

Unthinking the Imaginary War. Intellectual Reflections of the Nuclear Age, 1945-1990

Veranstalter: Centre for Peace History, University of Sheffield; Arbeitskreis für Historische Friedensforschung; German Historical Institute London; German Historical Institute Rome

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Bericht von: Arvid Schors, Historisches Seminar, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg,

The starting point of this conference was the consideration that all politics during the Cold War took place under the threat of nuclear annihilation and that the war-like character of the Cold War consisted of a sustained attack against the imagination (Michael Geyer). In this context the conference aimed at discussing how the atomic bomb and its imaginary impact has served as a signifier in political, intellectual and artistic discourses, and how philosophers, writers, artists, but also defense intellectuals tried to think and unthink the political and strategic realities of the nuclear age. The conference at the German Historical Institute in London was generously supported by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung, the German Historical Institute London, the Arbeitskreis Historische Friedensforschung and the Deutsche Stiftung Friedensforschung.

BENJAMIN ZIEMANN (Sheffield) opened the conference with an introduction of its focus on the intellectual history of the Cold War. He stressed the particular relevance of simulations and collective images in the absence of a full-scale battlefield. He concluded that the central questions of the conference dealt to a lesser extent with *why* but rather with *how* the 'imaginary war' was waged.

Panel I discussed the *Long-Term Perspectives on the Nuclear Threat*. DAVID TAL (Calgary) started with a presentation on *The Wilsonian Heritage and US Nuclear Disarmament Policy*. He focused on the question of why the nuclear arsenals in the Cold War period never disappeared, even though so many people were talking about disarmament. In establishing a long-term perspective on US disarmament policy he highlighted its evolutionary character and revealed its profound dilemma: how to balance American

values and self-perception that both favored disarmament with the actions of American allies and adversaries. He determined that although values were strong enough to lead the US to *negotiate* disarmament, its concrete disarmament policy was ultimately based on what were perceived as national security interests – and therefore the US favored nuclear armaments staying high.

Subsequently MATTHEW GRANT (Middlesbrough) spoke about *The Atomic Sensation in British Culture* giving an account of the public discourses in Great Britain following the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. At first fear and anxiety were prevalent due to the fresh scars caused by the bombings of the Second World War. The perception that the next war would be nuclear and almost inevitably lead to the end of civilization was a widespread concern. But this anxiety soon lessened, not least under the impact of civil defense efforts. The first successful British nuclear test in 1952 represents a key turning point in this regard. In its aftermath nuclear weapons became associated with Britain's status in international politics, superseding anxiety over the end of the world.

JASON DAWSEY (Chicago) closed the panel with his talk about *Günther Anders and the History of Anti-Nuclear Critique*. Dawsey characterized the Austrian-Jewish philosopher and journalist Anders (1902-1992) as an intellectual of the 'age of extremes' of the 20th century. He was not only an early thinker concerned with the Shoa, but also a pessimistic critique of technology and an anti-nuclear radical. In this regard the atomic bomb played a crucial role for Anders' philosophy. It underlined the fundamental gap between the capability of humans to kill and their willingness to take responsibility. Anders also saw the nuclear age as essentially paradoxical, for the bomb enabled humanity to extinguish itself and yet also thereby succeeded in creating one humanity.

This panel culminated in the keynote lecture by PAUL BOYER (Madison) about *American Thought and Culture in the Nuclear Age*. Boyer argued that while the intellectual impact of the atomic bomb in the US was profound, it was not a constant one. Boyer sup-

ported his proposition by identifying different phases in American history that reflected this cyclic and ambivalent development. He showed that the impact of nuclear weapons could either provoke new imaginations or lead to a neglect and even blocking of imagination. As a future agenda for studying the Cold War Boyer stressed the importance of connections between politics and culture, the relevance of race and gender aspects, and the need to internationalize research by pursuing comparative approaches.

The following discussion made evident that for the perceptions of the nuclear age the relevance of the experiences of the Second World War could hardly be overestimated. It also became clear that for future research the relationship and the difference between fear of technology in general and fear of nuclear weapons should be considered more thoroughly.

Panel II on *Nuclear Apocalypse* was opened with a presentation by MIRIAM DOBSON (Sheffield) about *Apocalypse, Peace, and Religious Belief: Soviet Representations of the Cold War*. She focused her talk on Evangelical Christians in the Soviet Union and their apocalyptic fears during the late Stalinist era. According to Dobson apocalyptic images and anxiety, expressed in 'heavenly letters' or in the interrogation of Evangelical Christians arrested for worshiping, stood in some connection to the fear of nuclear annihilation.

