

Introduction*

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On 31 December 1870, the Swiss philosopher, Henri-Frédéric Amiel (1821–1881), petitioned the municipal authorities of Geneva on behalf of his neighbours and himself. They lived in a street called the Rue des Belles Filles (“beautiful girls’ street”) and wanted to have the name of their street changed because it alluded to prostitutes.¹ This is just one among a multitude of historical facts that have come down to us because humble (or not so humble) suppliants put them on paper in the form of a petition, and the authorities to which these petitions were addressed took care to preserve them. Writing petitions was a common human experience. “Everybody is free to write petitions and have a drink of water”, as a traditional German saying would have it.² However, as opposed to drinking water, writing petitions is an act which produces historical sources, many of which have survived. The aim of this volume is to give an overview of their importance as sources for social history.

PETITIONS

Petitions are demands for a favour, or for the redressing of an injustice, directed to some established authority. As the distribution of justice and largesse are important parts of ruling, rulers can hardly deny their subjects the right to approach them to implore them to exercise justice, or to grant a favour. And subjects have done so from Egyptian building workers in pharaonic times to illiterate Ecuador Indians in 1899; from anti-Catholic English women in 1642 to French workers asking for the repeal of the *livret ouvrier* in 1847; from Italian peasants complaining about noble banditry in 1605 to Brazilian slaves vindicating their rights against their owners in 1823; from western European early modern guild members to

* I thank Michiel Baud, Maarten Prak, Klaus Tenfelde, and Willem Trommel for helpful suggestions for this introduction. The usual disclaimer applies.

1. Philippe M. Monnier, “Amiel et les ‘belles filles’: bibliothèque publique et universitaire”, *Musées de Genève*, 221 (1982), pp. 3–7.

2. “Supplizieren und Wassertrinken sind jedermann erlaubt”, quoted in Otto Ulbricht, “Supplikationen als Ego-Dokumente. Bittschriften von Leibeigenen aus der ersten Hälfte des 17. Jahrhunderts als Beispiel”, in Winfried Schulze (ed.), *Ego-Dokumente: Annäherung an den Menschen in der Geschichte* (Berlin, 1996), pp. 149–174, 152.

German Democratic Republic workers demanding improvement of economic efficiency, or voicing consumer demands.³ As this short overview shows, petitions seem to be a global phenomenon, stretching back in time almost as far as writing.

Many of the documents which are treated in this volume were not designated as petitions historically. In many languages and periods, different kinds of petition-like documents were distinguished by different terms. These could reflect the body which wrote them, whether they were aimed more at attaining justice or a favour, or juridical technicalities. In this collection of essays, we have adopted the general term “petitions” to underline how much these documents have in common.⁴ The only exceptions are the contributions by Würgler and Nubola, which treat the differences between the different kinds of petition in some detail, and therefore cannot manage with one generic term.⁵

In choosing one generic term for petitions, we also dispute the argument that petitions are somehow a nineteenth-century invention, dependent on written constitutions.⁶ It is clear that the character of a petition depended much on the circumstances in which it was presented – whether by an individual or by a group – and whether it addressed to a democratically chosen parliament or an autocratic ruler. The prescriptions laid down for the form the text of a petition should take could also be very influential.

Whatever form or context, petitions were usually written in a deferential style, showing that the petitioner did not intend to question the established power structure. As the petition was usually addressing higher levels, if not the apex of the power structure, this made sense. As the example quoted by

3. A.G. McDowell, *Village Life in Ancient Egypt: Laundry Lists and Love Songs* (Oxford, 1999); Michiel Baud, “Libertad de Servidumbre: Indigenista Ideology and Social Mobilization in Late Nineteenth Century Ecuador”, in Hans-Joachim König and Marianne Wiesebron (eds), *Nation Building in Nineteenth Century Latin America: Dilemmas and Conflicts* (Leiden, 1998), pp. 233–253; Patricia-Ann Lee, “Mistress Stagg’s Petitioners: February 1642”, *Historian*, 60 (1998), pp. 241–256; Madeleine Rebérioux, “Pétitionner”, *Mouvement Social*, 181 (1997), pp. 127–132; Jaime Rodrigues, “Liberdade, humanidade e propriedade: os escravos e a assembleia constituinte de 1823”, *Revista do Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros*, 39 (1995), pp. 159–167; C. Povoletto, “Processo contro Paolo Origiano e altri”, *Studi Storici*, 29 (1988), pp. 321–360; Henk van Nierop, “Popular participation in politics in the Dutch Republic”, in Peter Blickle (ed.), *Resistance, Representation and Community* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 272–291; Jonathan R. Zatlin, “Ausgaben und Eingaben: Das Petitionsrecht und der Untergang der DDR”, *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 45 (1997), pp. 902–917.

