

PEACE THROUGH PROTEST?

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Lawrence S. Wittner. *Confronting the Bomb: a Short History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement*. (Stanford Nuclear Age Series.) Stanford, CA: Stanford U. P., 2009. Pp. xv, 256. ISBN: 9780804756310. US\$55.00 (hb); US\$22.95 (pb).

Lawrence Wittner thinks that the global nuclear disarmament movement has never been properly credited for its contribution to the avoidance of full-scale superpower conflict for almost 50 years of Cold War. To ignore this worldwide struggle against the bomb in explaining why a third world war was averted during this dangerous half century “makes about as much sense as omitting the US civil rights movement from explanations for the collapse of racial segregation and discrimination” (p. xii). This does not appear to be an extravagant claim, and Wittner is far too astute an historian completely to bypass the state-level actors and the high politics and diplomacy of disarmament and détente—both of which feature prominently in the last few chapters especially of this short study. He has not produced a simple “pacifist” corrective to the “triumphalist” versions of how the Cold War ended. Indeed, Wittner saw few signs of peace movement influence before he embarked on the huge research undertaking of which this book stands as an elegant and accessible synopsis. Engaged at the grass roots of campaigns which he has now chronicled,¹ Wittner was inclined to believe that such efforts had been “ineffectual. After all, I thought, the Bomb has not been banned” (p. xii). Only after immersing himself in archival records from the period, especially government documents, did he begin to see the outlines of a quite different picture—of Western states always fretful about, and periodically amenable to, anti-nuclear pressures, and of Communist reformers who eventually embraced the “new thinking” urged by Bertrand Russell from the mid-1950s as the most fundamental prerequisite of civilization’s survival.

However nuanced and rounded, Wittner’s treatment of his important subject definitely clashes with the dominant (and for him, deeply distorted) counter-narrative in which military muscle and political resolve alone are seen as the key ingredients of the West’s security during the Cold War and,

¹ See his autobiography, *Working for Peace and Justice: Memoirs of an Activist Intellectual* (Knoxville: U. of Tennessee P., 2012).

ultimately, of its “victory” over a morally, politically and financially bankrupt Soviet system. Wittner also disputes the related if less swaggering contention that the deterrent effect exerted by the threat of mutually assured destruction actually “worked”. The deterrence thesis fails to take account of how nuclear restraint was consistently observed in theatres of conflict in which only one superpower was engaged. The United States, for example, never seriously contemplated the deployment of nuclear weapons in Vietnam, but not because of the prospect of Soviet or Chinese retaliation. The nuclear option remained unthinkable, as President Nixon complained, because “the resulting domestic and international uproar would have damaged our foreign policy on all fronts” (quoted on p. 111).

Peace movement scholars are heavily in Wittner’s debt already for his epic, three-volume study of the nuclear disarmament movement since 1945.² *Confronting the Bomb* is an abridgement of that scholarly triptych; shorn of the scholarly apparatus, it is probably intended more for a student or lay readership. Although the coverage of certain episodes and national organizations is necessarily compressed, Wittner retains the impressive breadth of focus from the earlier works—and rightly so in the history of a *global* phenomenon.

Russell first enters Wittner’s account as a champion of world government after the Second World War—not of the flawed system built by the United Nations charter, but of an international authority in which the great powers would be compelled to relinquish far more sovereignty. The author overlooks the belligerent anti-Communism that was conjoined to Russell’s “one world” politics in the era of American nuclear monopoly, except to note his demonization by Soviet propaganda—which dismissed the world government campaign as a capitalist-imperialist front—as a fascist warmonger (p. 44). Gradually, and with increased urgency after the devastating experimental explosion of an American hydrogen bomb at Bikini Atoll in March 1954, Russell devoted the bulk of his political energy to exposing and curbing the nuclear peril. His efforts were part of a global awakening about the horrors of nuclear war and the hazards of a rapidly escalating arms race. Russell’s two signature contributions in this regard were his promotion of the Russell–Einstein manifesto and the follow-up conference of East–West scientists, which convened in Pugwash, Nova Scotia, in July 1957. These initiatives served to remobilize an international scientific community that had been instrumental in raising anti-nuclear concerns after 1945 (indeed, even before then: see Ch. 1) but had

² *The Struggle against the Bomb*, Vol. 1: *One World or None: a History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement through 1953*; Vol. 2: *Resisting the Bomb: a History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1954–1970*; Vol. 3: *Toward Nuclear Abolition: a History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1971–Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford U. P., 1993, 1997, 2003, respectively).

been badly affected by the Cold War chill in general and the impact of McCarthyism in particular.

