

NONVIOLENT METHODS AND EFFECTS OF THE WORLD NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT MOVEMENT

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Contents

1. The Movement and Its Impact, 1913-1945
 2. The Rise and Fall of a Mass Movement, 1945-1953
 3. The Movement's Impact, 1945-1953
 4. The Movement Resurrected, 1954-1970
 5. Impact of the Movement, 1954-1970
 6. The Movement Begins to Revive Again, 1971-1980
 7. Impact of the Movement, 1971-1980
 8. The Movement at Flood Tide, 1981-1989
 9. Retreat from Armageddon, 1981-1996
 10. Declining Movement, Reviving Arms Race, 1993-Present
 11. Conclusion
- Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketch

Summary

Opposition to nuclear weapons began with efforts by scientists to prevent their use in World War II. After the atomic bombing of Hiroshima revealed the existence of nuclear weapons to the general public, a broad nonviolent citizens' campaign developed to foster nuclear disarmament. Although this movement faded by 1950, it had some impact on governments, particularly the American, which accepted civilian control of atomic energy and made the first serious official nuclear disarmament proposals. In response to the development of hydrogen bombs, another surge of nuclear disarmament activism began in the mid-1950s and crested in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Eloquent appeals by some of the world's foremost intellectuals and the creation of ban-the-bomb groups in many nations led to an unprecedented outpouring of antinuclear activism. This second round of mass nonviolent protest led to the world's first nuclear arms control agreement, the Partial Test Ban Treaty of 1963, as well as to later key agreements, such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968. Thereafter, however, the antinuclear movement again ebbed, largely because of exhaustion, complacency, and the rise of other issues. In the late 1970s, yet another groundswell of popular protest began to emerge, as the end of the Vietnam War, concern about nuclear power, and the revival of the nuclear arms race spurred renewed concern about nuclear dangers. In the following years, the largest,

most powerful social movement of modern times erupted, with millions of participants around the world. This massive nonviolent antinuclear campaign had a dramatic impact upon the public policy of the nuclear and would-be nuclear powers, curbing the nuclear arms race and preventing nuclear war. Only with the decline of the movement in the 1990s did the nuclear menace begin to reemerge.

1. The Movement and Its Impact, 1913-1945

The campaign to save the world from nuclear destruction began long before nuclear weapons existed. In 1913, H. G. Wells, one of the world's most popular novelists, completed the writing of his latest work of fiction, *The World Set Free*, in which he portrayed a future war fought with atomic bombs. According to the novel, so devastating was this first nuclear war that national leaders, recognizing that civilization stood on the brink of catastrophe, joined together to end war through the creation of a world government. Actually, scientists in numerous nations already were speculating on the possibility that the atom might be split, thereby releasing enormous quantities of energy that could be used for weapons. In subsequent decades, they continued to work on nuclear fission.

One young physicist, Leo Szilard—a Hungarian who had fled Nazi Germany to resettle in Britain—became deeply concerned with the implications of this nuclear research. In late 1933, he conceived the idea of a nuclear chain reaction that could result in the construction of atomic bombs. Having read Wells, Szilard was highly disturbed by this prospect. Therefore, he sought to generate a conspiracy of silence among leading physicists about nuclear fission. But these efforts had little effect. Szilard was a junior figure in his field and, furthermore, secrecy went against the grain of scientific research. Even so, after December 1938, when two German chemists published the results of their successful experiment with nuclear fission, Szilard's warnings had greater impact, for many top scientists worried that Nazi Germany might develop nuclear weapons. Thus, Szilard succeeded for a time in restricting the flow of scientific information on nuclear fission. In the spring of 1939, however, French physicists published their own research findings, and this precipitated the breakdown of the agreement among scientists, as well as the secret establishment of atomic bomb projects in Germany, Great Britain, and, perhaps, the Soviet Union. Alarmed, Szilard went to meet with his former mentor, Albert Einstein, the world's most famous scientist. At this meeting, Szilard convinced Einstein that it was necessary to warn U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt that Nazi Germany might be building an atomic bomb. In this fashion, they helped initiate the Manhattan Project, the U.S. atomic bomb program.

