

# Explosive claims engulf Human Rights Watch

Human Rights Watch champions the brutally repressed. But in the wake of a 'Nazi' scandal involving an employee, is all well in its own back yard?

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Jonathan Foreman

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Marc Garlasco lost his job over his enthusiasm for Nazi memorabilia (Sipa Press/Rex Features)

At the headquarters of Human Rights Watch, more than 30 storeys above the noise and bustle of Manhattan, there is so much high-mindedness hanging in the air you can almost taste it. This is the epicentre of a certain type of socially smart, progressive activism — the kind that persuades Hollywood grandes, power lawyers and liberal financiers to dig deeply into their pockets.

When the story broke that one of the organisation's most prominent and vocal members of staff might be a collector of Nazi-era military memorabilia it felt like some sort of sexual scandal had erupted in the Victorian church. For a lobbying

group accustomed to adulterous coverage in the media, it was a public-relations catastrophe.

By night, Garlasco was “Flak88”, an obsessive contributor to Third Reich memorabilia forums and an avid collector of medals emblazoned with swastikas

Human Rights Watch is one of two global superpowers among the world’s myriad humanitarian pressure groups. It is relatively young — established in its current form in 1988 — but it has grown so quickly in size, wealth and influence that it has all but eclipsed its older, London-based rival, Amnesty International.

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Unlike Amnesty, HRW, as it is known, gets its money from charitable foundations and wealthy individuals — such as the financier George Soros — rather than a mass membership. Also unlike Amnesty, it seeks to make an impact, not through extensive letter-writing campaigns, but by talking to governments and the media and backing up its advocacy with reports.

It is an association that is all about influence — an influence that depends on an honed image of objectivity and high morals. So it was perhaps a little awkward that a key member of staff was found to have a treasure trove of Nazi regalia.

By day, Marc Garlasco was HRW’s only military expert, the person that its Emergencies Division would send to conflict zones to investigate alleged war crimes.

He wrote reports condemning the dropping of cluster bombs in the Russia-Georgia war, the alleged illegal use of white phosphorus by the Israeli army in Gaza and coalition tactics

that he said “unnecessarily” put Iraqi or Afghan civilians at risk. An enthusiastic source of quotes for the media, he was incessantly on the phone to journalists.

But by night, Garlasco was “Flak88”, an obsessive contributor to internet forums on Third Reich memorabilia and an avid collector of badges and medals emblazoned with swastikas and eagles.

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### Nazi sympathies?

A lavishly illustrated \$100 book he compiled and self-published is dedicated to his grandfather, who served in the Luftwaffe. On members-only sites such as Wehrmachtawards.com he was writing comments like “VERY nice Hitler signature selection”; “That is so cool! The leather SS jacket makes my blood go cold it is so COOL!”

An interest in Nazi memorabilia does not necessarily suggest Nazi sympathies — but it is hardly likely to play well in the salons where Garlasco’s employer might solicit donations.

Human Rights Watch started small, but there is now a grandness about it, a deep hum of power and connectedness. In Los Angeles, its annual Hollywood dinner is said to raise more than \$2m. When he was guest editor of Vanity Fair, Brad Pitt published a profile of the executive director, Kenneth Roth.

In London, HRW’s board meetings and fundraising parties are held in huge houses in Notting Hill and Hampstead, with wealthy expat Americans — “the Democratic party in exile”, one board member calls it — vying to outdo each other in lavishness. Significant contributors in the UK include Tony Elliott, the owner of Time Out, and Catherine Zennstrom, whose husband,

Niklas, created Skype. When the philanthropic London-based banker John Studzinski joined the board it was proof positive that he had “made it”.

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Sarah Leah Whitson is HRW's executive director and a chief fundraiser (DBL/Solarpix.com)

The enthusiasts for Third Reich memorabilia who meet up in cyberspace make up a cosy little community. In one posting Garlasco put up a photograph of himself wearing a sweatshirt with an Iron Cross on the front, sitting next to his daughter. One of his internet buddies comments: “Love the sweatshirt... Not one I could wear here in Germany though – well I could but it would be a lot of hassle.”

Garlasco certainly seems to have been more open with his online collector friends than he had been with his employer. “Flak88” was more than happy to talk openly about his day job. He wondered whether he should reveal his hobby to Human Rights Watch – who evidently knew nothing about it: “So I am trying to figure out what to do. My book is clooe [sic] to done, but I am not sure if I should put my name on it. If folks at work found out I might very well lose my job.”

His dilemma did not last long. In September a blogger noted that Marc Garlasco had long been reviewing books on Third Reich memorabilia on Amazon – and that he was the same Marc Garlasco who had written controversial HRW reports about alleged Israeli violations in Gaza and Lebanon. The blogger did not accuse him of being a Nazi, but wondered if Garlasco’s “obsession with anti-Semitic Nazi genocidal lunatics”

was in any way related to his “apologism for anti-Semitic genocidal Hamas lunatics”. The story soon gained momentum. Human Rights Watch was forced to investigate.