DANIEL GERSTER (Florence) presented three Catholic responses to the Cold War in his presentation *West German and US Catholics, the Bomb and Perceptions of Apocalypse, 1945-1960*. First he highlighted the main Catholic discourse espoused by church officials. Not until 1953/54 did Pope Pius XII officially declare the use of nuclear weapons to be immoral. Before that date the church considered limited nuclear bombings a reasonable defense against the perceived communist threat. Second, Gerster concentrated on the counter-discourse of Catholics who used powerful religious images and rational arguments to critique the official position. Third, he considered the significance of popular Catholic belief, especially the increase of Marian Apparitions. Gerster noted that in Germany the main reference of these apparitions

were to the experiences of the Second World War whereas in the US the devastating effects of nuclear war dominated Catholics' religious imagination.

JOHANNES PLATZ (Cologne) gave a presentation on *The Scientific and Intellectual Expert Committee of the Protestant Studies Association commissioned by the Protestant Military Bishop 1956-1959*. In the framework of the 'Evangelische Studiengemeinschaft', Hermann Kunst, the first Protestant military bishop of the FRG founded a multidisciplinary scientific committee to discuss the problem of nuclear weapons. Its work culminated in 1959 in the publication of the so-called 'Heidelberger Thesen' which proposed a new self-conception for soldiers that would stress their changed role to prohibit rather than to fight war. According to Platz these theses constituted a milestone in Protestant thinking about the military and were more important for the 'Bundeswehr' than the more well-known concept of 'Innere Führung'.

FRIEDERIKE BRÜHÖFENER (Chapel Hill) talked about *Debating Cold War Anxieties in West Germany during the 1980s* focusing on commentaries in the German mainstream press. Brühöfener stressed the importance of the articulation of emotions – especially emotions of angst – for the new political protest movement. Newspaper commentators immediately picked up these sentiments but most of them continued to support NATO's double-track decision. As a result the commentaries fostered skepticism about protestors by contrasting the emotionality of the peace movement with the alleged rationality of advocates of nuclear armament. An important point of reference was also the German Nazi past, the memory of which led many commentators to warn against the German public's assumed susceptibility to emotional manipulation.

The discussion shed light on the necessity of a very critical approach to sources that deal with apocalyptic thoughts to identify their point of reference unambiguously. For the West German case it became clear how strongly the vagueness of who in the event of war would control the nuclear weapons stationed on German territory reflected gen-

eral ambivalences in dealing with the nuclear threat.

Panel III dealt with *Dialectics of Destruction: Imaginations of the Bomb* and started with a presentation by PATRYK WASIAK (Warsaw) about *Good Human versus Computer Villain: New Technologies and the Discourse of Nuclear War*. In his main case study he analyzed the 'Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility' (CPSR), an NGO incorporated in 1983 in Silicon Valley. CPSR was especially concerned with the potential dangers of computers malfunctioning in nuclear warfare. According to Wasiak these activists were solely interested in discussions between professionals and only anxious about US national security. They dealt exclusively with technological questions; moral problems played no role in their thinking.

The panel ended with a paper by LARS NOWAK (Trier). Concentrating on nuclear test films made by the American military during the 1950s, Nowak argued that these motion pictures were an essential component of the ongoing preparation for nuclear war. Makers of the films built entire suburban towns in the desert to represent American cities, and used animals as representatives for human beings. Mainly manufactured for limited and internal audiences, these films not only served military and technical purposes but also had psychological objectives. They maintained the notion that a nuclear war could be fought and won.

In the discussion the importance of the atomic bomb for US nation-building took center stage. This was exemplified by the influence the fear of a nuclear attack had on the development of a more and more suburban America, thereby having a deep impact on everyday life.

Panel IV was concerned with *Expert Cultures: Defense Intellectuals and Peace Researchers* and started with a presentation by CLAUDIA KEMPER (Hamburg) on *Physicians as Experts. The German Section of IPPNW*. The 'International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War' were founded in 1980 to promote nuclear disarmament. IPPNW focused not only on the technical, but also on the psychological and moral consequences of nuclear weapons. Kemper under-

lined the self-conception of these physicians as independent from political and ideological causes. This attitude came along with a strong elitist image of themselves as experts consolidated by the shared reference to the Hippocratic Oath. The IPPNW played an important role in the intensifying German discussions in the 1980s about civil defense and particularly attacked physicists that were involved in civil defense planning, accusing them of trying to 'normalize' the reaction to nuclear war.

