



An American soldier, David B. Gleason from Chicago, IL, at the Port of Brindisi, nearby the San Vito Dei Normanni US Air Force Base in 1996-1997. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=Special:Search&limit=50&offset=0&profile=default&search=san+vito+dei+normanni&searchToken=a7r76bzsgxa2r951ducqxe56s#/media/File:Port_of_Brindisi_\(2149301088\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=Special:Search&limit=50&offset=0&profile=default&search=san+vito+dei+normanni&searchToken=a7r76bzsgxa2r951ducqxe56s#/media/File:Port_of_Brindisi_(2149301088).jpg)

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Human Rights vs. Human Life: The US-Soviet Bottom-Line

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In 1977 an incident occurred in a tiny fisherman village located in the south-eastern corner of Italy, which resonated in both Washington and Moscow. That kind of linkages in history, combining the micro and macro levels of analysis simultaneously, is what inspires me the most as a historian and what makes me feel so much at home at EUR's history department. An overarching, comprehensive view of history, one that intertwines the local and global together, helps me in the exploration of the global repercussions that a plethora of apparently marginal events recurrently had throughout the cold war.

When the incident happened, the crisis of the cold war détente – the attempt to establish a pacific coexistence between the two superpowers – was already in full swing. The newly elected American president Jimmy Carter was trying to implement an international policy based on the universal safeguard of human rights. In his inaugural address, Carter had stressed the importance of such a new approach for the conduct of American foreign policy, which had to be based on nothing less than a worldwide defense of human freedom. “Because we are free,” the US president said, reiterating a long-standing view of American exceptionalism, “we can never be indifferent to the fate of freedom elsewhere. Our moral sense dictates a clear-cut preference for those societies which share with us an abiding respect for individual human rights.” The main object of Carter’s criticism, was, of course, the Soviet Union. Moscow had a gloomy record in human rights violations. Individual freedoms of speech, associations, religion, and expressions were constantly denied at home and threatened abroad. In Russia, the KGB dutifully applied a policy of “medicalization” to human rights activists, or, as the official propaganda portrayed them, dissenters. People like Andrei Sakharov or the intellectuals reunited in the so-called Helsinki Watch

Groups were usually confined in psychiatric institutions, when not sent to prison, labor camps or internal exile. Abroad, the rise of local protests culminating in the launch of the anti-socialist Czech manifesto *Charter 77*, was met with constant hostility and violent repression.

This tension notwithstanding, when a minor incident occurred to three American soldiers off the coast of Italy, Washington and Moscow suddenly found a common denominator that led them to agree on some of the most basic humanitarian principles, including the absolute value of human life. On a sunny afternoon in November, indeed, three members of the US Air Force working at the radar station of San Vito Dei Normanni decided to go for a small boat trip. The weather was good and the routine activity at the base was running smoothly as usual. Once the three stepped in their tiny boat, however, the stream changed rapidly. Wave after wave, the tiny rowboat was soon carried out in open sea and disappeared from the sights of those living near the coasts of Santa Sabina. It was then, when the three men had almost lost faith in their rescue, that a Soviet ship patrolling the southern Adriatic noticed them, and saved them without a hint of hesitation. The Soviet Captain, Vladimir Bogdanov, and the whole crew of the *Kazatin*, offered shelter to and took immediate care of the three Americans, bringing them safely back to their port. For their actions, which had followed the best tradition of maritime solidarity, the Soviet sailors were praised and secretly acknowledged by the American officials, including those working at the American embassy in Italy.

The small adventure of the three American soldiers had proven that their arch-enemy had a human face, perhaps instilling in some US policymakers a bit of optimism for future bilateral rapprochements with Moscow. This did not happen and the story of the three men in the end did not substantially alter the grand strategies of the cold war. Nevertheless, their accident is still worthy of further historical inquiry. What had, for instance, induced the American soldiers to embark on such a late boat trip? Was that a customary practice for the US soldiers at the San Vito Dei Normanni base, as it was for many Italians living in the coastal areas of the Peninsula, or not? And, more generally, how did American soldiers spend their free time while stationed in Italy? Were there other relevant, and perhaps less dangerous, forms of cross-cultural exchanges? And how did local people react to such colorful manifestations of American folklore as Halloween or Thanksgiving? In order to answer these questions, the papers of the US Department of State, where this story comes from, may be useful but surely not exhaustive. They can enlighten, for

instance, the geopolitical reasons that had brought, in the first place, the American soldiers to Italy. But other local sources, oral interviews and unofficial accounts are needed to reckon with the multifaceted elements that such a continuous transatlantic exchange entailed. And this is precisely the challenge my current research project is engaged in. My main aim, indeed, is to assess the overall economic, environmental and socio-cultural impact that the enduring presence of hundreds of American military outposts in Europe has had throughout the cold war. The hope is that by adopting a bottom-up approach, it will be possible to render justice to the complexity of the cold war relations, something that traditional, top-down, diplomatic histories have too often left outside their purview.

Further reading

Alvah, Donna. *Unofficial Ambassadors: American Military Families Overseas and the Cold War, 1946-1965*. New York, 2007.

Hanhimäki, Jussi M. *The Rise and Fall of Détente: American Foreign Policy and the Transformation of the Cold War*. Washington, 2013.

Moyn, Samuel. *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*. Cambridge MA, 2012.

Vine, David. *Base Nation; How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World*. New York, 2015.