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It's so obvious that the Nazis were evil, I never realised that other people, including friends and colleagues, might wonder why I care

Initially HRW offered Garlasco unequivocal support. This was not surprising. The organisation is supremely self-confident. When I asked the executive director Kenneth Roth if he could think of any errors made by HRW, he replied: “Nothing major. There is an errata page on our website.” And despite his oddness, Garlasco was also an asset. Born in Manhattan and raised in Queens, his background was a useful counterpoint to the posh-boho culture that pervades the group.

He is a keen gun-owner, a member of the National Rifle Association, had worked for the Pentagon and counted key members of the military as friends. More than anything, his military and strategic know-how provided the group with desperately needed credibility – especially when talking about “disproportionate” military responses.

HRW's public-relations machine quickly went into action. Garlasco was defended as “the author of a monograph on the history of German air force and army anti-aircraft medals and a contributor to websites that promote serious historical research... and which forbid hate speech”. They said that comments by Garlasco about Nazi regalia merely “reflect the enthusiasm of a keen collector... and have no bearing on Garlasco's work for Human Rights Watch”.

### The public apology

Garlasco himself wrote an apologetic column on the political website the Huffington Post in which he claimed he had “never hidden my hobby, because there’s nothing shameful in it, however weird it might seem to those who aren’t fascinated by military history. Precisely because it’s so obvious that the Nazis were evil, I never realised that other people, including friends and colleagues, might wonder why I care about these things”.

It wasn’t enough for HRW to defend Garlasco or to make the sensible distinction between an innocent interest in the second-world-war German army and an unhealthy attraction to Nazi iconography. HRW also went on the offensive. It accused those who raised the issue of Garlasco’s hobby of being part of “a campaign to deflect attention from Human Rights Watch’s rigorous and detailed reporting on violations of international human rights and humanitarian law by the Israeli government”. It even used the word “conspiracy”: its programmes director, Iain Levine, later went so far as to directly accuse the Israeli government of being behind it. But he provided no evidence for the charge.



HRW have been criticised for not yet publishing a report on post-election Iran (Hamed Saber)

The vehemence of Human Rights Watch in defending Garlasco surprised many. But it made sense for two reasons. Though HRW relishes complaints from infuriated dictatorships, it is not used to its personnel and methods being questioned at home. And it coincided with a series of less-well-publicised criticisms of the group. Suddenly, when its own practices came under scrutiny, it became very touchy.

On September 14 last year the organisation suspended Marc Garlasco with pay “pending an investigation”. But as the months went by, HRW said nothing about the investigation — and nothing about Garlasco’s status.

Garlasco himself kept mum. When I called him, he told me that he “had nothing more to say”. I learnt from friends of his, however, that he had been gagged by a confidentiality agreement. They said that he had in effect been fired, but would be paid for the duration of his contract as long as he kept silent.

When I visited HRW’s New York headquarters in February, I asked Kenneth Roth about Garlasco’s status. He said nothing had changed. Did he mean that Garlasco is still suspended pending an investigation? “Yes,” came the reply.

Some conflict zones get much more coverage than others. For instance, HRW has published five heavily publicised reports on Israel

On March 5, Garlasco’s name was removed from the list of staff members on HRW’s website. Later that day, the Jerusalem Post newspaper asked about Garlasco’s status. A spokeswoman replied by email that HRW had “regretfully accepted Marc Garlasco’s resignation” two weeks before. Kenneth Roth has sent an email to staff, board members and key donors insisting that they do not respond to any media inquiries. Garlasco, meanwhile, prefers to stay out of the limelight: when The Sunday Times Magazine inquired about using the picture of Garlasco wearing a sweatshirt featuring an Iron Cross, we received this reply:

“It is my understanding that you intend on using a photo or likeness of him, which is copyrighted, without his permission. Should you do so... we will prosecute this matter to the fullest extent of the law. Sincerely, Attorney Paul James Garlasco.”

We contacted Attorney Garlasco to find out if he was related to Marc Garlasco; he did not return our calls or emails. HRW was also cagey about the photograph. Garlasco has become a non-person. “It might be him,” hedged the communications director Emma Daly, but “he doesn’t work here any more.”

Every year, Human Rights Watch puts out up to 100 glossy reports — essentially mini books — and 600-700 press releases, according to Daly, an ex The Independent journalist.

Some conflict zones get much more coverage than others. For instance, HRW has published five heavily publicised reports on Israel and the Palestinian territories since the January 2009 war.

