

Anti-Nuclear Movement in Europe

The Pull-Back From Armageddon

Bob Brubaker

The massive and still-growing anti-nuclear movement in Europe has become a serious threat to the avatars of destruction who, through the auspices of NATO, are attempting to turn Europe into a nuclear battlefield by deploying Pershing II and cruise missiles on European soil. An American diplomat in Bonn recently warned the readers of the international edition of *Newsweek* (8/24/81): "If the peace movement isn't defused soon, we might see the same kind of threat to cruise and Pershing installations after 1983 that you see directed against nuclear energy plants today." The implications of this shocking development were clearly spelled out by the worried diplomat: "We're talking about a serious threat to NATO planning as a whole."

The same *Newsweek* article explained that "the anti-nuclear umbrella is wide enough to cover anarchists and socialists, ecologists and religious congregations." "The movement's foot soldiers," the article continued, "come mostly from among Europe's international corps of alienated youth. From urban squatters in Berlin and Zurich to unemployed trashers in London, the restless young people scorn the values of their industrial society—and fear for their lives in the nuclear age."

Political opportunists and those with a short memory are trying to scapegoat Reagan as the cause of America's growing militarism. But this myopic view ignores the basic continuity of American foreign policy regardless of who is in the White House. In fact, it was the decision made by NATO in 1979 to deploy 108 Pershing II and 464 cruise missiles in Europe, as well as President Carter's Directive 59 order to realign U.S. nuclear strategy in accordance with the development of this weaponry—it having the capacity to destroy Soviet missiles in their silos and allow the waging of a so-called "limited" nuclear war through "pinpoint strikes" on Soviet military and command targets—which provided the original impetus for the growth of the European peace movement. (See "Yes, We Have No Mañanas," FE #303, October 20, 1980.)

Reagan's saber-rattling militarism confirms the apt judgment of *The Nation* magazine that his policies make nuclear war "marginally more likely," though this should not blind us to the harmonious interests of the political parties or lead us to the absurd calculus (as it does *The Nation*) that some politician is worth supporting against his or her equally (or marginally more) pathological counterpart. Not merely the pathology of politicians but the interactions of the competing Soviet and American empires, and the internal logic of "deterrence" strategies, are responsible for the drift toward nuclear war. It is far too late in the game for anyone to still have illusions in this regard.

The European peace movement has taken on such dimensions as to represent, in *Newsweek's* judgment, numbers "approaching a silent majority against the bomb." Fear that the situation is getting out of hand has led to swift verbal retaliation by the Reagan administration, which accused opponents of the neutron warhead of "carrying the propaganda ball for the Soviet Union."

A campaign in the media to ridicule the motives of the movement has also made its appearance. Some examples of this campaign: an editorial in the *New York Times* in which it was claimed that the European protesters have forgotten that nuclear weapons and the "balance of terror" are "the sources of peace;" a column by Walter

Laqueur which noted that “America cannot re-educate European youth who seem to have been lost—temporarily one hopes—to the cause of freedom;” Andrew Greeley’s syndicated column where he called European youth “spoiled brats” who adhere to no values other than a vague sympathy for ecology and peace; and William Safire’s attack in his syndicated column on the “wave of isolationism sweeping across Europe” supposedly aimed at limiting destruction in a nuclear war to the superpowers’ countries, and whose members “have persuaded themselves that the danger is not from Soviet expansionism but from both superpowers wanting to play war on their soil. From that nonsensical premise, they reason it would be best to make it impossible to defend Europe, and so demand that we not deploy the tactical nuclear weapons that give us a chance.”

These columnists’ absurd remarks only add more force to the convictions of the anti-nuclear movement. For Safire and the others, it might become necessary to destroy Europe in order to save it; an easy conclusion when come to from armchairs in the United States, far from the deadly consequences should a “limited” nuclear war take place in Europe.

Unlike these writers, the European people are posing fundamental questions: why should their lives hang in the balance with every step of the superpowers’ danse macabre; and what is the word for a “defense,” which in the event of its employment, would mean their certain annihilation?

In “A Letter to America” (*The Nation*, 2/24/81), British social historian and anti-nuclear activist E.P. Thompson offers this rationale for nuclear disarmament: “The current chatter about theater of tactical nuclear war is not a sophisticated variant of the old vocabulary of deterrence; it is directly at variance with that vocabulary. For it is founded on the notion that either of the two superpowers might engage, to its own advantage, in a limited nuclear war which could be kept below the threshold at which retribution would be visited on its own soil.

