Introduction

Between Accidental Armageddons and Winnable Wars: Nuclear Threats and Nuclear Fears in the 1980s

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In 1977 the board game "Fulda Gap: The First Battle of the Next War" hit the shelves in the United States. Playing on the central geostrategic role of West Germany in the Cold War, publicity for the game stated, "If war ever again comes to Europe, the major Soviet thrust must be aimed at the powerful US forces guarding southern Germany. In order to breach NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] defenses and break through to the heart of Europe, the armored columns of the Warsaw Pact must force their way through the Fulda Gap."[1] As a war simulation on the brigade level, the game underscored the vulnerability of US troops to a Soviet advance. Through its two main scenarios – the "Tripwire" (a Soviet surprise attack) and "Advance Warning" (partial mobilization/redeployment of NATO forces), as well as their variants "Warsaw Pact/NATO Disintegration" – it also reminded its players of the drastic consequences of war, which might include the use of chemical, biological, and even nuclear weapons.

Only a few years later, the military strategy and security policy of the superpowers had vastly overtaken the premises of the game. The introduction of the Soviet SS-20 and the planned stationing of Pershing II and Cruise Missiles as NATO's response – the policy centerpieces of what contemporaries perceived as a "second Cold War" – intensified both the speed of any potential conflict and its destructive impact on Europe.[2]

The choice to deploy the Pershing missiles represented a fundamental diplomatic departure, working against years of détente efforts, from West Germany's *Ostpolitik* to East-West disarmament and human rights agreements (1972: SALT I; 1975: Helsinki Accords; 1979: SALT II). Alarmed by the 1975 introduction of the SS-20, the NATO Council

in December 1979 ratified the "Double-Track Decision," followed in short succession by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The NATO document called for negotiations with the Soviet Union to correct the strategic imbalance and to establish a mutual limitation on intermediate-range ballistic missiles. Should these talks fail, NATO would immediately undertake a modernization of its nuclear arsenal, including the production of Pershing II and Cruise Missiles and their placement in Western Europe.[3] As negotiations sputtered, due both to the Soviet Union's refusal to withdraw the SS-20s and, at least in part, to the West's weak interest in an agreement, NATO initiated the rearmament plan, further heightening superpower tensions.

Concomitant with this escalation was a strategic shift in US security policy from the concept of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) prevailing in the early decades of the Cold War to a "countervailing strategy" expressed in Presidential Directive 59 in July of 1980. The reorientation now allowed for the possibility of a winnable nuclear war, especially if confined to the European theater. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 reconfirmed the widespread impression of a departure from the traditional balance-of-power doctrine to a more aggressive phase of global competition between the two superpowers and a remilitarization of East-West conflict.[4] Reagan presented his proposed Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) as defensive and even antinuclear, as it promised to deter a nuclear attack. But, as critics loudly noted, it also made an intercontinental nuclear war newly viable, insofar as one side might now "win" by knocking its opponents' missiles out of the sky (or upper atmosphere). In addition, Reagan included Colin S. Gray, a key architect of the winnable nuclear war doctrine, among his top military advisors.

These developments greatly increased public fears of nuclear calamity. Anxiety abounded throughout the world during the 1980s, spanning mass culture, the literary world, the news and entertainment media, religious and civil society institutions, activist enclaves, alternative arts scenes, government bodies, and the highest echelons of security policy.[5]

Most notable, in the cultural realm, was the made-for-television American movie *The Day After*, which first aired on November 20, 1983, to nearly 100 million viewers. In gripping melodrama, it envisioned the cataclysmic destruction brought on by a full-scale nuclear war and the dismal life for its survivors. The film incited torrents of commentary from pundits, security experts, and scientists. Activists, for their part, used it as an organizing tool, holding screenings in college dormitories, community centers, and churches. The movie was occasion for probably the greatest

attention Americans had paid to the prospect of nuclear war since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

Indeed, the movie provoked such alarming reactions even before its screening that the American Broadcasting Corporation organized a post-broadcast discussion with heavyweights like Secretary of State George Shultz, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, as well as journalist William F. Buckley and author/activist Elie Wiesel.[6] Successfully or not, the panel tried to at least soften public fears. The film made an impression on President Ronald Reagan himself, who mused in his diary that it was "powerfully done," "very effective & left me greatly depressed." He wondered whether it would "be of help to the 'anti nukes' or not" and was resolved "to do all we can to have a deterrent & to see there is never a nuclear war."[7] In that sense Reagan may even have felt confirmed and legitimized in what he had declared as the ultimate goal of his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), namely "to give us the means of rendering these nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete."[8]