4. The volume even includes a contribution by Shapiro and Markoff on a kind of document which has become famous under its specific name, the *cabier de doléances*, but as the authors explain, there are good reasons to see this as a kind of petition.

5. Würgler also treats the historiography in some details, which makes it unnecessary to repeat that in this introduction.

6. Helmut Ridder, “Petitionsrecht”, in *Staatslexikon. Recht Wirtschaft Gesellschaft. Herausgegeben von der Görres-Gesellschaft* (sixth edition, Freiburg, 1961) vol. 6, pp. 230–234; Charles Tilly, *Durable inequality* (Berkeley, CA [etc.], 1998), p. 217.

Nedostup and Liang Hong-ming shows, this deferential attitude towards the powers that be could also take the form of adopting the jargon of the party in power.

THE USES OF PETITIONS

Petitions are social history in the sense that a social history of the petition could be written, showing the evolving ways in which individuals and social movements used petitions.

Where petitions became an accepted tradition, they could evolve into an institution which not only catered for the wishes of individuals, but also was used to elicit general legislation. Not only in Britain, but also in countries like Germany, Russia, and Japan, where rulers laid claim to absolute power, petitions were used by broad layers of the population to influence legislation.⁷

The right to petition could easily develop into a crystallization point for other popular rights. This happened in Western countries from the seventeenth century. The right to petition easily brought about the right to assemble in order to draw up, discuss, and sign the petition. This could involve masses of subjects in the discussion of petitions.⁸ The meeting in which a petition was debated was an exercise in politics, as was the soliciting of signatures. This could involve large numbers of citizens. The Chartist petitions of 1839, 1842 and 1848 each had well over a million signatures to it. If numbers of subjects were allowed to sign a petition, and have it presented in their name, it was hard to see how they could be denied the right to present their petition themselves. But if a number of signers presented a petition to a ruler or a representative body, this resulted in a demonstration. This happened, for instance, in 1779, when Lord George Gordon introduced a petition against the relief of anti-Catholic measures in the British Parliament, and took 14,000 supporters with him to Parliament to deliver the petition.⁹ The 1894 and 1932 marches of

7. Beat Kümin and Andreas Würzler, "Petitions, Gravamina and the Early Modern State: Local Influence on Central Legislation in England and Germany (Hesse)", *Parliaments, Estates & Representation*, 17 (1997), pp. 39–60; L.S. Roberts, "The Petition Box in Eighteenth-Century Tosa", *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 20 (1994), pp. 423–458; James W. White, *Ikki: Social Conflict and Political Protest in Early Modern Japan* (Ithaca, NY [etc.], 1995).

8. Charles Tilly, *Popular Contention in Great Britain 1758–1834* (Cambridge, MA [etc.], 1995); Jonathan Scott, *England's Troubles: Seventeenth-Century English Political Instability in European Context* (Cambridge, 2000); David Zaret, "Petitions and the 'Invention' of Public Opinion in the English Revolution", *American Journal of Sociology*, 101 (1996), pp. 1497–1555; David Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Princeton, NJ, 2000).

9. Tilly, *Popular Contention in Great Britain*, p. 160.

unemployed veterans on Washington were legitimized as the presentation of petitions.

The usual way out for rulers was to forbid collective petitions. These were, for example, illegal in prerevolutionary France. In 1648 in England, where petitioning was by that time regarded as an established right, the Long Parliament laid down that petitions could not be submitted by more than twenty individuals. Under Charles II, petitioning to convene Parliament was punishable as high treason. James II had bishops confined to the Tower for petitioning against his religious policies. These attempts on the right of petition led to its being included in the Bill of Rights in 1689. In the eighteenth century, the right to petition was included in listings of individual liberties like the Bills of Rights of most American states and the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* of 1791. In England, by the late eighteenth century, petitions had become the normal way in which the unfranchised could make their opinion known.

