, and stood as a Labour candidate in several parliamentary elections without success.

In the 1940s and 1950s Benenson attended, on behalf of the Trade Union Congress and Labour lawyers, the political trials in Spain of Basque nationalists and trade unionists. Seeing the value of sending legal observers to trials held after the 1956 anti-Soviet uprising in Hungary, and to the treason trial of Nelson Mandela and colleagues in South Africa, Benenson formed Justice, an independent human rights group of lawyers (the British branch of the International Commission of Jurists).

Against oblivion

Over the years Amnesty International has become the world's largest independent human rights organisation with supporters today in 150 countries. It has extended its brief to oppose any use of torture, other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and the death penalty. In 1977 Amnesty International was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for having "contributed to securing the ground for freedom, for justice, and thereby also for peace in the world".

Peter Benenson had become a Catholic in 1958 and this reinforced his belief in the power of individuals to improve the world. He was a member of Pax Christi and a supporter of many other campaigns for peace and human rights. Modestly refusing the knighthoods offered by successive British prime ministers, he challenged them instead to end the human rights violations committed or condoned by British governments. He was always aware of what still had to be done to rescue the forgotten prisoners "from oblivion". Lighting the Amnesty candle for the organisation's 25th anniversary he said: "The candle burns not for us, but for all those whom we failed to rescue from prison, who were shot on their way to prison, who were tortured, who were kidnapped, who 'disappeared'. That is what the candle is for."

Through Amnesty International thousands were made aware of the importance of human rights and this galvanised public support for new international laws to protect them. In 1975 the United Nations unanimously adopted a declaration against the use of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and in 1976 the UN brought into force two vital Covenants -on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and on Civil and Political Rights. The world was changed forever on the day that Peter Benenson converted his anger into action.

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