### Questionable priorities

In 20 years they have published only four reports on the conflict in Indian-controlled Kashmir, for example, even though the conflict has taken at least 80,000 lives in these two decades, and torture and extrajudicial murder have taken place on a vast scale. Perhaps even more tellingly, HRW has not published any report on the postelection violence and repression in Iran more than six months after the event.

When I asked the Middle East director Sarah Leah Whitson if HRW was ever going to release one, she said: “We have a draft, but I’m not sure I want to put one out.” Asked the same question, executive director Kenneth Roth told me that the problem with doing a report on Iran was the difficulty of getting into the country.

I interviewed a human-rights expert at a competing organisation in Washington who did not wish to be named because “we operate in a very small world and it’s not done to criticise other human-rights organisations”. He told me he was “not surprised” that HRW has still not produced a report on the violence in Iran: “They are thinking about how it’s going to be used politically in Washington. And it’s not a priority for them because Iran is just not a bad guy that they are interested in highlighting. Their hearts are not in it. Let’s face it, the thing that really excites them is Israel.”



Kenneth Roth has been the executive director of Human Rights Watch since 1993 (Nicholas Kamm)

Noah Pollak, a New York writer who has led some of the criticisms against HRW, points out that it cares about Palestinians when maltreated by Israelis, but is less concerned if perpetrators are fellow Arabs. For instance, in 2007 the Lebanese army shelled the Nahr al Bared refugee camp near Tripoli (then under the control of Fatah al Islam radicals),

killing more than 100 Iran civilians and displacing 30,000. HRW put out a press release — but it never produced a report.

Such imbalance was at the heart of a public dressing-down that shook HRW in October. It came from the organisation's own founder and chairman emeritus, the renowned publisher Robert Bernstein, who took it to task in *The New York Times* for devoting its resources to open and democratic societies rather than closed ones. (Originally set up as Helsinki Watch, the group's original brief was to expose abuses of human rights behind the iron curtain.)

“Nowhere is this more evident than its work in the Middle East,” he wrote. “The region is populated by authoritarian regimes with appalling human-rights records. Yet in recent years Human Rights Watch has written far more condemnations of Israel... than of any other country in the region.”

Bernstein concluded that if HRW did not “return to its founding mission and spirit of humility... its credibility will be seriously undermined

Bernstein pointed out that Israel has “a population of 7.4m, is home to at least 80 human-rights organisations, a vibrant free press, a democratically elected government, a judiciary that frequently rules against the government...and probably more journalists per capita than any other country in the world... Meanwhile the Arab and Iranian regimes rule over some 350m people and most remain brutal, closed and autocratic”.

Bernstein concluded that if HRW did not “return to its founding mission and the spirit of humility that animated it... its credibility will be seriously undermined and its role in the world diminished”. HRW’s response was ferocious. In their letters to the paper, Roth and others made it sound as if Bernstein had said that open societies and democracies should not be monitored at all.

I met Robert Bernstein at an office he keeps in midtown Manhattan. Though he has been retired from publishing for more than two decades, and from HRW for 12 years, he remains active in human rights, especially in China. He said: “It broke my heart to write that article... Of course open societies should be watched very carefully, but HRW is one of the very few organisations that is supposed to go into closed societies. Why

should HRW be covering Guantanamo? It's already covered by a lot of other organisations."

The revelation of Marc Garlasco's hobby was also significant because he was the first and only person at Human Rights Watch with any kind of military expertise. While staff members at HRW tend to be lawyers, journalists or political activists, Garlasco, 40, had worked as a civilian employee at the Pentagon for seven years before joining HRW in 2004. According to his HRW biography, he had served as "a senior intelligence analyst covering Iraq" and his last position there was as "chief of high-value targeting" at the very beginning of the Iraq war.

This apparently meant that it was he who selected targets for air strikes. According to an interview Garlasco gave to *Der Spiegel*, he was a key player in an air strike on Basra on April 5, 2003 intended to kill Ali Hassan al-Majid, better known as Chemical Ali, but which instead took the lives of 17 civilians.

### **Blood on Garlasco's hands?**

In another interview, Garlasco said he was responsible for up to 50 other air strikes — none of which killed anyone on the target list but which accounted for several hundred civilian deaths. Soon after the Chemical Ali air strike, he left to join Human Rights Watch. In interviews he has suggested that he did so because he was sickened by his responsibility for these deaths, and had always been opposed to the war to overthrow Saddam Hussein. Associates of Garlasco have told me that there had long been tensions between Garlasco and HRW's Middle East Division in New York — perhaps because he sometimes stuck his neck out and did not follow the HRW line. Garlasco himself apparently resented what he felt was pressure to sex up claims of Israeli violations of laws of war in Gaza and Lebanon, or to stick by initial assessments even when they turned out to be incorrect.

