

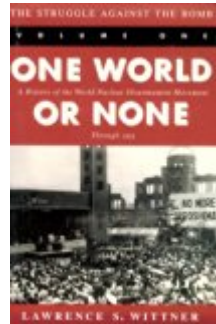
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Lawrence S. Wittner. *The Struggle against the Bomb, vol. 1: One World or None: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement through 1953*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993. vii + 456 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-2528-6.

Lawrence S. Wittner. *The Struggle against the Bomb, vol. 2: Resisting the Bomb: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1954-1970*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. vii + 641 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-3169-0.

Lawrence S. Wittner. *Toward Nuclear Abolition: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1971 to the Present*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. 657 S. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-4861-2.



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Pathologies of Nuclear State and Society

Lawrence Wittner concludes his magisterial history of the world nuclear disarmament movement, in volume 3, with a reflection on what he calls “the pathology of the nation-state system”: “with no higher authority to set guidelines for national behavior or to resolve international disputes, nations traditionally have resorted to wars to secure their ‘national interests’” (p. 488). A world of abundant nuclear weapons and delivery systems, however, means that this simple proposition promises global suicide. The courageous, energetic, and diverse endeavors of antinuclear activists over the last half century have, according to Wittner, saved us—at least so far—from this horrible end. Nonetheless, disarmament advocates have failed to eliminate or prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, and they have failed to alter the military organization of the nation-state system. We are, then, left where we started in the early years of the nuclear age. As Wittner recounted in his first volume, *One World Or None*: “Nuclear weapons, [disarmament advocates] warned repeatedly, rendered obsolete the traditional policy of guaranteeing security through overwhelming military strength. The real alternatives, they insisted, were One World or None” (p. 331).

Disarmament advocates have not been immune to the pathologies of international conflict. An important theme of Wittner’s three volumes is that nationalism and “national interest” have also infected the antinuclear movements that he chronicles in such extraordinary detail. Time and again, well-organized and influential disarmament groups have found public mobilization turn to public apathy as their particular nation’s immediate safety from nuclear danger appeared to grow. This was especially true for the United States after the Atmospheric Test Ban Treaty in 1963 (chronicled in Wittner’s second volume, *Resisting the Bomb*) and during the years surrounding the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I) and détente (chronicled in *Toward Nuclear Abolition*). American, Soviet, and other nuclear arsenals continued to expand in both periods, but citizens felt greater safety from immediate nuclear threats to their nation. Agitation for disarmament declined, only to rise again when national nuclear threats became more palpable. We might call this the pathology of antinuclear activism: disarmament advocates rely upon displays of nuclear militarism to justify their claims and mobilize public action. John Isaacs of the Council for a Livable World put it best when

he explained that the intemperate proponents of a nuclear build-up around Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s were a “dream team” for disarmament advocates (vol. 3, p. 170).

Wittner’s third volume is most insightful for this very period. During the Reagan years the world nuclear disarmament movement attained unprecedented strength. West German citizens, responding to the scheduled deployments of American intermediate-range missiles on their territory, staged the largest political demonstration in the nation’s history. In October 1981, three hundred thousand people gathered for a single protest in the capital city of Bonn. This was followed by cascading local manifestations of public activism that included extensive support from religious institutions, feminist groups, and the nascent Green party. Ultimately, West German citizen activism changed the contours of the country’s politics. The Greens used their antinuclear appeals to attract the necessary electoral support for a presence in the Bundestag, and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) adopted a strong position against the American missile deployments. The more pro-American Christian Democratic Union (CDU) dominated West German politics in the 1980s, but the opposition parties were now more strongly unified in their commitment to disarmament than ever before. Wittner’s new volume provides the best English-language description of the popular upsurge in antinuclear activism within West Germany, as well as the rest of Europe and Asia during the early 1980s.

The same can be said for Wittner’s coverage of the United States. *Toward Nuclear Abolition* vividly reminds the reader of the public outpouring against the Reagan administration’s nuclear policies. This is a topic all too often neglected by scholars of the period. On June 12, 1982, nearly a million people joined a demonstration in New York City—the largest in American history—calling on the government to “Freeze the Arms Race—Fund Human Needs.” By the end of the year, nine states and more than thirty localities had passed referenda calling for a nuclear freeze (pp. 176-177). This language soon found its way into a resolution that passed the House of Representatives on May 4, 1983. The publication of Jonathan Schell’s *The Fate of the Earth* and the broadcast of the television movie *The Day After* made public discussion of nuclear disarmament truly ubiquitous. Even some traditional members of the American foreign policy establishment, particularly George F. Kennan, embraced the idea of a nuclear freeze.

Wittner uses his chronicle of this period to highlight

how grassroots activism changed high policy. Despite the contrary inclinations of many of his advisors, President Ronald Reagan modified his rhetoric and his policies to account for public disarmament demands. While he treats Reagan as an opponent of nuclear disarmament, Wittner explains that his administration turned toward arms control negotiations, and the so-called “zero option” proposal for the elimination of all American and Soviet intermediate-range missiles on the European continent, in response to antinuclear pressures at home. “U.S. policy shifted because of pressure generated by the antinuclear campaign and effectively transmitted by U.S. allies and by Congress. Peace was beginning to break out in the American Cold War camp, but it was not based on ‘strength’—unless, of course, one is referring to the strength of the antinuclear movement” (vol. 3, p. 333).

The influence of disarmament advocates grew after the early 1980s, according to Wittner, when a forward-looking leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, replaced the stultifying and unimaginative clique that had ruled the Soviet Union since the 1960s. Gorbachev’s “new thinking” placed a new premium on real disarmament—rather than mere limits on future arms construction—for the purposes of building a more peaceful and stable international community. Wittner highlights how Gorbachev’s January 15, 1986, three-step plan for a nuclear-free world adopted many of the ideas circulating in disarmament circles for the last decade. Despite initial resistance from Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and others, Gorbachev continued to persevere in this program, ultimately convincing Reagan himself of this vision, at least in part.

