

Eckart Conze, Martin Klimke, Jeremy Varon, eds. *Nuclear Threats, Nuclear Fear and the Cold War of the 1980s*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 386 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-13628-1.

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Nuclear Anxiety and Its Effect on Society, Culture, and Politics during the Second Cold War

Starting with the seminal work of Lawrence S. Wittner with his trilogy, *The Struggle Against the Bomb*, the development and the social, political, and cultural impact of antinuclear movements has aroused a considerable interest from historians, leading to a fruitful debate on the role of no-nukes protest movements in shaping politics and societies during the so-called nuclear age.[1]

Nuclear Threats, Nuclear Fear and the Cold War of the 1980s is a well-written and well-researched collective volume edited by Eckart Conze, Martin Klimke, and Jeremy Varon which is located within this historiographical debate, focusing in particular on the 1980s. The fifteen essays, exploiting archival resources, illustrate convincingly how, during this pivotal decade, the idea of a friendly atom was replaced with “nuclear anxieties” (p. 6) that affected profoundly the society, the culture, and even the realm of high politics.[2] Furthermore, they show how the different strands of the antinuclear movement, which was dormant after the signing of the Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963, experienced a resurgence at the end of the 1970s. In the 1980s indeed no-nukes protest campaigns spread across Europe, the United States, and Japan because of the renewed fear of a nuclear war between the two superpowers and because

of the emergence of a new ecological awareness. The book emphasizes that the collapse of détente and the development of the so-called second Cold War, with all the talk about a winnable and survivable nuclear war, together with environmental concerns over radioactive contamination, led to nuclear anxieties that permeated the cultural, political, and social realms of Western societies.

The essays are devoted to two main research lines. The first is aimed at showing how in the 1980s nuclear anxieties “were so pervasive that they profoundly shaped the era’s culture, its habits of mind, and its politics, far beyond the domain of policy” (p. 6). The second is instead dedicated to an analysis of the kaleidoscopic antinuclear protest movement that reemerged forcefully at the end of the 1970s with a double aim: fighting against the nuclear arms race but also against the civilian nuclear industry, considered as hazardous as the constant proliferation of atomic weapons. In this way no-nukes dissent, fostered by “not only spontaneous movements but also well-established organizations such as churches and left-wing parties,” shaped a new kind of challenge for governments, showing the connection between high and low politics and domestic and foreign policy in the United States, Europe, and Japan (p. 316).

The essays are organized around four main thematic areas that intersect with each other: the definition and the narrative construction of the atomic menace posed by the military and the commercial nuclear power industry; the echo of the atomic age in the cultural and artistic production; an analysis of grassroots and transnational no-nukes campaigns; and the impact of protest movements on governments, political parties, and international institutions. The book thus provides a wide-ranging account on the antinuclear dissent of the 80s, underlining the pervasiveness of the nuclear fear and its profound impact on society and politics.

So far as the perception of the nuclear menace is concerned, the book discusses the debate on the nuclear winter scenario elaborated by Carl Sagan and the TTAPS team.[3] The essay by Wilfried Mausbach illustrates how, with the description of the catastrophic consequences of lowering temperatures produced by a limited nuclear exchange, “the protest against the arms race squarely arrived in the field of environmentalism” (p. 43). The idea that the criticism of nuclear technology was rooted also in environmental concerns is further strengthened by the analysis of citizen’s reaction in the wake of the Three Mile Island accident. The worried reaction of residents to the peril posed by radiological contamination and their alliance with pacifist organizations questioned “a Cold War logic that drew a sharp boundary between power plants and bombs,” shattering the idea that “American civilians would be magically inoculated against radiological dangers” (p. 74).

Moreover the book stresses that the no-nukes dissent of the 80s acted at a double level. On the one hand it was driven by grassroots activists, genuinely worried about the effects of radiation on their health, such as the case of protests at the Wyhl reactor construction site in Germany or the local coalitions which developed in the United States to protest against nuclear power plants, like the Clamshell or the Abalone alliance. On the oth-

er side the fight, especially against the most frightful aspect of nuclear technology, that is, the atomic arms race, was conducted by national peace organizations that tried to influence national policy-makers but at the same time attempted to act at the transnational level. As emerges from the book, one of the most relevant example is the case of the initiative European Nuclear Disarmament (END) that “was only one of many Western peace groups whose members actively spread ideas and tactics across borders in the 1980s” (p. 228).

The last section of the book discusses the impact of the no-nukes upheaval on politics, addressing “how nuclear anxieties challenged the basic tenets of domestic and foreign policy and the impact of the peace movement on geopolitics” (p. 16). In this regard the essays underline that while French public opinion was “globally cautious about antinuclear movements” (p. 331), in the United States and in Germany no-nukes groups enjoyed a wide degree of public support, fostering a public debate on the nuclear danger. In the United States, the success of no-nukes claims within different segments of the American society forced the Ronald Reagan administration to launch a huge campaign to counter the antinuclear campaign and to make “important alterations in its nuclear weapons policy” (pp. 279-280).[3] In the German Federal Republic, too, the movement’s impact was tangible, pressing the Social Democratic Party of Germany to change its position on nuclear matters and leading the chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, to soften his position on the euro-missiles deployment. Finally, the book makes the valid point that the no-nukes upheaval overlapped with the institutionalization of the G7 summits, whose “participants were aware of the growing uneasiness, which was felt among the Western public and sought a stage where they could appear as responsible leaders of the Western world” trying to assure global security and stability (p. 348).

The essays persuasively depict how, from the end of the 1970s, the public consensus on nuclear

technology was replaced by a deep fear of a nuclear annihilation. This public mood affected Western culture, leading to the rebirth of pacifist and environmentalist antinuclear movements and to a critique of Cold War security strategies and paradigms of development based on an ever-expanding consumerist society that imperiled the global ecosystem. The book therefore sheds new light on a relevant phenomenon of the last phase of the Cold War, pointing to research themes that definitely need further exploration.

Notes

[1]. Lawrence S. Wittner, *One World or None. A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement Through 1953* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), *Resisting the Bomb. A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1954-1970* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), and *Toward Nuclear Abolition. A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1971 to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). See also Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Trans-national Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

[2]. On the cultural effects of nuclear weapons see Paul Boyer, *Fallout. A Historian Reflects on America's Half-Century Encounter with Nuclear Weapons* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998); and Margot A. Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

[3]. TTAPS is the acronym for the names of the scientists involved in the nuclear winter study: R. P. Turco, O. B. Toon, T. P. Ackerman, J. B. Pollack, and Carl Sagan.

[4]. On the US antinuclear movement in the 1980s see also Angela Santese, "Ronald Reagan, the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign and the Nuclear scare of the 1980s," *The International History Review* 39 (2017): 496-520.

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