Wittner expertly anatomizes not only the various phases of protest and the different national organizations but also the suspicion with which these activities were regarded in official circles on both sides of the Cold War divide. While Western governments deliberately kept their publics in the dark about nuclear weapons and tried to marginalize activist communities, the Soviets countered with the clumsy propaganda of Communist-led “peace” campaigns—from which Russell always maintained a healthy distance even as his crusade against the bomb made him more *persona grata* in Moscow (see, for example, *Papers* 28: xxxi–iv). The movement nevertheless became a force to be reckoned with in the West in the late 1950s (and again twenty-five years later) because its push for disarmament, arms control and the cessation of nuclear testing resonated with a sizeable swathe of public opinion, not to mention the leaders of some non-nuclear allies of the United States and Britain. As President Eisenhower himself acknowledged privately in March 1958, “the new nuclear weapons are tremendously powerful”, but “they are not ... as powerful as is world opinion today in obliging the United States to follow certain lines of policy” (quoted on p. 80). The formation of Soviet nuclear policy was much better shielded from such considerations, although not completely so (p. 107). The only acceptable peace advocacy inside the Soviet bloc was officially sanctioned and invariably imparted a blunt anti-American message. But emphasis on the frightfulness of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, for example, could sometimes backfire, spawning a mistrust and fear of nuclear weapons generally, not merely those of the United States.

While Russell was helping to mould the Pugwash movement into a respected and independent voice of scientific and political reason on nuclear testing and arms control, he was also embracing the classic pressure-group style of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. But he grew impatient with CND’s conventional methods of protest, and by the fall of 1960 had endorsed the civil disobedience strategy that would soon be put into practice by the Committee of 100. This trajectory of radicalization was not typical of the movement’s leadership or base as a whole. Indeed, as Wittner points out, the more commonplace turn after the “high tide” years of 1958 to 1965 was towards disengagement and withdrawal, as such notable advances as the Partial Test-Ban Treaty—disparaged by Russell (*Auto*. 3: 86) as a rather meagre half-loaf—made the movement “a victim of its own success. As governments drew back from nuclear weapons and nuclear war, many people became convinced that victory had been won or, at the least, that things were moving in the right direction” (p. 112). Even in his 90s Russell did not succumb to the exhaustion or complacency felt by many of the movement’s much younger activists. But he was certainly at one with those who were morally and politically outraged

by the war in Vietnam and came to regard the fight against American intervention there as a far more urgent priority than continued agitation against the bomb. Not for the first time, the nuclear disarmament movement faded, but its decline was again only temporary, repeating the pattern of advance and retreat that had marked the years from 1945 to 1953.

Russell features only sporadically in *Confronting the Bomb*, and half the book is concerned with the period after his death in 1970. But his influence also cast a shadow over a “third wave” of anti-nuclear protest. This critical phase in the movement’s history started in the mid-1970s after a decade-long hiatus and gathered momentum through the transformative era of détente following Mikhail Gorbachev’s rise to power. The more fruitful negotiating climate that arose would eventually yield the INF agreement signed by the Soviet leader and President Reagan in December 1987. Further cuts to the nuclear arsenals of the two superpowers were made four years later by the START I treaty as well as by significant steps taken unilaterally by Gorbachev and the George H. W. Bush administration. As Wittner points out, the Soviet leader had been determined to discard Cold War shibboleths in the interests of humanity’s survival. The famous tract in which his reforming creed was set down, *Perestroika*, included this uncanny echo of the Russell–Einstein manifesto: “All of us face the need to learn to live at peace in this world, to work out a new mode of thinking” (quoted on p. 182). His able lieutenant, foreign minister and fellow reformer, Edouard Shevardnadze, invoked Russell’s heartfelt appeal from thirty years previously even more explicitly, as something which “offered politicians the key to the most troublesome and complex riddles of the age” (quoted on p. 183). Gorbachev’s circle of advisors included a number of Pugwash veterans, and the Soviet leader cultivated his contacts with anti-nuclear scientists and intellectuals from the West. In addition to illuminating this international dimension of *glasnost*, Wittner includes some suggestive commentary on the symbiosis between Western peace activism, East European dissidence and post-Communist democratic reform (pp. 126–8, 194–5). In a reflective coda to his slim volume, the author himself comes across as something of a “Russellian”, wondering whether the world is yet “ready for the new thinking about international relations necessitated by the nuclear age”. He appears suspended between fear of nuclear proliferation and a renewed arms race, and hope that popular pressure can again be harnessed to curb these dangerous tendencies. His ultimate solution is proper international governance, as indeed it was for Russell, for it is the “the pathology of the nation-state system” (p. 222) which, at root, explains the persistence of nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War era.
