

Ban the Bomb: from 1950s activism to the General Assembly, via Greenham Common

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Introduction

The 1950s slogan "Ban the Bomb" was given new purpose on 27 October 2016 when 123 UN Member states voted for the resolution "L.41" on "Taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations", thereby agreeing to start negotiations in 2017 on "a legally binding treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination". More than 71 years since two atomic bombs destroyed the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, the world stands on the threshold of banning nuclear weapons. Drawing lessons from historical nuclear campaigns, this chapter looks at early efforts to ban nuclear testing, the networked feminist, humanitarian campaigning centred on the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, especially in the years 1981 to the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 1987, and the growing international campaign to ban nuclear weapons (2010 to the present).

There have been three notable surges in nuclear disarmament activism: the 1950s, when governments and civil society pushed for the global step of a comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty (CTBT); the 1980s, when opposition to new types of nuclear missiles inspired women to develop new forms of nonviolent, feminist and ecological campaigning that led from the interim demand to ban one class of modern nuclear weapons to inter-related campaigns against all forms of patriarchal violence and oppression; and the post 2010 humanitarian initiatives to prohibit nuclear weapons as the next feasible step to build stronger norms and conditions for all nuclear arsenals to be irreversibly eliminated.

The 1950s Ban-the-Bomb campaigns developed in reaction to the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the contaminating mushroom clouds that punctuated the escalating nuclear rivalry between the US and Soviet Union. Movements were mainly initiated in the West, led by scientists, left-leaning political groupings and peace organisations. Pugwash and the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (custodians of the 'doomsday clock') started at this time. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF, founded in 1915) networked across the world to bridge East-West divides, and were instrumental in the 1961 US Women's Strike for Peace that is credited with influencing the Kennedy administration to pursue the CTBT.

The UK Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) was founded in 1958 after Britain joined the US-Soviet nuclear club with a series of nuclear tests in Australia and the Pacific. CND organised widely-supported public marches between London and the Aldermaston atomic weapons factory 50 miles away, in close cooperation with the Committee of 100 which encouraged sit-downs and blockades of nuclear facilities. CND's logo, designed by Gerald Holtom to depict the semaphore signals for N (nuclear) and D (disarmament) contained in a circle (symbolising birth and life), remains a potent peace symbol, familiar across the world.

Soon after France joined the nuclear club in 1960, and less than a year after the Cuban Missile Crisis, US, Soviet and British leaders abandoned efforts to achieve a comprehensive test ban treaty (CTBT) and settled for the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT), which prohibited nuclear explosions in the atmosphere, underwater and outer space. Five years later, after China had begun nuclear testing and several others had embarked on national nuclear weapons programmes, the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty was concluded. This did not prohibit nuclear weapons, but enshrined a weakly worded "good faith" obligation in Article VI to pursue nuclear disarmament negotiations.

The NPT was essentially an agreement to close the door to those who had not yet crossed the threshold. It created a special category defined as 'nuclear weapon states' (NWS), encompassing the five states that also enjoyed permanent seats on the UN Security Council.¹ The NWS' obligations focussed mainly on not transferring weapons or their technologies, with no verification requirements, contrasting starkly with the explicit undertakings required from non-nuclear governments not to acquire, manufacture or receive assistance or technology to develop nuclear weapons. In addition to its nonproliferation provisions in Articles 1-3, the NPT encouraged developments in nuclear technologies for 'peaceful purposes' and permitted 'peaceful nuclear explosions' in Articles 4 and 5. Regarded as the most that could be achieved during the 1960s Cold War, the PTBT and NPT were partial agreements at best. Though presented as steps to disarmament, their over-riding purpose was to safeguard the interests of the major nuclear possessors, including their nuclear advantages.

Though these treaties' preambles contained aspirations for effective nuclear disarmament and the desire to prevent further environmental contamination, human devastation and nuclear war, it soon became apparent that disarmament was being downgraded and displaced by 'non-proliferation'. Non-nuclear nations and civil society made efforts to emphasize that disarmament and non-proliferation were two sides of the same coin, and to equate 'vertical proliferation' - the growth and modernization of nuclear arsenals – with the spread of nuclear weapons horizontally (to further states).² Nonetheless, the structure of the NPT and powerful interests involved in the nuclear-military establishments of defined NWS ensured that arms control and non-proliferation were framed as 'realist' practical endeavours, while disarmament, meaning the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons, was dismissed as 'idealist' and utopian, in the never-never land of 'ultimate goals'.

The Vietnam War and the reduced visibility of the nuclear arms race after 1967 contributed to the waning of nuclear disarmament activism. Détente in the 1970s enabled bilateral US-Soviet agreements that partially limited strategic offensive missiles, anti-ballistic missiles and the permitted size of underground nuclear testing. These arms control agreements facilitated the management of nuclear arsenals and cold war relationship, while underscoring the power relations that allowed the five NWS to carry on designing and producing new types of nuclear weapons.