But Szilard and numerous other scientists who worked on the Manhattan Project—as well as Einstein, who did not—viewed a U.S. atomic bomb, if it could be built, as a deterrent to a Nazi nuclear attack, not as a weapon of war. Therefore, as it became clear that Germany had failed to build the bomb and that the U.S. government was preparing to use its nuclear weapons against Japan, scientists began to warn of the consequences. The Danish physicist, Niels Bohr, who had escaped from his homeland to Britain and, then, to America, was disturbed about the dangers of a postwar nuclear arms race, and—in meetings with both Winston Churchill and Roosevelt—implored them to develop international nuclear arms controls. Szilard, thwarted in his efforts to discuss the nuclear

menace with Roosevelt and his successor, Harry Truman, conferred on the issue with Truman's designate as secretary of state, James Byrnes, in May of 1945. That June, a group of bomb project scientists at the Chicago Metallurgical Laboratory, headed by James Franck, a refugee chemist, drew up a memo on the nuclear issue that they delivered to Washington officials. Written largely by Eugene Rabinowitch, this "Franck Report" declared that, "if the United States were to be the first to release this new weapon of indiscriminate destruction upon mankind," it "would sacrifice public support throughout the world, precipitate the race for armaments, and prejudice the possibility of reaching an international agreement on the future control of such weapons." That summer, Szilard organized a petition campaign among Manhattan Project scientists against precipitous employment of nuclear weapons, arguing that it would open the door "to an era of devastation on an unimaginable scale."

Nevertheless, these efforts and others—all, in the context of wartime secrecy, conducted within official channels—had no impact upon U.S. and British government leaders. Committed to a traditional view of international relations, in which powerful weapons provided useful instruments of war and diplomacy, they swept aside warnings about the extraordinary dangers of nuclear weapons. Roosevelt and Churchill dismissed the notion of international control of atomic energy and agreed that, after the war, their two countries would maintain an atomic monopoly. When Truman and Churchill met at Potsdam in July 1945, recalled the British prime minister, "the decision whether or not to use the atomic bomb . . . was never even an issue." On 6 August, U.S. military forces launched the atomic bombing of the city of Hiroshima. Three days later, they annihilated the city of Nagasaki.

2. The Rise and Fall of a Mass Movement, 1945-1953

The atomic bombing of Japan gave the public its first glimpse of the new weapon and, in contrast to officials from the bomb-wielding nations, most people reacted to it with fear and dismay. To be sure, polls conducted in the United States and other allied nations showed that the use of the bomb against Japan commanded overwhelming support. Nevertheless, the atomic attack was publicly condemned by articulate minorities, usually composed of religious leaders and pacifists. Furthermore, as wartime passions cooled, John Hersey's *Hiroshima* revealed the bombing's terrible effects, and doubts grew about the necessity for the action. Popular attitudes became increasingly critical, especially outside the United States. More significant, even many supporters of the atomic bombing of Japan were frightened by what the vast destructive power of the new weapon might portend for the future. As the scientists had warned, in a nuclear-armed world, the survival of civilization was at stake. Writers, news commentators, and scientists talked apocalyptically of "one world or none."

A small but influential atomic scientists' movement swept into the vanguard of postwar efforts for the international control of atomic energy. Developing out of the wartime network of concerned scientists, the Federation of Atomic Scientists emerged in the fall of 1945 and was quickly reorganized into the Federation of American Scientists (FAS). Although the FAS never had more than 3000 members, it did draw together some 90 percent of the scientists from the Manhattan Project, thus giving its pronouncements on arms control and disarmament great authority. Other powerful voices for disarmament

among American scientists included the Emergency Committee of Atomic Scientists (headed by Einstein and masterminded by Szilard) and the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (edited by Rabinowitch). Simultaneously, concerned British Scientists organized an Atomic Scientists' Association, while scientists in other countries also formed new groups or strengthened old ones with the intention of pressing for a solution to the problem posed by nuclear weapons.

A second important force behind postwar disarmament efforts was the rapidly-growing world government movement. Appalled by the dangers of the nuclear arms race, prominent writers, educators, scientists, and even politicians began to rally behind the notion of "one world." World government groups sprang up in dozens of countries and, by 1950, the World Movement for World Federal Government claimed to speak for 56 organizations with 156,000 members. Although purists in the movement tended to argue that international control of nuclear weapons would be impossible without world federation, more pragmatic types viewed international control as a first (and important) step toward world government. Einstein, Szilard, American publisher Norman Cousins, British philosopher Bertrand Russell, and French journalist Claude Bourdet often blended the two causes.