Even if authorities frowned upon petitions as a way to voice demands and to mobilize and demonstrate popular support for them, this does not mean that they did not heed the opinions uttered in them. In fact, even the most autocratic of governments used petitions as a source of information about popular feeling.¹⁰ In the present collection, this is made clear in the essay by Nubola, who looks at the reasons Italian princes had for taking notice of the opinions brought forward by petitioners. There seem to have been at least three. First, petitions offered a window upon the mind of the general population for contemporary statesmen, in much the same way as they do to latter-day historians. This alone, as Nubola shows, could be enough reason for rulers actively to stimulate their subjects to write and present petitions. Secondly, behind the deferential facade of a petition always lurked the threat that the population might revolt if a justified demand went unheeded. The right to petition thus worked as a safety valve.¹¹ And thirdly, petitions could sometimes be read as an offer by a local population for a coalition with the centre of the state to work against intermediate power holders. In a recent overview, Wayne te Brake has called attention to the role of ordinary subjects in shaping early modern European politics, together with local rulers and national claimants to power. Petitions by ordinary people to political leaders at national level were one way to outmanoeuvre local elites, and thus contribute to the formation of national states.¹² It might be useful to compare the

10. This is of course even more true of the *cabiers de doléances* analysed by Shapiro and Markoff, the drafting of which was obligatory.

11. K. Tenfelde and H. Trischler (eds), *Bis vor die Stufen der Throns. Bittschriften und Beschwerden von Bergarbeitern* (Munich, 1986), p. 14.

12. Wayne te Brake, *Shaping History: Ordinary People in European Politics, 1500–1700* (Berkeley, CA [etc.], 1998).

centralizing and state-building effects of the right to petition national rulers with those of the establishment of juridical courts of appeal at national level.¹³

Nubola's attention to the bureaucratic and political process petitions went through leads to more insights, which should be kept in mind when analysing petitions. For instance, even if the idea of a good person heading the state was a myth, it may well have been recognized as a useful myth at both the writing and reading ends of the petitioning process. In a similar way, even if mighty and rich petitioners with good connections at court stood a far better chance of being heard, petitions nevertheless offered a way to the centres of power which was also open to those without money and influence, not because the ruling father figure was good, but because it made good sense to him to keep this way open.

Revolutionary situations, like the French Revolution, or the revolution of March 1848 in Germany, went hand in hand with waves of petitioning. These two waves are here represented in the studies of Shapiro and Markoff on the national level, in the French case, and Lipp and Krempel on the local level of Esslingen, in the German case. In the situation where workers' organizations were not yet formed or recognized, petitions were used to voice workers' demands.¹⁴ Here, Swarnalatha gives an example of this in the colonial context, where other forms of resistance were explicitly forbidden. Usually, when other forms of voicing workers' demands became accepted, petitions became less important in this respect. However, they could linger on in situations where trade unions and workers' representation took longer to establish themselves. This was often the case within the military – where, for example, Brazilian officers in the nineteenth century had to send in petitions to get promotion – or in the British naval dockyards, as described here by Lunn and Day. Their example also shows how trade unions could use petitioning up to the point where there no longer seemed a point in keeping out the unions and full negotiations. Both this essay and Swarnalatha's show how the development of labour conditions and labour relations can be followed through consecutive petitions. The deferential mould in which the petitions were cast could convey the true feelings of the author of the petition, but, of course, did not necessarily do so.¹⁵

As the example of the British naval dockyards shows, petitions could lose their importance as other ways of representing interests came to the fore. In the West during the twentieth century, their important remaining role was in introducing private legislation, as in the case described here by

13. Wolfgang Reinhard, *Geschichte der Staatsgewalt. Eine vergleichende Verfassungsgeschichte Europas von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich, 1999), pp. 291–304.