The film had international resonance as well. This was true, above all, in West Germany, as both the quintessential "frontline" state in a potential nuclear conflict and home to a spirited peace movement with roots in environmental and student activism, as well as prior antinuclear campaigns. The movie's German distribution company held an exclusive screening for journalists and members of the German parliament before its broad release.[9] Hitting German theaters one month after its US airing, the film attracted 3.6 million viewers in its first five weeks; its gross of $50 million equaled the US box-office revenues for the blockbuster *Star Wars: The Return of the Jedi* during the same period. Capturing the symbiosis of escalating geopolitical tensions and public worry – as well as the American penchant for exporting both its power and its protest culture – *Die Zeit* said of the film's German release, "Aren't they wonderful, these Americans? They sent us the Pershing and *The Day After* – the bomb and the [survival] manual at the same time."[10]

The Day After was only the most prominent cultural representation of a nuclear showdown in a time-period saturated with them, on both sides of the Atlantic. The 1983 techno-thriller *War Games* further elevated the atomic threat to the level of mainstream debate. *When the Wind Blows*, the 1986 animated British film with a soundtrack featuring David Bowie and Pink Floyd's Roger Waters, achieved cult status as a dour, antinuclear polemic. Precedent had been set for this genre of doomsday verité (as opposed to the more allegorical "disaster film" or sci-fi dystopia) by the

time of the release in 1979 of *The China Syndrome*, which depicted a meltdown at a commercial nuclear power plant. In an apparent case of life imitating art, just twelve days after its release there was a severe accident at a nuclear reactor at Three Mile Island (TMI) in Pennsylvania. The film, the panicked reaction to TMI, and the fierce protests against nuclear power already taking place helped establish another hallmark of the era: the twinning of concerns about nuclear weapons and nuclear power in a novel mix of atomic-age fears.

Both European and American musicians took up the nuclear issue, whether in apocalyptic musical visions or passionate appeals for peace. The Clash's "London Calling," the title song of its seminal 1979 album, described a nuclear attack in England's capital.[11] Kate Bush's "Breathing" (1980) imagined survival after an atomic explosion: "Breathing the fall-out in, / Out in, out in, out in, out in. / We've lost our chance. / We're the first and the last, ooh, / After the blast. / Chips of Plutonium / Are twinkling in every lung."[12] Such British groups as Ultravox, Frankie Goes to Hollywood, Nik Kershaw, and Pink Floyd released their own antinuke compositions. Sting's 1985 ballad "Russians" made a powerful plea for geopolitical rapprochement, declaring that "In Europe and America, there's a growing feeling of hysteria" and wondering "How can I save my little boy from Oppenheimer's deadly toy." "99 Red Balloons," the antiwar pop anthem by West Germany's Nena, instantly topped the West German charts in 1983, with the German original even making it to second place on the American Billboard Hot 100. American musicians mobilized against nuclear power as well. In 1979, A-list acts, including Paul Simon, Crosby, Stills and Nash, and Bruce Springsteen, held a series of now-famous No Nukes benefit concerts in New York City. The handsome triple-album from the concerts featured pages of information about nuclear hazards.[13]

In more traditional media, *Time* magazine – a standard-bearer of American journalism – made the nuclear threat a recurring cover story from 1979 to 1985. In his 1982 bestseller *The Fate of the Earth*, US journalist Jonathan Schell detailed the danger that nuclear warfare posed to the survival of humankind and the planet, while West German author Udo Rabsch's 1983 novel *Julius oder Der Schwarze Sommer* (Julius or The Black Summer) depicted the psychological anguish of the renewed arms race. The novel's nuclear-obsessed protagonist "had been preparing himself for the end of the world for years. His private library on the apocalypse filled an entire IKEA bookcase." After the city of Stuttgart is hit by an atomic bomb, he experiences a sense of relief, steeped in irony:

"He knew that it had finally happened. It was all good now. Only one moment longer, and he would have gone crazy."[14]

These cinematic, musical, and literary expressions of nuclear anxieties both emerged from and bolstered a transnational antinuclear protest movement. Producing massive demonstrations, the movement shaped the political and cultural landscape in the United States and much of Europe. On October 10, 1981, in the biggest peace protest Germany had ever seen, at least 250,000 demonstrators of diverse social, political, and cultural backgrounds gathered in Bonn to protest the escalating arms race. Two weeks later, two hundred thousand people rallied in Brussels, home to the headquarters of NATO. On November 21, nearly four hundred thousand demonstrators rallied in Amsterdam; held in the Netherlands, a country of minor geostrategic significance, the protest indicated how deeply nuclear fears had touched Western Europeans.