The world pacifist movement provided a third important force backing postwar nuclear disarmament efforts. Although organized pacifism had been badly shaken by the Second World War, after that conflict the three world pacifist bodies—the War Resisters' International, the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom—underwent modest revivals and provided important leadership in national and international campaigns against nuclear weapons. Leading pacifists—such as A.J. Muste, Vera Brittain, André Trocmé, Kathleen Lonsdale, Aldo Capitini, Mohandas Gandhi, and Shinzo Hamai—spoke out repeatedly against nuclear weapons and nuclear war. In some countries, such as Japan, where pacifism made substantial strides in the postwar years, it became closely linked with the development of "Hiroshima Day" and other antinuclear ventures.

Yet another force behind postwar agitation against nuclear weapons arose in the form of a Communist-led peace movement. Although Communist parties initially applauded the atomic bombing of Japan, they became far less comfortable with nuclear weapons once the growing Cold War convinced them that they might be used against the Soviet Union. Anxious to stir up opposition to Western military measures but critical of the nonaligned peace movement, leading Communists launched their own movement in April 1949, when a World Peace Congress held in Paris sparked the formation of the Partisans of Peace.

At a March 1950 meeting at Stockholm, the Peace Partisans began a mass petition campaign calling for a ban on the atomic bomb. This Stockholm Peace Appeal, as it became known, purportedly received the signatures of 500 million people by the end of the year. The signatures, however, resulted almost entirely from official campaigns in Communist nations and to a lesser extent from Communist party-organized campaigns elsewhere. Drawing upon this large but politically limited constituency, the Peace Partisans formed a permanent organization in late 1950: the World Peace Council (WPC).

Despite this nonviolent surge of opposition to nuclear weapons, the disarmament movement faded rapidly in the early 1950s. The FAS and the Atomic Scientists' Association lost membership and momentum, while the Emergency Committee of Atomic Scientists terminated its activities. World government organizations declined precipitously. Pacifist groups also experienced losses of membership, morale, and influence. This decline clearly reflected the heightening Cold War, most notably the bloody war in Korea, which made disarmament seem either dangerous or merely impractical. In addition, the popular fear of nuclear weapons that had given the disarmament movement its major impetus proved difficult to sustain. Finally, the activities of the Communist-led peace movement tended to discredit non-Communist disarmament groups and ventures among many people who might otherwise have supported them.

3. The Movement's Impact, 1945-1953

Even so, the nonviolent movement had some effect. Startled by the public furor over nuclear weapons, policymakers grew more cautious. In the United States, the White House backed away from its original plan for military control of atomic energy and supported the creation of a civilian agency to direct the U.S. nuclear program. Although, previously, neither Roosevelt nor Truman had shown any interest in eliminating U.S. nuclear weapons, the Truman administration now sponsored the Acheson-Lilienthal Plan and the Baruch Plan, the world's first two official proposals for nuclear disarmament. "The release of atomic energy constitutes a new force too revolutionary to consider in the framework of the old ideas," Truman proclaimed. "The hope of civilization lies in international arrangements looking, if possible, to the renunciation of the use and development of the atomic bomb." Furthermore, during the Korean War, Truman brushed aside pleas from military and political leaders to use nuclear weapons in the conflict. In the words of Secretary of State Dean Acheson, the bomb had become "a political liability."

The British and Soviet governments also reacted to the nonviolent popular pressure. Fearing criticism of their postwar nuclear weapons program, British officials concealed its existence from the public, from parliament, and from most of the cabinet. Meanwhile, despite its nuclear ambitions, the British government publicly backed U.S. disarmament proposals and sought to dispel any talk of nuclear war. As cabinet records reveal, in November 1950, when Truman implied at a press conference that he was considering the use of nuclear weapons in Korea, Prime Minister Clement Attlee hastened to Washington to oppose the idea "in order to allay popular anxiety." Nor did the Soviet government ignore the widespread popular opposition to nuclear weapons. The Kremlin sharply assailed nonaligned critics of the bomb, initiated and funded the Communist-led peace movement, and launched an enormous propaganda campaign to portray the Soviet Union as the *avatar* of world peace.

Nevertheless, official accommodation to popular protest was limited, for the U.S. government was determined to retain its nuclear advantage and the Russians and British were determined to catch up. Consequently, although nuclear war was avoided during the early Cold War era, the great power nuclear arms race swept forward. The United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union tested, developed and, then, deployed large

numbers of atomic and, ultimately, hydrogen bombs. Sometimes, they also threatened to unleash nuclear war.

4. The Movement Resurrected, 1954-1970

This ongoing nuclear arms race—and, particularly, the testing of the new hydrogen bombs, weapons with a thousand times the explosive power of their predecessors—sparked a revival of the nonviolent antinuclear campaign. In 1954, when U.S. nuclear tests in the Pacific irradiated the crew members of a Japanese fishing boat, the *Lucky Dragon*, a wave of fear and revulsion swept around the world. In Japan, where antinuclear feelings were particularly intense, Tokyo housewives began a petition drive against atomic and hydrogen bombs that drew 32 million signatures. The following year, the first World Conference Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs convened in Hiroshima.