14. Tenfelde and Trischler, *Bis vor die Stufen der Throns*.

15. Ulbricht, "Supplikationen als Ego-Dokumente", pp. 169–170.

Ota. Petitioning also remained a vibrant activity in the form of soliciting signatures under a political statement and presenting these to political powerholders to show public support for political positions.¹⁶ For individual appeals to justice, an ombudsman has, in some cases, taken over the role that petitions used to have.¹⁷ That is not to say that the classical petition has lost its importance always and everywhere. Bukhovets draws our attention to the fact that the First Congress of People's Deputies in 1989 received 300,000 letters and telegrams. In present-day Mexico, petitions are still a living right. In many other developed democracies, whether republics or monarchies, a feeling remains that the ordinary citizen has a right to address the head of state with his or her personal problems, if other ways to find a solution to these problems have failed.¹⁸

RULERS

To be effective, a petition has to mention the ruler or ruling body it is addressed to, the request, perhaps a motivation and certainly the name (and often some other qualities) of the petitioner(s). These data make petitions a powerful historical source. All formal elements of the petition, as described above, lend themselves to historical analysis: the ruler or ruling body the petition is addressed to, the request and its motivation, and the name and other qualities of the petitioners.

As to the ruler or ruling bodies, here petitions tell us something about the way government was perceived by petitioners. They must have seen government as something which could be moved to decide in their favour – perhaps as a multilayered formation, in which one layer could be encouraged to operate against another.¹⁹ Petitions tried to use perceived fissures within ruling classes, for instance, by addressing a central authority with complaints about a local authority, or addressing a colonial power with demands based on the metropolitan system of justice.²⁰

16. Jean-François Sirinelli, *Intellectuels et passions françaises. Manifestes et pétitions au XXe siècle* (Paris, 1990).

17. Jaap Talsma, *Het recht van petitie, verzoekschriften aan de Tweede Kamer en het ombudsvraagstuk. Nederland, 1795–1983* (Arnhem, 1989).

18. In a number of late twentieth-century cases, the question of whether petitioning was still a meaningful individual right was debated on the occasion of the rewriting of constitutions. If political and juridical theory wish to justify this right to address the head of state, they usually find justification in the idea that it is useful to supplement other, more specific, rights of appeal, with a general right to be used when more specific procedures are lacking.

19. Rodrigues, "Liberdade, humanidade e propriedade".

20. C.R. Friedrichs, "Anti-Jewish Politics in Early Modern Germany: The Uprising in Worms, 1613–17", *Central European History*, 23 (1990), pp. 91–152; Lidwien Kapteijns and Jay Spaulding, "Women of the Zar and Middle-Class Sensibilities in Colonial Aden, 1923–1932", *Sudanic Africa*, 5 (1994), pp. 7–38.

The segment or level of government to which a petition is addressed may give a clue here. Different segments of government may put petitions to quite different uses. Radical Members of Parliament in the early nineteenth-century United Kingdom used petitions to stage debates in Parliament, thus obstructing the functioning of Parliament. Their supporters fed this strategy with a stream of petitions. When new Parliamentary rules of order (1832, definitively in 1842) made this kind of obstruction harder, the number of petitions remained high, especially petitions carrying more than 10,000 signatures, as assembling large numbers of signatures was, in itself, a way of making political opinion visible.²¹ As suffrage spread, this changed the meaning of petitions, which developed into a way of showing elected representatives which way popular feeling ran.

THE REQUEST AND ITS MOTIVATION

The request and its motivation can also be used for analysis. Of course, some motivations stated can have been given only for tactical reasons. The petition may borrow the language of the ruling classes to defend subaltern ways of living. In some cases, like the Dutch Republic in the eighteenth century, the rules for petitions were so complicated that specialists were needed to draw them up. If the petitioners were illiterate, the help of a literate writer was *per* definition necessary. But whatever influences the way in which demands are voiced, demands have to be voiced as that is the point of a petition. If the obstacles are taken into account, petitions lend themselves to linguistic or rhetorical analysis as texts.

In some cases, bringing forward an argument is the sole purpose of the petition. This applies, for example, to the lengthy petition of Wang Mingding to the 1934 National Congress of the Kuomintang, analysed by Nedostup and Liang Hong-ming. Its original aim was to present its author's view on education to the congress. Even if it was not noticed there, it has enabled Nedostup and Liang Hong-ming, two generations later, to reconstruct the world view of rank-and-file nationalists.