Though on a lesser scale, antinuclear protest emerged even in Eastern European countries, whose peace activism helped pave the way for the mass democracy movements of the end of the 1980s.[15] In the fall of 1983 alone, a total of about five million people, mostly in Western Europe, took part in demonstrations against the so-called Euromissiles. In the United States, more than a million people participated in a Nuclear Weapons Freeze demonstration on June 12, 1982, in New York City. The gathering remains perhaps the largest political demonstration in a single locale in US history. Throughout these years of protest, an elaborate infrastructure of think tanks, NGOs, grassroots groups, and peace communities agitated for the freeze, reduction, or abolition of nuclear arsenals. Antinuke militants, often from the Catholic left, engaged in "high-risk" activism at nuclear sites and at the offices of weapons manufacturers, despite the threat of lengthy prison sentences. The Cold War of the 1980s, if centrally defined by superpower tensions, was also an era of unprecedented anti-nuclear protest.

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Nuclear Threats, Nuclear Fear, and the Cold War of the 1980s brings together scholarship from the United States and Europe to address responses to both the arms race of the 1980s and the ascent of nuclear energy as a second, controversial dimension of the nuclear age. Diverse in its topics and disciplinary approaches, the volume is varied as well in its core themes and ambitions.

Most broadly, this volume contributes to the emerging historiography of the 1980s by focusing on an underresearched aspect of the decade.[16]

The era's nuclear tensions have been addressed by scholars mostly from the standpoint of security studies, focused on the geostrategic deliberations of political elites and at the level of state policy. Yet nuclear anxieties, as the essays document, were so pervasive that they profoundly shaped the era's culture, its habits of mind, and its politics, far beyond the domain of policy. As during the "high Cold War" of the 1950s and early 1960s – and after an interregnum dominated by proxy conflicts between East and West in Vietnam and other "Third World" hotspots – the nuclear standoff between the Americans and the Soviets served in the 1980s as the alpha and omega of so much global politics.[17] Renewed worries over an actual nuclear war, amplified by new scientific models spelling out the grisly consequences of nuclear conflict, made fear itself and a perpetual sense of crisis hallmarks of the era. This volume seeks to make palpable that elusive, ambient – yet essential – quality of the times.[18]

Nuclear Threats, Nuclear Fear also chronicles, following another major thread, the destiny of protest movements in the Western world after their assumed heyday in the 1960s. The 1980s are both commonly recorded and remembered as a period of social movement decline, dominated by the electoral ascent of the political right and the retreat of many on the left from activism. The administrations of Ronald Reagan in the United States, Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, and Helmut Kohl in the Federal Republic of Germany are thought to typify this rightward turn in both domestic and foreign policy, with the latter defined by a newly resolute Western stand against Soviet communism. Ideologically tinged, much popular memory of the era credits President Reagan's harsh stand toward the Soviets – and his aggressive embrace of a new arms race especially, which further damaged the Soviet economy – as key causes of the collapse of communism. Domestic political conflict, according to such portrayals, concerned mostly "cultural" issues such as reproductive rights and questions of diversity (in the United States at least), as well as debates over the size and scope of the welfare state, raging throughout the developed world.

Another, more complex narrative exists, as this volume seeks to elucidate. The mobilization against nuclear arms and nuclear power in the 1980s are among the most robust social movements in human history, likely exceeding in its size international opposition to the Vietnam War or any other global cause.[19] And though based in the political left, with organizational roots reaching back to early public responses to Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Ban the Bomb efforts of the 1950s and 60s, the movement cut substantially across ideological

lines, uniting diverse actors in promoting a "culture of life" against nuclear threats.