Meanwhile, in July 1955, at the instigation of Russell and Einstein, a small group of the world's most eminent scientists issued an eloquent warning—the Russell-Einstein Manifesto—on the nuclear menace. In the shadow of nuclear weapons, it declared, “we have to learn to think in a new way. We have to learn to ask ourselves, not what steps can be taken to give military victory . . . , for there no longer are such steps.” The real question is: “What steps can be taken to prevent a military contest of which the issue must be disastrous to all parties?”

These events provided the disarmament movement with new momentum. Pacifist groups once again raised their voices against nuclear weapons testing and development. In 1957, Russell and British physicist Joseph Rotblat began the Pugwash conferences, which brought together top scientists from both Cold War blocs to discuss the feasibility of nuclear arms control and disarmament measures. That same year, Cousins convinced Albert Schweitzer, the famed medical missionary, to broadcast a radio appeal to fifty nations to stop the testing of nuclear weapons. Later that year, the American chemist Linus Pauling released a petition, signed by 11,000 scientists from diverse nations, calling for rapid action to secure a nuclear test ban treaty.

As the tide of protest grew, new organizations sprang up to lead antinuclear campaigns. With the exception of the Japan Council against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs, the most powerful and influential was Britain's Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). Launched at a public meeting in early 1958, CND quickly burgeoned into a mass movement, with as many as 100,000 people from Labour Party branches, union, church groups, and universities parading behind the new nuclear disarmament symbol at its yearly Aldermaston marches, held at Easter. CND argued that Britain could take the lead in ridding the world of nuclear weapons through its own nuclear disarmament.

Although polls in the late 1950s and early 1960s found that support for unilateral action never ran beyond 30 percent of the British population, CND did become the largest, liveliest political movement in postwar Britain, backed by the nation's cultural luminaries. Russell served as its president and Canon John Collins, a socially conscious Anglican prelate, as its chair. Most important, CND helped make its goal of banning the Bomb enormously popular.

Similar groups, sporting the nuclear disarmament symbol and engaging in colorful marches and petition campaigns, emerged throughout Western Europe and Australasia. These included the Struggle Against Atomic Death in West Germany, the Movement Against Atomic Armaments in France, a Bertrand Russell Youth Committee in Greece, a Movement Against Atomic Arms in Switzerland, an Anti-Atom Bomb Action group in the Netherlands, a CND in Ireland, CND groups (modeled on the British) in Australia and New Zealand, and comparable organizations in Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Austria, Italy, Sweden, and elsewhere.

Lively ban the bomb movements also sprang up in North America. In the United States, Cousins and Clarence Pickett (a longtime leader of the American Friends Service Committee) launched the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE) in 1957. SANE was established to sponsor a few newspaper ads criticizing nuclear testing; but the ads had such widespread appeal that Cousins and Pickett decided to form a long-term organization. Moving gradually from the testing issue to ending the nuclear arms race, SANE acquired 25,000 members, making it the largest peace group in the United States. Although SANE promoted multilateralist rather than unilateralist solutions to the nuclear dilemma, it worked closely with British CND and similar groups. It secured a powerful ally with the formation of Women Strike for Peace, an organization that developed out of nationwide protests by some 50,000 women, in the fall of 1961, against the resumption of nuclear testing. In Canada, the Canadian Committee for the Control of Radiation Hazards, founded in 1959, was renamed the Canadian Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in 1962. Together with the newly-organized Voice of Women, Canadian CND staunchly opposed the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Canada, an issue that played a key role in the 1963 parliamentary elections.

In other lands, protest against nuclear weapons emerged in more muted form. For the most part, poverty, colonialism, and political repression prevented nuclear disarmament organizations from taking root in the Third World, although small-scale antinuclear ventures did appear in Ghana, India, and Israel. To some degree, however, the weakness of the organized disarmament movement in the Third World was compensated for by the staunch antinuclear positions of some Third World leaders—most notably Jawaharlal Nehru and Kwame Nkrumah, who maintained close ties with peace and disarmament groups. In the Soviet Union, dictatorial practices severely limited the possibilities for protest. Even so, Andrei Sakharov, Igor Kurchatov, and a few other courageous scientists worked behind the scenes to stop nuclear weapons testing. Sakharov attributed his antinuclear views to statements by Russell, Einstein, Schweitzer, and Pauling. Other Soviet scientists were influenced by what they read in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* or by the Pugwash conferences.