When petitions are available in large enough numbers, they can be analysed statistically to determine the social and spatial distribution of grievances.²² This line of analysis is represented here by Bukhovets, who uses petitions to gauge anti-Semitism in Byelorussia in the first decade of

21. C. Leys, "Petitioning in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries", *Political Studies*, 3 (1955), pp. 45–64.

22. Kari Helgesen, "Supplikker på 1700-tallet: et lite brukt kildemateriale", *Heimen*, 19 (1982), pp. 93–100; Kristian Hvidt and Hanne Rasmussen, "Socialistenadressen i November 1872", *Arbejderhistorie*, 3 (1995), pp. 22–32, Gilbert Shapiro and John Markoff, *Revolutionary Demands: A Content Analysis of the Cahiers de Doléances of 1789* (Stanford, CA, 1998).

the twentieth century. Shapiro and Markoff discuss an important question which arose during the French Revolution. Would the popular will only be expressed in electing the people's representatives, or would electors send their representatives to Paris with a binding mandate? They show the power of content analysis and of petitions as a serial source, especially their databank of the demands brought forward in the *cabiers de doléances* in giving a precise answer to the question of who held which position in this debate.²³ Bukhovets's analysis of ethnic and national stereotypes, as embodied in his Byelorussian petitions, leads to an unexpected conclusion regarding the importance of Jewish stereotypes. Ota analyses in depth the way petitioners presented themselves and their relatives to gain American citizenship, and the stereotypes of "American" involved.

THE PETITIONERS

Especially interesting are petitions produced by subaltern groups in colonial situations. In Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the indigenous population was quick to adopt petitions, perhaps because petitions resembled oral or written appeals they were already familiar with.²⁴ This encounter is described here by Swarnalatha for handloom weavers in the north of Coromandel (India) in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Soon, these weavers amazed the colonial authorities by the quality of the argument in their petitions. However, as Stern has argued for Peru, the use of petitions may have integrated native society more tightly in the colonial power structure.²⁵

When reading a petition, it is not always easy to decide whom one is reading. Before the rise of mass literacy, many petitioners were unable to write, let alone write a petition. The fact that petitions had to conform to formal requirements, or had to be written in official language, often required a professional hand even if the petitioner was able to write.²⁶ Still, it is generally possible to determine what was the influence of the

23. As argued above, it is worthwhile to look at the *cabiers de doléances* as petitions, but, as the whole of France was supposed to produce *cabiers*, as a source these have a coverage only rarely attained by petitions.

24. Carmen Nava, *Los abajo firmantes. Cartas a los presidentes*, 2 vols (Mexico City, 1994); John Kwadmo Osei-Tutu, *The Asafoi (socio-military groups) in the History and Politics of Accra (Ghana) from the 17th to the mid 20th Century* (Trondheim, 2000).

25. Steve J. Stern, "The Social Significance of Judicial Institutions in an Exploitative Society: Huamanga, Peru, 1570–1640", in George A. Collier, Renato I. Rosaldo, and John D. Wirth (eds), *The Inca and Aztec States 1400–1800: Anthropology and History* (New York, 1982), pp. 289–317.

26. Ulbricht, "Supplikationen als Ego-Dokumente", p. 154.

professional scribe (preacher, schoolmaster), and what is the voice of the real petitioner.²⁷

Petitioners usually had reason to highlight one side of the story, and an analysis of the arguments and facts presented in a petition therefore requires the usual critical attitude towards argumentative historical sources. One of the best known studies of petitions, in this case petitions aimed at a pardon, underlines the fictional element in these petitions in its title.²⁸ But even if we see them as fiction, these life stories had to be credible to be effective, and thus give us information about the lives of the historical petitioners. Petitions share with other autobiographical sources a certain element of fiction and the need for historical criticism, but the difference is that petitions are more concentrated in time than most autobiographies.²⁹ Even given these limitations, it still is worthwhile to stress how often petitioners, in the course of their pleas, find occasion to describe their lives and everyday circumstances.³⁰ Examples of this can be found in the essays by Blaine, Nedostup and Liang Hong-ming, and Ota.