Subsequently ISABELLE MICLOT (Paris) talked about *French Defense Intellectuals and the Modeling of Nuclear War*. She identified three phases for the development of French nuclear strategy. The first phase, from 1945 to 1950, was highly influenced by the French defeat of 1940, which led the military to adapt a 'blitzkrieg' doctrine. The second phase (1950-1960) was dominated by a plurality of conflicting paradigms but in the end the 'blitzkrieg' idea was swept away by the impact of the nuclear age. Finally, the third phase (1960-1965) began with the first French nuclear test in 1960 and saw the emergence of the first French nuclear strategy based on deterrence.

ØYVIND EKELUND (Oslo) spoke about *The Advent and Advance of Early Norwegian Peace Research* concentrating on the foundation of the 'Peace Research Institute Oslo' (PRIO) in 1959. Ekelund situated his paper in research about a peculiar Norwegian peace tradition and about the historiography of the genesis of peace research after the Second World War. Using the PRIO as a case study, he argued that the atomic bomb had nearly nothing to do with the rise of peace research after 1945. At most it accelerated the institutionalization of peace research after the war.

EVA FETSCHER (Oslo) presented an affiliated paper on *The Chair in Conflict and Peace Research at the University of Oslo 1963-1985*. Fetscher was especially concerned with the influence the atomic question had on the establishment of this chair. It resulted from an initiative by a group of Norwegian researchers, one of whom has claimed that the danger of nuclear weapons was an important driving force for its establishment. But Johan Galtung, the first holder of the chair until 1969, barely concentrated his research on nuclear

weapons, and between 1969 and 1977, issues other than nuclear problems dominated its work. Fetscher hypothesized that this development was connected to the public perception of a diminishing nuclear threat within the framework of relaxation of tensions between the superpowers in the 1970s.

PAUL RUBINSON (Tampa) closed the panel with his talk on *'The Nuclear Winter Phenomenon': Antinuclear Protests and Human Rights in the US and the Soviet Union*. Robinson discussed the perspective on nuclear war presented by the natural sciences at the beginning of the 1980s. In 1983, a US research group centered around the astrophysicist Carl Sagan published its results, based on computer simulations, about the devastating environmental effects of nuclear war. Sagan, a 'great scientific communicator', went public with his findings and stressed that no one on earth could remain untouched by this 'nuclear winter'. Sagan's findings had a profound impact on public discussions, but almost no effect on US nuclear policy. They did, however, find their way to the Soviet Union, motivating the dissident movement to protest for a change in nuclear policy.

The discussion underlined the important role of theologians in debates about the nuclear threat that often even outran the role of experts because all considerations on nuclear war were speculations in the end. It also became apparent that the debate about nuclear winter in the 1980s was in many respects the precursor of the debate about climate change today, highlighting the deep-rooted and influential legacy of the Cold War.

Panel V centered on *Imagining the Unimaginable: Artists and the Bomb* and opened with a talk by VERA WOLFF (Hamburg) about *Material Aesthetics for the Nuclear Age. How Japanese Artists undid the Imaginary War*. Wolff's presentation dealt with the 'Gutai group', an association of Japanese artists founded in 1954. Wolff offered an interpretation of the 'Gutai group' that emphasized the intention of these Japanese artists to be part of the western avant-garde and thereby side with the victors of the Second World War. The group's art celebrated the victim as a hero and, with its new international orientation, blurred the national identity of

traditional Japanese art. According to Wolff the 'Gutai group' was an important expression of a changed Japanese self-conception after the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

UMBERTO ROSSI (Rome) spoke about *Images of World War III in Novels by Philip K. Dick and Thomas Pynchon*. He focused on Dick's 1962 alternate history novel *'The Man in the High Castle'* and on Pynchon's novel *'Gravity's Rainbow'* of 1973. According to Rossi both books deal with the nuclear bomb and highlight the connections between the Second World War and an imagined Third World War. Rossi especially pointed to the fact that despite fundamental discrepancies between the real 1960s and Dick's alternate reality, humanity in both worlds almost inevitably stood on the brink of nuclear destruction.

