

PT 358 Critical Human Rights Advocacy/ Scholars at Risk

Seminar Leader: Kerry Bystrom
Email: k.bystrom@berlin.bard.edu
Office Hours: Mondays 1-2:30pm and by appointment

Course Description

8 ECTS-4 US credits. This seminar serves as an introduction to human rights advocacy, with a practical component. Half of the course (Mondays) focuses on the history and theory of human rights. What is it to make claims for human rights, or to denounce suffering or rights violation, especially on behalf of others? How and when and why have individuals and groups spoken out, mounted campaigns, published reports and exposés? How do they address, challenge, and sometimes work with governments and international organizations like the United Nations, particularly through transnational advocacy networks? What allows some campaigns to succeed while others fail? As we look at human rights advocacy from the campaign to abolish the slave trade to the founding of Amnesty International and the advent of digital activism, this half of the course serves as an introduction to human rights work as a mode of legal, political and cultural practice.

The other half of the course (Wednesdays) involves hands-on work with the human rights organization Scholars at Risk (SAR) to support detained and disappeared Uyghur scholars in China. We will research events and individuals, communicate with families and lawyers and other advocates, write country and case profiles, propose strategies and tactics for pressuring governments and other powerful actors, and develop appeals to public opinion -- all while recognizing the ethical and political risks this work may involve.

This seminar is a Global Higher Education Alliance for the 21st Century (GHEA21) Network Online Course (NOC) that connects with seminars in National Sun Yat-Sen University (Taiwan) and Bard College Annandale (USA). A number of classes and activities will take place across these campuses. Working collegially and responsibly with network peers is an important part of the course.

Readings

The following books are required for this class and purchasing hard copies is recommended. Students unable to purchase copies can access digital copies through the GHEA21 Library via the course Brightspace platform: <https://osun.brightspace.com/d2l/home/7944>.

- Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves*, Houghton, Mifflin Harcourt, 2005.
- Jewher Ilham, *Because I Have To, The Path to Survival, The Uyghur Struggle*, ed. Adam Braver, University of New Orleans Press, 2022.

Additional required readings will be available as PDFs through Brightspace.

Requirements

- Come to every class meeting, having read the assigned material thoroughly and preferably more than once, and participate actively in our discussions and group activities
- Make every effort to keep your camera turned on during sessions
- Communicate proactively with the instructor regarding any challenges related to attendance, course content and assignments, logistics, technology and so on
- In the first half of the course, write one critical essay (1500 words)
- In the second half of the course, write two short (500 words) response papers to assigned readings, including questions for class discussion

- Together with colleagues at other GHEA21 network campuses, design and carry out an action project for your SAR case and document this project in a final action portfolio as well as a presentation (equivalent of 2000 words)
- Write a final reflection paper (1000 words)

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Special note on AI: While AI tools can be used to locate research materials relating to the SAR case, AI should not be used in the conceptualization and writing of the critical essay, responses papers or the final reflection paper.

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the [Bard College Berlin Accessibility page](#). Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation. After this, in order for an absence not to impact a student's participation grade, medical documentation must be provided to your professor and any assigned make-up work completed. Bard College Berlin may not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Assignments

Critical Essay: Students will write one critical essay of approximately 1500 words (3-5 pages). The essay will be due by 5pm local time on **Friday October 16**. Further information about the essay will be provided closer to the date.

Response Papers: Students will write two response papers of approximately 500 words (1-2 pages) each. Papers should summarize an assigned text, connect it to an ongoing theme or discussion in the course, and pose at least one discussion question for the class. Students will sign up for their dates in September. Papers must be posted to the course Padlet site by 5pm local time on **the day before the assigned course meeting**.

SAR Advocacy Work and Portfolio: Over the course of the semester, and in groups, you will research and produce an action or set of actions to support your imprisoned scholar. Actions might include: writing draft letters of appeal and approaching government officials to adopt these letters; conducting social media campaigns to raise awareness about the scholar's situation; holding webinars, teach-ins or letter-writing parties; writing op-eds about the scholar and your own efforts to raise awareness about the case (for student or local paper or other media outlets); approaching other NGOs or associations to ask for their involvement on the case; creating or screening short films or podcasts, or curating a film or arts festival, to raise awareness about the scholar; doing relevant research for SAR; etc. It is important that you and your professor discuss safety concerns before your group decides on an action. All actions must be completed by **Friday December 3**. In the last week of the semester, each group will hand in all written (and other) materials produced for the case and create a short (5 minute) final video or presentation that will be shared with the other campus sections or presented live in our closing joint session on **Wednesday December 9 and/or Wednesday December 13**. The materials and prepared presentation together constitute your Final Action Portfolio and are due on **Friday December 11**. Please note that in addition to the final presentations for the other campuses, all sections will meet jointly at various times across the semester to discuss their advocacy campaigns.