Nuclear Threats, Nuclear Fear seeks to capture the distinct qualities of antinuclear activism within the evolution of social movements. On one level, antinuclear campaigns were marked by the professionalization of its brand of activism. Expert advocates such as the Union of Concerned Scientists, lobbying organs such as SANE/Freeze, and countless think tanks and NGOs worldwide were drivers of debates over nuclear issues, wielding considerable influence on at least the articulation of policy options. As local governing bodies declared their jurisdictions "nuclear-free zones," career politicians became antinuclear leaders as well.

By the same token, the antinuclear movement was very much animated by grassroots activism. Opposition to nuclear energy in particular bred a new kind of "accidental activist," motivated less by ideology than common-sense resistance to perceived threats to health, home, and family. Such efforts, moreover, might feature skepticism toward experts and science more generally, as well as a new mistrust of politicians thought to be in collusion with industry and dangerously out of touch with the public. In this sense, the nuclear anxiety of the late 1970s and 1980s further cast suspicion on establishment authority, whose credibility had already been damaged by the saga of the Vietnam War, in which so many government claims proved untrue, and by the corrosive malfeasance of the Watergate scandal. Significantly, women organizing as women were among the most spirited and influential antinuclear activists. Whether appealing to women's maternal identities as guardians of the species and the planet, or to the presumed affinity of women for peace, they made gender a vital trope in antinuclear discourse and a basis for mobilization. Paradoxically, both feminism, versions of which posited women as more peaceful than men and averse to ego-driven militarism, and conventional views on femininity, which celebrated traditional motherhood as the great protector against the predations of out-of-touch elites, rallied to the antinuclear cause.

Antinuclear activists in the United States and Europe, whether building on the tactics of the civil rights, anti–Vietnam War, or student movements of the 1960s, also practiced nonviolent, extralegal resistance on a massive – and historically underappreciated – scale. Opposition to the building of nuclear power plants in Seabrook, New Hampshire, and Diablo Canyon, California, produced among the largest civil disobedience campaigns in US history.[20] In Wyhl, West Germany, tens of thousands of Germans occupied the proposed site of a nuclear power plant, preventing

its construction. During the 1980s the same happened in the Bavarian town of Wackersdorf, the proposed site of a nuclear reprocessing plant, before the project was given up as politically unfeasible in 1989. With such tactics, antinuclear activists lent a radical edge to expanding understandings of nonviolence as a comprehensive ethic that was politically and spiritually opposed to nuclear arms, nuclear power, and what they considered a broader "culture of death." In addition, such activism kept alive civil disobedience within the repertoire of civic action, for rediscovery and reinvigoration by subsequent movements like HIV/AIDS activism, the alter-globalization struggle of the late 1990s, and the campaign against fossil fuels in the present day. Documenting this aspect of antinuclear protest, *Nuclear Threats, Nuclear Fear* explores legacies of dissent within larger narratives of public engagement and civic action. Religious opposition to the arms race gave great moral weight to the antinuclear movement while enriching, especially in the "high-risk activism" of America's Catholic left, traditions of prophetic moral witness. Recognizing the spiritual strain of antinuclear activism, the book speaks as well to efforts to define the political imperatives of faith and reimagine religion for the nuclear age.

The era's antinuclear dissent both presupposed and reacted against pronuclear sentiment, which experienced its own surge. Such sentiment coursed through the highest levels of establishment politics, most obviously in the administration and policies of Ronald Reagan. In the United States, a parallel network of think tanks promoted hawkish stances on nuclear issues, echoing a defense industry ever eager to develop and manufacture new armaments in response to new, perceived threats. Pro-nuclear feelings had a popular dimension as well. Indeed, much of the appeal of President Reagan stemmed from his rededication to the anti-Communist crusade and promise to restore, following the fiasco of the Vietnam War, American military prowess and "greatness" in the international arena. Above all, Reagan's uncompromising stand toward the Soviets in a newly escalating arms race epitomized this resolve and catalyzed a resurgent Cold War patriotism.[21]

The essays in this volume understand pronuclear sentiment – whether at the level of policy or public feeling, elite or grassroots opinion, and whether directed against the military or the civil use of nuclear energy – to be the backdrop against which antinuclear politics existed. The pronuclear position is, in a sense, the story of Reagan's policy footing and the ascent of the political right – topics thoroughly engaged in existing literature on the 1980s. The volume therefore addresses those narratives

only indirectly, focusing mostly on the development of an antinuclear counterpolitics and culture.