This convenient arrangement was fundamentally challenged in the 1980s. The catalyst was Moscow's decision to deploy SS20 missiles facing Europe, which NATO met with a decision on 12 December 1979 to deploy a new generation of state of the art intermediate-range cruise and Pershing missiles, starting with the US Airforce base at Greenham Common, 60 miles West of London.³ Others would be deployed in Germany, Netherlands, Belgium and Italy.

These deployments of weapons seemed more suited to first-use decapitation strikes than the mega bombs associated with 'mutual assured destruction' (MAD) "deterrence" doctrines. As such, they were viewed as a dangerous escalation likely to exacerbate US-Soviet hostilities and insecurity, and undermine crisis instability. From US Generals to people in supermarkets, there was talk of a nuclear 'third world war'. As several governments distributed civil defence advice, such as the UK's notorious "Protect and Survive" pamphlet, the stage was set for a new generation of disarmament activists to rise up and challenge the nuclear-military establishments that made and maintained the "balance of terror" with ever more nuclear weapon types to fuel continuing political rivalries.

This period saw the re-energising of established organisations like Pugwash and CND as well as the emergence of professional groups like the European Nuclear Disarmament (END) network and the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, which won the 1985 Nobel Peace

Prize for its joint leadership by both American and Soviet doctors to highlight the shared humanitarian consequences of nuclear war.

Most significantly, however, was the resurgence of disarmament activism, with the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp emblematic of how feminist and ecological politics synthesized the analytical understanding that "the personal is political", and expanded the ways in which civil society in many countries challenged militarism, from Europe to the Pacific and beyond. Militarism was identified as the armed wing of patriarchy. Nuclear testing, nuclear bases and deployments were connected and opposed by grassroots and women's groups that networked around the world, setting up other peace camps and campaigning against a spectrum of nuclear-military threats not only as environmental and war risks, but also in terms of human rights, independence (from colonialist oppression in the Pacific, and non-alignment from the NATO and Warsaw military blocs that held sway in the Cold War).

Leadership was diffused and shared, with ideas drawn from many places and people. The Greenham Women's Peace Camp, for example, developed out of a walk from Cardiff to Greenham in August 1981 organised by a group calling themselves 'Women for Life on Earth'. Their initiative not only echoed the Aldermaston marches of the 1950s and '60s, but also drew inspiration from the 1980 Women's Pentagon Action and peace walks that European and Scandinavian groups, including from WILPF, were undertaking to link communities from Western and Eastern European blocs. Evoking the Suffragettes, it was not the walk's leaders but other participants who played the defining role in building and maintaining the peace camp that inspired women around the world to use creative nonviolent actions at nuclear bases, deployment sites, parliaments and other symbols of patriarchy and militarism, with banners that proclaimed "Greenham women are everywhere" and linked the objectives of "nuclear free" and "independent".

Greenham started with one overt request - a televised debate with the Defence Secretary about NATO's 'dual track' decision and deployment of cruise. This reasonable demand was ignored, and after a year of living and protesting at the USAF base in all weathers, Greenham hit the headlines when 35,000 women surrounded the 9 mile perimeter fence on 12 December 1982, the third anniversary of the NATO decision, in an action called "Embrace the Base". Six thousand stayed through a long, dark, frosty night in order to "Close the Base" on a working Monday with a mass blockade of all the gates. Greenham became front page news, with hundreds of women moving to the peace camp and thousands more setting up Greenham support groups in their home towns and countries, heeding the call to "carry Greenham home".⁴ Many more actions followed, from "dancing on the silos" to Women's International Day for Disarmament (now institutionalised on 24 May as an annual day of action), and from mass blockades to occupying significant parts of the base (like the air traffic control tower) or political locations such as parliament, Downing Street and the Ministry of Defence.

As more women passed through Greenham, not only participating in actions at the Women's Peace Camp but also networking with information from their own national and regional struggles, links were explicitly made between Greenham's immediate objective and a wider peace and justice agenda. Greenham women travelled abroad to speak at meetings creating solidarity actions between activists opposing nuclear testing, military and nuclear bases and chemical as well as nuclear weapons deployments, whether foreign, colonial or national. In 1983 thirteen Greenham women worked with the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) on a legal case known as "Greenham Women Against Cruise versus Ronald Reagan and the Joint Chiefs of Staff". They joined with two US Congress members and sought an injunction to prevent the deployment of cruise missiles, arguing that the humanitarian impacts and first use characteristics of cruise and Pershing made these weapons unlawful under US and international law. The US and UK militaries flew cruise missiles into Greenham in November 1983, before the Judge had ruled on the case.⁵ Even so, the case achieved some of its political purpose, inspiring women's peace camps at North