Final Reflection Paper: The advocacy plans and actions will be matched with a reflection on them. You should write an approximately 1000 words (2-3 pages) analysis connecting your advocacy campaign to some of the scholarship on advocacy you have encountered in the course. How have the readings contributed to, shed light on, interfered with, complicated, or simplified the work you have done with SAR? This paper is due on the final day of the semester, **Friday December 19**.

Participation: Even for online courses, the success of this class is dependent not only on you actually being present but also on the quality of thought and energy you bring to each session. You must be prepared for class; the most effective participation is rooted in class readings and insights they provoke. Class sessions often include brainstorming and writing periods, together or in break-out rooms, in which you may work alone or with a partner, as well as group work ending with the creation of impromptu mini presentations. You may also be asked to select passages, formulate discussion questions or complete informal writing assignments in advance of the class. You are expected to engage in all of these activities; failure to do so will impact your class participation grade. Participation grades are based on continuous assessment and will be issued for the first and for the second half of the semester.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students will receive feedback for their course work during and at the end of the semester. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

Participation: 30% (15% first half of course, 15% second half of course)

Paper #1: 20%

Response Paper #1: 5%

Response Paper #2: 5%

SAR advocacy group project and action portfolio: 30%

Final Reflection: 10%

Schedule

****Please note that this schedule is subject to change and it is your responsibility to keep up with the latest assignments and deadlines.****

Week One

Monday August 31

Introduction

Reading:

- Course Syllabus
- Video: „[SAR Truth Matters/ European Student Advocacy Days 2026](#)”
- SAR webpages about Student Advocacy Seminars and Scholars in Prison Project:
<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/introducing-scholars-risk/>
<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/actions/student-advocacy-seminars/>
<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/action/scholars-in-prison-project/>
<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/actions/ilham-tohti-china/>

Wednesday September 2

Transnational Advocacy for Academic Freedom: What, How and Why?

Reading:

- Keck and Sikkink, “Transnational Advocacy Networks in International and Regional Politics,” *UNESCO International Social Science Journal* 59 (159), 1999, pp. 89-101 [Brightspace]
- Hoodfar, “Beyond Aspiration: Rethinking Transnational Academic Freedom as Global Public Good,” in *Threatened Scholarship, Dynamics of Repression and Modes of Resistance*, pp. 1-24 [Brightspace]

Week Two

Monday September 7

Human Rights Review

Reading:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights [Brightspace]
- Advocates, Ch. 2 “Human Rights Background” in *Human Rights Tools for A Changing World*, 2015, pp. 5-14 [Brightspace]
- Hanhimäki, Ch. 6 “Rights and Responsibilities,” in *The United Nations: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford UP, 2008, pp. 111-132 [Brightspace]

Weds September 9

What’s happening in the XUAR?

Reading:

- Human Rights Watch and Mills Legal Clinic of Stanford Law School, “Break Their Lineage, Break Their Roots”: China’s Crimes Against Humanity Targeting Uyghurs and Other Turkic Muslims, April 2021,
https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2021/04/china0421_web_2.pdf
- Hunerven, “Spirit Breaking: Capitalism and Terror in Northwestern China,” *Chuǎng Journal* Vol. 2, 2016 [Brightspace]
- Mauk, “Inside Xinjiang’s Prison State,” *New Yorker* Feb. 2021
<<https://www.newyorker.com/news/a-reporter-at-large/china-xinjiang-prison-state-uyghur-detention-camps-prisoner-testimony>>

Week Three

Monday September 14

Historical Roots of Human Rights Advocacy I: Abolishing the British Slave Trade

Readings:

- Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves*, Harper Collins, 2005, "Introduction" and "World of Bondage"

Wednesday September 16

The Case of Ilham Tohti

Readings:

- Articles on Ilham Tohti and Jewher Ilham
 - Sakharov Prize of the European Parliament, "Ilham Tohti 2019"
<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/sakharovprize/en/ilham-tohti-2019-china/products-details/20200615CAN55802>
 - Ian Johnson, "The don't want moderate Uighurs," *New York Review of Books*,
<https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/09/22/trial-ilham-tohti-they-dont-want-moderate-uighurs/>
 - "Opera, Ice Cream, Activism: Daughter of jailed Uyghur scholar share Father's Day memories," *Amnesty International*,
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2025/06/opera-ice-cream-activism-daughter-of-jailed-uyghur-scholar-shares-fathers-day-memories/>
- Ilham, *Because I Have To*, University of New Orleans Press, 2021, Foreword, Parts I and II

Week Four

Monday September 21

Historical Roots of Human Rights Advocacy II: Abolishing the British Slave Trade

Readings:

- Hochschild, *Bury the Chains* "From Tinder to Flame"

Weds September 23

Guest Lecture** Activist Jewher Ilham with author Adam Braver** Class will start at 4pm CET

Readings:

- Ilham, *Because I Have To*, Parts III, IV, V

Week Five

Monday September 28

Historical Roots of Human Rights Advocacy III: Abolishing the British Slave Trade

Readings:

- Hochschild, *Bury the Chains* "A Whole Nation Crying with One Voice" and "War and Revolution"

Wednesday September 30

Guest Lecture on China and Human Rights**Class will start at 4pm CET

Readings TBC

Week Six

Monday October 5

Historical Roots of Human Rights Advocacy IV: Abolishing the British Slave Trade

Readings:

- Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, "Bury the Chains" and "To Feel a Just Indignation"

Wednesday October 7

Special Advocacy Workshop with Casey Kelso (Part I)**Class will start at 4pm CET

Week Seven

Monday October 12

Making Modern Human Rights Advocacy: Amnesty International
"The Forgotten Prisoners," Amnesty International and the Politics of the Appeal

Readings:

- Benenson, "The Forgotten Prisoners," *The Observer* May 28, 1961 [Brightspace]
- Hopgood, Ch 3 "Lighting the Candle" from *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International*, Cornell UP, 2006, pp. 52-72 [Brightspace]

Wednesday October 14

Special Advocacy Workshop with Casey Kelso (Part II)** Class will start at 4pm CET

Friday October 16: Essay #1 due

FALL BREAK Monday October 19 and Wednesday October 21

Week Eight

Monday October 26

Making Modern Human Rights Advocacy: Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo

Readings:

- Keck and Sikkink, "Human Rights Advocacy Networks in Latin America," *Activists Beyond Borders*, Cornell University Press, 1998, pp. 79-120 [Brightspace]
- Arditti, "The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Struggle Against Impunity," *Meridians*, 2002, pp. 19-41 [Brightspace]

Wednesday October 28 Advocacy Work Day

Week Nine

Monday November 2

Contemporary Activism: Ending Child Marriage

Readings:

- Watch video Sonita Alizadeh, "[Daughters for Sale](#)" and read [profile](#)
- Girls not Brides: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-child-marriage/>
- Becker, "Child Marriage," in *Campaigning for Children*, Stanford UP, 2017, pp. 45-57 [Brightspace]
- Merry, "Transnational Human Rights and Local Activism: Mapping the Middle," *American Anthropologist* Vol. 108, Issue 1, 2006, pp. 38-51 [Brightspace]

Wednesday November 4 Advocacy Work Day

Week Ten

Monday November 9

The Ethics of Representing and Speaking for Others

Readings:

- Gready, "Responsibility to the Story," *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, Vol. 2, Number 2, 2010, pp. 177-190 [Brightspace]
- Cole, "The White Savior Industrial Complex" *The Atlantic* 21 March 2012 [Brightspace]

Wednesday November 11 Advocacy Work Day

Week Eleven

Monday November 16

Personal Storytelling, then and now

Readings:

- Schaffer and Smith, "Conjunctions: Life Narratives in Human Rights," *Biography* 27.1 Winter 2004, pp 1-25 [Brightspace]
- Schaffer and Smith, "E-witnessing in the digital age" in *We Shall Bear Witness* ed Jolly and Jenson, University of Wisconsin Press, 2014, pp. 223-37 [Brightspace]

Wednesday November 18

Placeholder date/TBC: Academic Freedom in the Spotlight

GHEA21 Book Launch**Threatened Scholarship, Dynamics of Repression and Forms of Resistance

Week Twelve

Monday November 23

The Forensic Turn

Readings:

- Moon, "Human Rights, Human Remains: forensic humanitarianism and the human rights of the dead," *UNESCO International Social Studies Journal* 215-16, 2016, pp. 49-63 [Brightspace]
- Weizman, "Introduction: Forensis," in *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth*, Sternberg Press, 2014, 9-32 [Brightspace]
- Weizman, "Open Verification," *e-flux architecture*: <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/becoming-digital/248062/open-verification/>

Wednesday November 25 Advocacy Work Day

Week Thirteen

Monday November 30

Approaching Indifference, Denial and Shamelessness

Readings:

- Keenan, "Mobilizing Shame," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103 (2-3), 2004, pp. 435-449 [Brightspace]
- Cohen, "Bystander States" in *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering*, Polity, 2001, pp 141-167 [Brightspace]

Wednesday December 2 Advocacy Work Day

Friday December 3 Deadline for completing Actions

Week Fourteen

Monday December 7

Course Wrap-Up Discussion

Please read back through the syllabus carefully, and choose one reading or guest lecture that has been particularly meaningful to you and be ready to share and discuss it with the rest of the class (from readings be sure to include on actual passage from the text, from lectures a quotation or specific example/insight); please also be ready to share one thing you that think was a success of the campaign work and one thing you would want to change to make the campaign stronger

Wednesday December 9

Final Presentations**Class will start at 4pm CET

Short presentation (5 minutes per group) sharing the group project outcomes must be prepared in advance

Friday December 11 Final Portfolios due

Week Fifteen (Completion Week)

Monday December 14 Hold for make-up classes

Wednesday December 16 Hold for Final Presentations

Friday December 19 Final Reflection Papers due