The panel closed with a contribution by THOMAS F. SCHNEIDER (Osnabrück) about *Representations of Post Nuclear Societies in Cold War Films*. Moving through the history of post-apocalyptic cinema after 1945, Schneider identified three different categories of films: first, movies like *'A Day Called X'*, a dramatized 1957 US documentary that reflected the propagandistic assurance that everything would be under control in case of a real nuclear raid; second, films like the 1965 BBC drama documentary *'War Games'*, the first movie not to downplay the consequences of nuclear war; and third, movies that almost completely focused on the post-war situation. Using the example of different film adaptations of the novel *'I am Legend'* by Richard Matheson, Schneider showed that the causes of the apocalypse were exchangeable in an almost arbitrary way. This led him to conclude that makers of post-apocalyptic movies were probably less influenced by the atomic age than often stated.

The conference closed with a thematic wrap-up by JOST DÜLFFER (Cologne) and MICHAEL GEYER (Chicago). Outlining the results and the open questions Dülffer stressed the importance of Second World War experiences as central frames of reference and asked to what extent the discussed imaginations were grass-roots developments and to what extent propagandistic creations. Geyer

underlined the need to consider nuclear war in the broader context of the history of warfare. He emphasized that nuclear war is always war against civilians, which situates it inevitably in the neighborhood of genocide. In contrast to Dülffer he stressed that the lesser consideration of eastern perspectives at the conference does not just result from a lack of open archives but rather from an epistemic gap. The eastern perspective on nuclear war was probably shaped by different images. Finally, Geyer observed that the battles over the control of the imaginations of nuclear war did not just take place between the superpowers but also as internal fights in each society.

Taken as a whole, the work presented at the conference clearly showed the value of analyzing the Cold War from both political and cultural perspectives.

Conference Overview

Opening and Welcome, Andreas Gestrich (GHI London)

Patrick Bernhard (GHI Rome), Holger Nehring (Sheffield), Benjamin Ziemann (Sheffield): Introduction

Panel I: Long-Term Perspectives on the Nuclear Threat

David Tal (Calgary), The Wilsonian Heritage and US Nuclear Disarmament Policy

Matthew Grant (Middlesbrough), The Atomic Sensation in British Culture

Jason Dawsey (Chicago), After Hiroshima. Günther Anders and the History of Anti-Nuclear Critique

Keynote Lecture: Paul Boyer (Madison, Wisconsin), Fallout. American Thought and Culture in the Nuclear Age

Panel II: Nuclear Apocalypse

Miriam Dobson (Sheffield), Apocalypse, Peace, and Religious Belief: Soviet Representations of the Cold War

Daniel Gerster (Florence), West German and US Catholics, the Bomb and Perceptions of Apocalypse, 1945-1960

Johannes Platz (Cologne), The Atomic Age – War, Peace and Apocalypse. The Views of the

German Protestant Military Bishop

Friederike Brühöfener (Chapel Hill), „Angst vor dem Atom“. Debating Cold War Anxieties in West Germany during the 1980s

Panel III: Dialectics of Destruction: Imaginations of the Bomb

Patryk Wasiak (Warsaw), Good Human versus Computer Villain: New Technologies and the Discourse of Nuclear War

Lars Nowak (Trier) Rehearsals for the Third World War: The American Nuclear Test Films

Panel IV: Expert Cultures: Defense Intellectuals and Peace Researchers

Claudia Kemper (Hamburg), Physicians as Experts. The German Section of IPPNW

Isabelle Miclot (Paris), French Defense Intellectuals and the Modeling of Nuclear War

Øyvind Ekelund (Oslo), ‘Science of Survival I: Prodiges of Peace. The Advent and Advance of Early Norwegian Peace Research

Eva Fetscher (Oslo), Science of Survival II: The Chair in Conflict and Peace Research at the University of Oslo 1963-1985’

Paul Robinson (Tampa), „The Nuclear Winter Phenomenon”: Antinuclear Protests and Human Rights in the US and the Soviet Union

Panel V: Imagining the Unimaginable: Artists and the Bomb

Vera Wolff (Hamburg), Material Aesthetics for the Nuclear Age. How Japanese Artists undid the Imaginary War

Umberto Rossi (Rome), The War which was not there: Images of World War III in Novels by Philip K. Dick and Thomas Pynchon

Thomas F. Schneider (Osnabrück), Armageddon and After. Representations of Post Nuclear Societies in Cold War Films

Thematic Wrap-Up, introduced by Michael Geyer (Chicago) / Jost Dülffer (Cologne)

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