American bases and linking the European calls for disbanding both cold war military alliances (NATO and the Warsaw Pact) and a US-Soviet treaty to ban battlefield atomic weapons and the intermediate-range "Euromissiles" with the demands of the US SANE-FREEZE movement, which called for a freeze on existing US and Soviet nuclear arsenals pending further strategic arms reductions. Meetings were undertaken with Japanese Hibakusha from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and speaking tours organised with survivors and campaigners who were raising awareness of the humanitarian impacts of nuclear colonialism and testing, which led to the founding of Greenham-related groups like "Women Working for a Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific" (WWNFIP). Meanwhile, the experience of living next to this base created a shocking link with women living near military bases across the world, from NATO to Kazakhstan, and Japan to the Philippines, as some Greenham women – especially lesbians – were the targets of sexual and physical attacks from certain military personnel and police. Unsurprisingly such experiences resulted in the anti-nuclear and nonviolent strategies and tactics to connect more explicitly with second wave feminist campaigns opposing all violence against women.

Like most if not all peace movements, Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp was established as a nonviolent campaign, in philosophy as well as tactics. However, it soon became apparent that nonviolence, like militarism, is profoundly gendered. The prevailing male dominated versions of "civil disobedience" and "passive resistance" did not resonate with the lived reality of many women. Sublimating fear and anger is an expected behavioural norm for women under patriarchy, so being passive in the face of violence tends to feed into female stereotypes rather than challenging the purveyors of violence. Unlike Gandhi and Martin Luther King, many women are survivors of domestic and sexual violence. Hence, many of the tenets and techniques of nonviolence taught by male practitioners have served to disempower. To liberate the creativity and power inherent in women's activism, Greenham had to develop a different philosophy and psychology for a feminist praxis of nonviolence that did not suppress anger and fear but channelled them into a powerful challenge to state and individual violence, drawing energy by combining the feminist passion for life and justice with strategies for changing the patriarchal status quo. Greenham's contribution was to demonstrate that nonviolence is not merely the refusal to use violence, but an active, empowering and transformative praxis for challenging, delegitimising and neutralising all forms of personal and political violence.⁶

The first step political demand for a treaty to ban the destabilising "Euromissiles" was achieved when Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev signed the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty on 8 December 1987. By 1992 the missiles had been removed and dismantled, though the nuclear warheads were mostly recycled. By 1993 the USAF base was completely closed, and by 2000, most Greenham had been restored as Common Land, with the nuclear silos standing empty in one corner in case Soviet inspectors should still want to check the complete absence of cruise missiles. Inevitably, the Conservative government gave all credit for the treaty that they had virulently opposed to President Reagan and NATO's "negotiations from strength". But President Gorbachev has explicitly acknowledged the importance of civil society actions in bringing him to the Reykjavik Summit in 1986, citing Greenham women and the US and Russian doctors and scientists who shocked both leaders with their studies on nuclear winter.⁷

As Greenham women dispersed after the INF Treaty, some redoubled efforts to ban nuclear testing, networking with established arms control and nonproliferation NGOs as well as grassroots anti-testing activists in NATO countries and the Pacific. The humanitarian, feminist and environmental analyses and experiences of the 1980s re-energised more traditional CTBT advocacy. When this treaty was finally concluded in 1996, it was due not only to the political and diplomatic decisions of the negotiating governments, but the spectrum of grassroots activism and NGO strategies and advocacy that helped to create the conditions for negotiations, including bringing several of the nuclear-armed states to the table, and promoted key objectives such as the zero yield scope.⁸

Humanitarian disarmament approaches crystallised in the period 1993 to 2008, during which the principles of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) were harnessed by coalitions of governments and civil society activists to create the conditions to negotiate two important treaties that stigmatised, banned and are well on their way to eliminating anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions respectively.⁹ By the time the 2010 NPT Review Conference ended, a small group of diplomats and civil society representatives had embarked on a humanitarian strategy aimed at achieving a near term treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons. Recognising that arms control approaches were providing a cover for modernisation and structured to enable the management rather than elimination of nuclear arsenals, this group transformed a small Australian project of IPPNW that had a great name – the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) – into the principal partner of governments seeking to stigmatise, ban and eliminate nuclear weapons.¹⁰ ICAN now has its main office in Geneva and coordinates over 440 NGOs in 99 countries. In an interesting historical footnote, the ICAN logo is a missile broken across the CND peace symbol.¹¹ With an International Steering Group drawn from disarmament and humanitarian NGOs from Australia to Japan, Latin America and Africa, and from NATO members Norway, UK and the United States, ICAN has mobilized civil society across the world to ensure that their governments participate in the Oslo, Nayarit and Vienna Conferences on the Humanitarian Impacts of Nuclear Weapons (HINW), and voted for various resolutions and humanitarian initiatives at UN and NPT meetings from 2012 onwards. At a time when most non-nuclear governments have plenty of priorities other than nuclear disarmament on their agenda, the awareness and political pressure that ICAN has created around nuclear risks, dangers and consequences – as well as the patient work of local campaigners to get their governments to turn up and vote – have made all the difference.