From the standpoint of antinuclear activists, there was nothing sacred about national boundaries. Delegations of protesters crossed into one another's countries to participate in marches and demonstrations. CND's nuclear disarmament symbol appeared everywhere, and became the international emblem for peace and disarmament. Defying governmental bans on travel and protest, activists sometimes endured beatings, arrests, and deportation. But, despite a variety of Cold War barriers, they proved irrepressible. An international team, sponsored by America's Committee for Nonviolent Action, wended its way through the United States, Western Europe and, eventually, East

Germany, Poland, and the Soviet Union, leafleting and carrying antinuclear placards along the way. Demonstrators from Western and African nations, organized by Britain's Direct Action Committee and the Committee for Nonviolent Action, invaded the French nuclear testing site in North Africa. Antinuclear activists sailed protest vessels into U.S. nuclear testing sites in the Pacific and into Soviet waters. Ignoring threats by the authorities, activists from Britain's Committee of 100 organized an antinuclear march and distributed thousands of incendiary leaflets in Moscow.

As nonaligned nuclear disarmament activism grew in the late 1950s and early 1960s, efforts commenced to unite the relevant groups in an international organization. These efforts culminated in January 1963, when an international gathering, at Oxford, England, voted to establish the International Confederation for Disarmament and Peace. Within a year, the new disarmament international claimed member groups in nearly thirty countries. Their combined strength was evident at the annual Easter marches which, in 1964, grew to half a million people, demonstrating in twenty nations.

Antinuclear opinion, too, reached very impressive dimensions. In mid-1961, polls found that the public favored banning nuclear weapons tests by a ratio of roughly ten to one in Italy, four to one in West Germany, three to one in France, and two to one in Great Britain. Asked in early 1963 about eliminating all nuclear weapons, the public backed the idea by 96 to one in Italy, 48 to one in France, 21 to one in West Germany, and nine to one in Great Britain. Much the same attitudes prevailed elsewhere.

As the nonaligned nuclear disarmament campaign flourished, its Communist-led counterpart began to disintegrate. In 1956, Soviet Party Secretary Nikita Khrushchev's revelations of Stalin's crimes threw Communist parties and movements into a tailspin—a process that accelerated with the Soviet invasion of Hungary later that year. To be sure, lavish Soviet funding and Communist party backing kept the World Peace Council (WPC) and its national affiliates afloat.

As a result, during these years they produced a vigorous critique of Western nuclear weapons. But the WPC's clear pro-Soviet partisanship continued to alienate nonaligned nuclear disarmament activists and the general public. Indeed, in the early 1960s, as Soviet and Chinese foreign policy diverged dramatically, even the Chinese pulled out of the WPC and began to denounce it as a rubber stamp for Soviet policy. Only the escalation of the horrific U.S. war in Vietnam, which tended to confirm WPC charges of a diabolical U.S. imperialism, rescued the WPC and its affiliates from collapse.

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Biographical Sketch

Lawrence S. Wittner was born in Brooklyn, New York on May 5, 1941 and was educated at Columbia College, the University of Wisconsin, and at Columbia University, where he received his Ph.D. in History in 1967. He has taught at Hampton Institute, at Vassar College, at Japanese universities (under the Fulbright program), and at the State University of New York/Albany, where he is currently Professor of History. A former president of the Council on Peace Research in History (now the Peace History Society), he has written extensively on the history of peace movements and on the history of United States foreign policy. His books include *Rebels Against War* (1969, rev. ed. 1984), *Cold War America* (1974, rev. ed. 1978), and *American Intervention in Greece, 1943-1949* (1982). His most extensive project has been a scholarly trilogy entitled *The Struggle Against the Bomb* (Stanford University Press), a history of the world nuclear disarmament movement. The first volume, *One World or None*, was published in 1993 and was awarded the Warren Kuehl Prize of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations as the outstanding book on the history of internationalism and/or peace movements. The second volume, *Resisting the Bomb*, was published in 1997 and the third volume, *Toward Nuclear Abolition*, in 2003. He has also edited four other books, served as co-editor of *Peace & Change*, and written more than 170 published articles and book reviews.

Professor Wittner has received major fellowships or grants from the American Council of Learned Societies, the MacArthur Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the United States Institute of Peace, and has given lectures in Austria, Canada, China, Finland, Germany, Japan, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, South Africa, Spain, and the United States.