“Thus it is thought by persons in the Pentagon that a theater war might be confined to Europe, in which, to be sure, America’s NATO allies would be obliterated, but in which immense damage would also be inflicted upon Russia west of the Urals, while the soil of the United States remained immune. (In such a scenario it is even supposed that President Reagan and Mr. Brezhnev would be on the hot line to each other while Europe scorched, threatening ultimate intercontinental ballistic retribution, but at last making peace.) This has been seen as a great victory for the West, and if world wide nuclear war seems to be ultimately inevitable, then the sooner that can be aborted by having a little theater war the better.

“Cruise and Pershing missiles are committing: strategically and also politically. They place Europeans, with finality, within the games-plan of the Pentagon. In each and every crisis, a Pentagon finger will be on the West European trigger: one barrel may be aimed at Russia, but the other will be aimed at Europe’s own head. It is for this reason that Senator Nino Pasti, formerly an Italian member of the NATO Military Committee and Deputy Supreme Commander for NATO Nuclear Affairs, has declared: ‘I have no doubt that the tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Europe represent the worst danger for the peoples of the continent. In plain words, the tactical nuclear weapon would be employed in the view of NATO to limit war to Europe. Europe is to be transformed into a ‘nuclear Maginot line’ for the defense of the United States.’”

Like all fragmentary attempts to oppose this society, the anti-nuclear movement is vulnerable to the criticism that it attacks only the symptoms and not the disease. To demand only that power retract one of its claws, or further, to even shape one’s actions in the form of a demand, is to engage in a mystifying dialogue which result is to confer legitimacy on institutions whose existence is the precondition and source of our massive predicament.

Still, the anti-nuclear peace movement is an affirmation of life over death. It implicitly cuts to the heart of our world, exposing the tissue of lies—the need for expertise, the awesome and unchallengeable “rationality” of the system (e.g. “the system is the solution”), the “promise” of technological progress—that comprises the support medium of the technological society. These people are crying out that their lives are too precious to be left to the experts.

It would be easy to conclude, contrary to the preceding, that the anti-nuclear movement is the captive of established political interests who have no desire to actually confront the social forces which dominate our lives. The list of trade unions, communist parties, church groups, and national governments supporting the movement’s aims is sufficient to give pause to any exaggerated optimism. But two points need to be made about this argument.

First, E.P. Thompson’s observation seems salient: a reduction of tensions in Europe, a pull-back from nuclear Armageddon, could create a political space in both Western and Eastern Europe for genuinely radical movements.

The East/West conflict provides much of the legitimating glue keeping the conflicting powers intact. A relaxation of tension in Europe could explode the rationale and legitimacy of repression in Eastern Europe. This could further provide major encouragement to radical currents in East Bloc countries, who might then seek cooperative efforts with their counterparts in the West.

Second, the movement is so large that it is doubtful the political leaders can maintain a sure grip on it. Like the anti-war movements of the '60s, its sheer size and great variety of participants militates against its control by politicians.

Our brief visit to the nuclear war convocation at Wayne State was a sobering experience which nevertheless proved of value as a contrast to what is probably the nature of the movement in Europe. Controlled from start to finish by university bureaucrats and professional peace groups, this convocation was intended to encourage passivity. *The South End* quoted invited speaker Rear Admiral Eugene J. Carroll Jr. as saying: "I am not a great proponent of demonstrations, even if it is on a subject that's this important. We have to rely on our elected representatives to get the job done." The "experts" spoke unchallenged, and our feeble protests were met by the admonishments of one of the organizers who said: "People are here to listen and learn, not disrupt"

Undoubtedly, the passivity promoted at the convocation was due to its origins among the human wreckage of the professional organizers. It is no less certain that, in the event of a truly massive anti-nuclear movement, these people would be swept aside in a moment.

Likewise, the European movement seems at least in part comprised of "uncontrollables" who are thumbing their noses at the goals of the politicians. The apparent fact that the anti-nuclear movement dovetails with rioting, squatting, and other such wholesome activities lends force to this impression. The "alienated youth" behind these actions are proving that subversion is not dead, that in the midst of a moribund society new life is stirring. In their spontaneous and incandescent activities, in their refusal of a world poised on the brink of annihilation, reside our best hopes for the future, for any future at all.

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