Life stories naturally have a place in petitions brought forward by individuals. However, many petitions were produced by groups. This holds true for the European *ancien regime* and comparable societies, which were seen by its members as composed of corporate bodies. These could have good reason to send in petitions, and also were supposed to represent their members to the authorities. The collective petition also comes to the fore after the establishment of parliamentary democracy and right up to the present day, as a large number of signatures under a petition becomes an important way to influence Parliament. As Shapiro and Markoff point out in their essay, such collective petitions may choose to remain silent on issues which might divide their supporters.

Petitions identify those in whose names they are made. This enables us, in turn, to identify the signatories historically, using the information in the petition and/or what other sources tell us about them.³¹ In this way we can analyse the social and economic position of the signatories, and determine the social profile of the supporters of different points of view.³² It has, for

27. *Ibid.*, p. 157–159. See also the discussion of the role of scribes in the essays by Bukhovets and Würigler.

28. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, CA, 1987).

29. Ulbricht, “Supplikationen als Ego-Dokumente”, pp. 155, 170.

30. Tenfelde and Trischler, *Bis vor die Stufen der Throns*, pp. 27–28.

31. Bernard Laguerre, “Les pétitionnaires du Front Populaire: 1934–1939”, *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, 37 (1990), pp. 500–515; Nicolas Offenstadt, “Signer pour la paix en 1938–1939: Pétitions et pétitionnaires”, *Cahiers de l'Institut d'Histoire du Temps Présent*, 26 (1994), pp. 249–263.

32. Oleg G. Bukhovets, *Sotsial'nye konflikt'y i krest'ianskaia mental'nost' v rossiiskoi imperii nachala XX veka. Novye materialy, metody, rezul'taty* (Moscow, 1996); Mark Knights, “London’s ‘Monster’ Petition of 1680”, *Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), pp. 39–67.

instance, been possible to determine that in Germany in the sixteenth century all social classes presented petitions, but that the large majority were from ordinary people.³³

The contribution by Lipp and Krempel shows how the identification of petitioners in other sources makes it possible to paint the whole landscape of the social groups signing different petitions in one of history's significant waves of petitioning: the 1848/49 Revolution.

Among the ordinary citizens petitioning, we find both men and women, if usually far more men than women.³⁴ As is clear from Blaine's study of women petitioning the New Hampshire government, the caring role of women was a basis for petitions. So were widely shared assumptions of dependence and helplessness. The provincial government of New Hampshire felt as much obliged to assume paternal care for these women as the Italian princes described by Nubola. This was especially the case when female petitioners could claim that their men were gone, dead or missing in action, or had treated them badly.

As is clear from the above, petitions were used by subjects, including quite humble subjects, in various cultures and political settings to voice their demands. Their ubiquity suggests that petitions are responsive to a need felt by individuals and human societies across cultural boundaries, perhaps something as fundamental as the need for justice.³⁵ However that may be, this collection shows that petitions certainly enable present-day social historians to hear the voices of working-class and middle-class men and women of the past, who would otherwise remain silent.

33. Ulbricht, "Supplikationen als Ego-Dokumente", p. 152, based on Helmut Neuhaus, *Reichstag und Supplikationenausschuß. Ein Beitrag zur Verfassungsgeschichte der ersten Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1977), p. 299.

34. For Restoration France, Odile Krakovitch counted that petitions by women were between 2 and 4 per cent of the yearly number of petitions presented to the *Chambre des députés*; Odile Krakovitch, "Les pétitions, seul moyen d'expression laissé aux femmes. L'exemple de la Restauration", in Alain Corbin, Jacqueline Lalouette, Michèle Riot-Sarcey (eds), *Femmes dans la Cité 1815–1871* (Grâne, 1997), pp. 347–371, 351. A similar number was counted for the July Monarchy period by Riot-Sarcey; Michèle Riot-Sarcey, "Des femmes pétitionnent sous la monarchie de Juillet", in *ibid.*, pp. 389–400, 389.

35. Barrington Moore, Jr, *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (New York, 1978).