Another major theme of *Nuclear Threats, Nuclear Fear* is the very interpenetration during the 1980s of politics and culture with respect to nuclear issues. Its essays attest to the vital role of culture in communicating and popularizing antinuclear messages, with bearing on transformations in culture in the 1980s as a whole. Once again, the 1960s are an initial point of reference.[22] Many of the artists rallying against nuclear weapons and energy, such as Crosby, Stills, and Nash, were long identified with the '60s-era counterculture and known for taking up political causes. Punk rock, as the great rebel genre of 1970s and 1980s music (within broadly white culture), inveighed against the nuclear militarism of President Reagan and the larger Reagan-Thatcher juggernaut.

Yet the 1980s also featured antinuclear-themed works from performers such as Sting, not conventionally thought of as "political" (and even less as creatures of the left). Commanding enormous pop audiences, they expressed themselves substantially through the new medium of the music video, conveyed through a new entertainment apparatus, MTV (Music Television). MTV itself became a major cultural institution of a kind that scarcely exists any longer in our current age of mp3 players, digital downloads, and the fragmentation of the cultural marketplace into innumerable niches. As a cultural commons with mass viewership, the network gave the political messages of its pop icons enormous reach and resonance. (The 1985 Live Aid benefit concert for famine relief in Africa, broadcast in full on MTV and England's BBC, set an unsurpassed standard of celebrity activism as cultural spectacle.)[23] So, too, American network television, which had often censored even oblique expressions of opposition to the Vietnam War, embraced controversies over nuclear policy, both generating and shaping public debate. Political dissent, as this volume details, had clearly moved from the countercultural margins to the mass culture mainstream.

Culture was vital to the antinuclear movement in a second sense, insofar as activists tried to build their communities of resistance as a far-reaching alternative to a mainstream culture thought largely to celebrate – whatever its strains of dissent – militarism and war. Peace encampments against nuclear weapons and the mass occupations of proposed sites of nuclear reactors were prime venues for elaborating the values, aesthetics, and existential demands of this oppositional culture. As investments in that culture grew, the movement experienced a sharp version of the tension – common among social movements – between the

emphasis on prefigurative politics and personal transformation and the goal of building a maximally large base and elite support to effect actual policy change.

This brings us to a related dimension of this volume: assessments of the impact of antinuclear activism on geopolitics, security policy, and the nuclear power industry.[24] Such determinations engage persisting methodological issues in diverse disciplines – of great concern to activists as well – over how to measure the efficacy of political protest. For all the official handwringing and activist sound and fury over nuclear perils in the 1980s, it remains unclear what the consequences of antinuclear protest were. Did world leaders ultimately listen to the great swaths of their terrified populations and bend policy to the public will? Or did the narrow geopolitics of the Cold War, executed by rarified circles of world leaders only weakly accountable to their publics, drive policy? Rather than proposing definitive answers to these questions, the essays in this volume seek to pose the questions anew and consider highly mobilized public opinion and civic action as variables within complex sociopolitical processes.[25]

A final theme of this book, touched on by nearly all of its essays, is the quality and texture of nuclear worries in the 1980s. These ranged from fears of "accidental Armageddons" persisting from the first decades of the Cold War to intensifying anxiety stemming from the apparent belief of a new generation of leaders in "winnable wars." The volume posits these as two poles within a continuum of fear. Such fear both reflected and addressed not just the geopolitical hazards of the moment, or even the constitutive perils of the nuclear age, but also humanity's Janus-faced relationship to technology writ large.

Fear over nuclear calamity is as old as the advent of nuclear arms, spiked by the Soviet acquisition of the bomb and the rapid development of the hydrogen bomb to replace its vastly weaker, atomic predecessor.[26] For the two decades following the nuclear equilibrium reached around 1960 as a result of the experience of the Berlin and Cuban Missile Crises, the prevailing security doctrine between the superpowers was deterrence based on the morbid wages of mutually assured destruction (MAD). Given the suicidal irrationality of a nuclear war, any nuclear attack – even if ordered by political or military leaders – could be nothing that its perpetrator (unless a malevolent, rogue actor) ultimately wanted. The presumption of a mutually shared rationality placed nuclear war at the far margins of willful, political calculation.

The postwar world was nonetheless haunted by the prospect of nuclear war, instigated by varieties of accidents. One possibility was a literal,