In June 2006, Garlasco had alleged that an explosion on a Gaza beach that killed seven people had been caused by Israeli shelling. However, after seeing the details of an Israeli army investigation that closely examined the relevant ballistics and blast patterns, he subsequently told the *Jerusalem Post* that he had been wrong and that the deaths were probably caused by an unexploded munition in the sand. But this went down badly at Human Rights Watch HQ in New York, and the admission was retracted by an HRW press release the next day.

Since the Garlasco affair blew up, critics of Human Rights Watch have raised questions about other appointments. An Israeli newspaper revealed that Joe Stork, the deputy head of HRW's Middle East department, was a radical leftist who put out a magazine in the 1970s that praised the murder of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. In 1976 he attended an anti-Zionist conference in Baghdad hosted by Saddam Hussein.

As Kenneth Roth pointed out to me, this was all three decades ago, Stork was just one of seven editors of the magazine when its editorial praised the massacre, and he later became a staunch critic of Saddam Hussein. Certainly, he no longer spiced up reports with talk of "revolutionary potential of the Palestinian masses." That said, when Stork was hired by HRW in 1996 he had never worked for a human-rights group, had never held an academic position, and had a history of anti-Israel activism.

Stork's boss, Sarah Leah Whitson, and most of his colleagues in the Middle East department of Human Rights Watch, also have activist backgrounds — it was typical that one newly hired researcher came to HRW from the extremist anti-Israel publication Electronic Intifada — unlikely to reassure anyone who thinks that human-rights organisations should be non-partisan. While it may be hard to find people who are genuinely neutral about Middle East politics, theoretically an organisation like HRW would not select as its researchers people who are so evidently on one side.



Amnesty International's Gita Sahjal has criticised their relations with radical Islamists  
(DBL/Solarpix.com)

While HRW was dealing with the fallout from the Garlasco affair, it was already on the defensive as a result of criticism of a fundraising effort in Saudi Arabia, one of the world's worst human-rights violators. This involved two dinners for members of the Saudi elite in Riyadh, at which Sarah Leah Whitson curried favour with her hosts by boasting about HRW's "battles" with pro-Israel pressure groups, such as NGO Monitor.

Although HRW has a policy of not taking money from governments, there were at least two Saudi officials present. One was a member of the Shura Council, which, among other

things, oversees the implementation of the strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islamic law. HRW has not given out a transcript of its appeal for donations or to publish a list of attendees at the dinners.

I asked the HRW executive director Kenneth Roth about the controversy that surrounded the Saudi dinners. He said: “Because somebody is the victim of a repressive government, should they have no right to contribute to a human-rights organisation?” Even if they had been invited, few victims would have been able to make the dinners — most Saudi dissidents are either in prison or live abroad in exile.

### **Amnesty's links with radical Islam**

It probably gives little comfort to Human Rights Watch that Amnesty International, the association's great rival, is also dealing with a queasy scandal involving questionable links. Amnesty's image suffered a blow in February when Gita Sahgal, the director of its gender programme, told The Sunday Times she was concerned that the organisation was compromising its core values by getting into bed with radical Islamists.

Amnesty has allied itself with the Cageprisoners programme that Sahgal said “actively promotes Islamic Right ideals and individuals”. The programme is led by Moazzam Begg, the former Guantanamo Bay detainee whom Sahgal called “Britain's most famous supporter of the Taliban”.

Amnesty's reaction to Sahgal's criticism was swift and jaw-droppingly incompatible with the work of an outfit that actively encourages whistleblowing: she was suspended from her job. Although this provoked a fierce response from Salman Rushdie and a Facebook campaign, it is sticking to its guns while denying that Sahgal was suspended “for raising these issues internally”.

Amnesty has allied itself with the Cageprisoners programme that Sahgal said 'actively promotes Islamic Right ideals'

Many of those on the left of the human-rights “community” may feel conflicting emotions when it comes to dealing with radical Islam, as if the former is somehow a dangerous distraction from the real struggle. In 2006 Scott Long, the director of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights programme at Human Rights Watch, attacked the British campaigner Peter Tatchell, accusing him of racism,

Islamophobia and colonialism for having the temerity to lead a campaign against Iran's executions of homosexuals — a campaign that Long believed was unconstructive and based on "a Western social-constructionist trope".

Human Rights Watch does perform a useful task, but its critics raise troubling questions that go beyond Garlasco's hobby or raising money from Saudis. Why put such effort into publicising alleged human-rights violations in some countries but not others?

Why does HRW seem so credulous of civilian witnesses in places like Gaza but so sceptical of anyone in a uniform? It may be that organisations like HRW that depend on the media for their profile — and therefore their donations — concentrate on places the media already cares about.

HRW's reaction to the scandals has perhaps cost it more credibility than the scandals themselves. It has revealed an organisation that does not always practise the transparency, tolerance and accountability it urges on others.

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