Like Greenham, the effectiveness of ICAN has depended on the decision to reframe disarmament as a humanitarian and environmental issue. Instead of becoming trapped in state-centred, military-stability arguments such as deterrence, both campaigns have demonstrated how treaty objectives and disarmament strategies can be achieved by grounding advocacy in humanitarian concerns and civil society action. Both these historic approaches recognised and challenged the role of power, status and gender in normalizing and perpetuating weapons and war.¹² By changing the assumptions and value attached to nuclear weapons and deterrence, and by creating international networks and alliances of civil society and middle powers, it is possible to accomplish what the mainstream arms control realists consider to be impossible – a treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons that will change the calculus for the nuclear-dependent states and established political-military interests. The Greenham experience demonstrates that by not adhering to mainstream approaches, a lot can be accomplished in a few years!

¹ China, France, Soviet Union (later Russia), United Kingdom and United States of America.

² See Rebecca Johnson, *Unfinished Business: The negotiation of the CTBT and the end of nuclear testing* (UNIDIR 2009)

³ Greenham Common was nominally a Royal Air Force base, requisitioned during the 1939-45 War, and then leased for use as a nuclear base by the US Airforce. See David Fairhall, *The Story of Greenham Common Ground*, IB Tauris, 2006

⁴ Recognising that most women were not in a position to leave their homes and live full time at this nuclear base, we encouraged women to "carry Greenham home" and to show militaries and governments in all our countries that "Greenham women are everywhere".

⁵ Jane Hickman, 'Greenham Women versus Cruise', and Rebecca Johnson, 'Alice Through the Fence' in A. Paliwala, S Picciotto and M Ruete (eds), *Nuclear Weapons, the Peace Movement and the Law*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 1986). See also Alice Cook & Gwyn Kirk, *Greenham Women Everywhere: Dreams, Ideas and Actions, from the Women's Peace Movement* (London: Pluto Press /Boston: South End Press, 1983)

⁶ See Feminism and Nonviolence Study Group, *Piecing in Together: Feminism & Nonviolence*, 1983; and Amanda Sebestyen (ed.), '68, '78, '88: *From Women's Liberation to Feminism*, (Prism Press, 1988), especially Rebecca Johnson's contribution on Greenham Common.

⁷ Fairhall, op. cit. *The Story of Greenham Common Ground*, IB Tauris, 2006

⁸ See Rebecca Johnson, *Unfinished Business: The negotiation of the CTBT and the end of nuclear testing* (UNIDIR 2009); and Rebecca Johnson, 'Advocates and Activists: Conflicting Approaches on Nonproliferation and the Test Ban Treaty' in Ann Florini (ed), *The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society*, (2000)

⁹ See M.A. Cameron, R.J. Lawson and B.W. Tomlin (eds.), *To Walk Without Fear: The Global Movement to Ban Landmines* (1998); Richard Price, "Reversing the Gun Sights: Transnational Civil Society Targets Landmines", *International Organization* 53:3 (1998) pp 613-644; Ethan A Nadelmann, "Global prohibition regimes: the evolution of norms in international society", *International Organization* 44:4 (Autumn 1990), pp 479-526; and John Borrie, *Unacceptable Harm: A History of How the Treaty to Ban Cluster Munitions Was Won*, (2009).

¹⁰ This quote is from Federal President of Austria, Heinz Fischer in his speech to the High Level Meeting of the UN General Assembly on Nuclear Disarmament, New York, 26 September 2013 "*Nuclear weapons should be stigmatized, banned and eliminated before they abolish us.*" Austria has been a leading government in nuclear prohibition strategies since 2010, and held the Vienna Conference in December 2014 which initiated the international Humanitarian Pledge.

¹¹ An original design by Peter Kennard that had been made for anti-Trident demos in the 1990s and was revived, with permission, as the ICAN logo.

¹² OpenDemocracy has published a series of contemporaneous articles from me on the humanitarian disarmament initiatives to ban nuclear weapons since 2010, including through a gendered lens that takes a historical perspective in critiques of non-proliferation, arms control and nuclear weapons modernization. For links to the range of articles, see <https://www.opendemocracy.net/author/rebecca-johnson> .