

Wittner, Lawrence S.: *Toward Nuclear Abolition. A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1971 to the Present*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2003. ISBN: 0-8047-4862-4; 657 S.

**Rezensiert von:** Holger Nehring, Pembroke College, University of Oxford

„Toward Nuclear Abolition“ is the last volume in Lawrence Wittner’s trilogy on the global history of the anti-nuclear-weapons movements since 1945. It covers the period from 1971 to the present. As in the previous two volumes, Wittner tells a story of growth and decline.<sup>1</sup> In the early 1970s, the anti-nuclear-weapons movement lost much of the force it had gained by the mid-1960s. The protests against the Vietnam War and the student protests consumed much of its energies. The 1980s, by contrast, saw the staggering growth of anti-nuclear-weapons movements across the world. In the 1990s, successive American administrations tried to unravel many previous arms control measures, this time almost unchallenged by large-scale anti-nuclear disarmament movements. Wittner also argues that the immense pressures which the world nuclear disarmament movement brought to bear on the US and Soviet governments during the 1980s were crucial for progress towards „nuclear abolition“ and for the ending of the Cold War.

Wittner’s book, especially if taken together with the previous two volumes, is a great scholarly achievement and will remain an important handbook for years to come. The author ploughed through masses of movement and governmental archival material in various languages. He has made use of oral history interviews, memoir literature, newspapers and movement journals, and of opinion polls. More than one hundred pages of reference document this knowledge meticulously and reliably. An 18-page index greatly facilitates the use of the book as a reference work.

The study’s scale and scope is breathtaking. Wittner not only gives an outline of developments of the protests movements in different countries, he also examines transnational co-operations and governmental reactions. He has thus done what no other histori-

an has done before in this breadth and depth: he has produced a global history of the perceptions of a global danger, without neglecting the very different ways in which different societies and different groups within these societies responded to these dangers. Although Wittner’s focus is primarily on the United States, the Soviet Union, Canada and Great Britain, there is reliable information on the anti-nuclear-weapons movements elsewhere. The book is thus not only a vital contribution to peace history, it also makes an important case for widening the boundaries of writing international history.

A project of this scale and scope can hardly satisfy all interests. It may, therefore, seem unfair to criticise the book for shortcomings and misinterpretations, especially in a review of this length.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, some of Wittner’s methodological assumptions and conclusions appear to be problematic and need further discussion. In spite of all the information Wittner shares with his readers, the specific character of the anti-nuclear-weapons movements of the late 1970s and of the 1980s remains rather vague: the important historical question of what distinguished the anti-nuclear-weapons protests of the 1980s from those of earlier periods remains unanswered. The interpretation of the Cold War which emerges from Wittner’s account is thus one of an arms race and neglects the elements of economic, technological and ideological competition between East and West. For Wittner, despite his general scepticism of governmental policies, the main thrust for ending the Cold War and the arms race during the 1980s came through Gorbachev’s alleged adoption of the Western protesters’ aims. Wittner thus adopts and radicalises insights from recent studies on the end of the Cold War.<sup>3</sup> As fa-

<sup>1</sup> Wittner, Lawrence S., *One World or None. A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement through 1953 (The Struggle Against the Bomb 1)*, Stanford 1993; idem: *Resisting the Bomb. A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1954-1970 (The Struggle Against the Bomb 2)*, Stanford 1997.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion cf. the H-PEACE round-table (May 2004), especially the contributions by Jeremi Suri and Vladislav Zubok.

<sup>3</sup> English, Robert, *Russia and the Idea of the West. Gorbachev, Intellectuals, and the End of the Cold War*, New York 2000; Evaneglista, Matthew, *Unarmed Forces. The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War*, Ithaca

scinating an insight as this is, it plays down the crucial fact that Gorbachev still sought to reform rather than to overcome the Soviet system, an aim with which most Western protesters hardly agreed. One does not, therefore, have to subscribe to the triumphalist interpretations which attribute the end of the Cold War to Western strength to find these conclusions not entirely convincing.

The flip side of Wittner's rather reductionist interpretation of the Cold War is that the governments' and movements' aims do not always come out as precisely as one would have wished. For Wittner, there are essentially only two positions towards nuclear weapons: either in favour, or against. Recent research suggests, however, that governments usually shared the movements' perceptions of the dangers of the arms race.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, there were important disagreements amongst the protesters which remain in the background of Wittner's study: Did they seek to advance alternative models for their countries' defence policies, or did they seek to abandon the whole nation-state system as a relic of the past? Were they opposed to wars in general, or just to wars fought with nuclear weapons? Did they support a project of non-violent societies in the radically pacifist sense, or were they happy with arms control measures alone?

Wittner writes the history of the global anti-nuclear weapons movements from within, almost making the movements' contemporary rhetoric his own. It is this element which endows the book with a unique thrust. Historians of these movements will thus find some typical features of movement discourses in Wittner's analysis. First, Wittner is not really interested in historical periodisation. He is interested in „the struggle against the Bomb“ in and of itself, as a „heartening“ story of how the „biggest mass movement in modern history“ modified state behaviour (pp. 485, 487). What is important for Wittner is that the movement existed rather than how it was shaped. History thus becomes encouragement for further action.

Second, there is an almost eschatological ring to Wittner's history. Despite recounting the story's many twists and turns, it is essentially about how the forces of light slowly but steadily win over the forces of dar-

kness. Underlying these two features is the third element which turns reading Wittner's book into a peculiar experience. The story is told in the form of a double binary coding. It is the opposition of „hawks“ versus „doves“, and of „government“ versus „the people“. Almost always, „doves“ and „people“ and „hawks“ and „governments“ appear as synonyms: Hawks needed the Cold War to preserve their positions of power (p. 421). By contrast, „the people“ had come to see the dangers and consequently opposed nuclear weapons (p. 376).

This critique does not devalue Wittner's significant achievements in the least. Rather, it should encourage us to discuss how to integrate historical peace research into social, political and international history at large. Wittner's peculiar approach to this topic is uniquely appropriate for engendering such a debate. As much as the book is a magisterial work of reference for the history of the world-wide nuclear-disarmament movements, it is also a political statement within the „struggle against the Bomb“. The book draws its force from Wittner's feeling of beleaguement by the „guardians of propriety“ (p. x) in the historical profession and by the „hawks“ in the Pentagon. Discussing this important book could advance our understanding beyond this dichotomy.

HistLit 2004-3-007 / Holger Nehring über Wittner, Lawrence S.: *Toward Nuclear Abolition. A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1971 to the Present*. Stanford 2003, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 03.07.2004.

1999.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the contributions in Gaddis, John Lewis et al. (eds.), *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb. Nuclear Diplomacy since 1945*, Oxford 1999. This research relates to the 1950s and 1960s, but there is no reason to believe that perceptions within governments changed dramatically since then.