This is, as Wittner admits, a “heartening” story of how the “biggest mass movement in modern history” modified state behavior (vol. 3, pp. 485, 487). Wittner never explicitly says so, but he clearly implies that antinuclear activists—not the proponents of “peace through strength”—made the end of the Cold War possible. Ideas and personal networks that dissented from Cold War orthodoxy forced leaders to reevaluate their political assumptions.[1] Interactions across state boundaries transformed the exercise and reception of national authority.[2]

The victory of peace advocates in the late 1980s, however, was a short and limited one. The pathologies of the nation-state system and antinuclear activism meant that in a post-Cold War world leaders returned to an emphasis on military force for the pursuit of “national interests.” Disarmament activism faded with the temporary diminishment of immediate and palpable nuclear threats. The

largest nuclear arsenals—particularly in the United States and Russia—have experienced significant reductions in recent years, but there is no serious movement to eliminate stockpiles of bombs and delivery systems. Quite the contrary, the number of nuclear states has grown since the end of the Cold War, and will, by most estimates, continue to expand in the next decade. Global nuclear proliferation has not, to date, posed a publicly recognizable threat to motivate necessary mass activism around counter-measures. The ideas and personal networks that peace advocates mobilized in the 1980s appear, once again, to be dormant in the face of neglected dangers.

This observation raises questions about the real power of these ideas and personal networks. If Wittner's argument in his three volumes is correct, one would expect to see a strong "antinuclear" climate after more than fifty years of global disarmament activism. After decades of civil rights agitation, for example, assumptions about race have certainly changed in the United States and many other countries. The same can be said about the legacy of feminist movements. Why is this not the case for nuclear weapons? Why has the legacy of the world disarmament movement proven so ephemeral?

The global resilience of policies that advocate the deployment of nuclear weapons, even after the end of the Cold War, points to the limits of Wittner's incredibly detailed and persuasive analysis. Wittner has done so much admirable research and thinking about disarmament activism that he has, perhaps, lost some of his critical perspective on the subject. He is, it seems, too quick to dismiss the ways in which antinuclear ideas worked in conjunction with more traditional forms of *Realpolitik* to affect policy change. The 1980s, the centerpiece of Wittner's new book, are perhaps the best place to make this case.

As Wittner persuasively shows, Mikhail Gorbachev's "new thinking" promoted many of the ideas that disarmament activists had long advocated. Wittner quotes Gorbachev's admission that his program "took into account and absorbed" the positions of many antinuclear figures, particularly in the Soviet Union and Europe (vol. 3, p. 372). The reasons why Gorbachev was receptive to these ideas, however, are not so straightforward. Wittner seems to assume that the inherent persuasiveness of disarmament proposals, and their broad public support, made them almost irresistible for the enlightened Soviet leader. There was, Wittner writes, an "antinuclear Zeitgeist" that produced a "tidal wave" carrying leaders to

a new shore (vol. 3, p. 403). The scholarship on Gorbachev and his "new thinking" argues otherwise. The ambitious Soviet leader adopted and used disarmament ideas because he believed they would strengthen Soviet society, allowing for a greater focus on neglected domestic needs. He also sought to build what he called a "common European home" that would neither revolutionize the nation-state system nor eliminate traditional forms of warfare, but increase Soviet influence through a policy of peace and cooperation. Gorbachev adopted disarmament ideas because they appeared to serve his *Realpolitik* goals. They were not an alternative to traditional state power, but instead a tool for the restructuring (*Perestroika*) of waning Soviet authority.[3]

In addition, scholars have noted that Gorbachev was initially much more tentative in his adoption of disarmament ideas than Wittner would have us believe. In the case of Afghanistan, for example, Gorbachev increased the use of Soviet force during his first years in office. He only really began to implement substantive cuts in Soviet conventional and nuclear forces after 1987. Soviet-American arms control negotiations are a large part of this story. This should not surprise us. It shows that Gorbachev did not imbibe the popular advocacy of unilateral disarmament, at least not initially. He was cautious and calculating in his selective use of antinuclear ideas.

The Soviet leader's increasingly urgent search for arms control agreements after 1987 reflects, in part, pressure from the United States. The Reagan administration surely did not "force" the Soviets to the negotiating table, as partisans claim, but Washington's commitment to an assertive military posture and new technological programs, like the Strategic Defense Initiative, promised Gorbachev a continued arms competition that he knew he could not afford in conjunction with wide-ranging domestic reforms. Championing public disarmament positions became a weapon of weakness—a measure for counteracting American military strengths through non-military means. We will never know for sure, but it is plausible that Gorbachev would not have adopted the same public disarmament positions if he had not felt so vulnerable in military terms. Strong states rarely disarm when the military balance favors their present position.[4]

This analysis does not detract from Wittner's central contention that disarmament ideas mattered. It does, however, raise questions about *why* and *how* these ideas contributed to the evolution of state policies. Wittner's multi-volume study breaks new ground in its interna-

tional coverage of antinuclear activism, and the author explains better than anyone else why this activism waxes and wanes at different times. He is, however, too quick to assume that a moment of extensive mobilization—like the early 1980s—will necessarily produce political results. Closer inspection of the policy-making process in the Soviet Union, the United States, and other countries reveals that disarmament ideas had their greatest effect when they connected with traditional concerns about national security. Put another way, antinuclear activism did not always challenge Cold War orthodoxy. At crucial moments leaders, like Gorbachev and Reagan, adopted disarmament positions to serve purposes that diverged from the more idealistic inclinations of grassroots activists.

Writing peace history, it seems to me, requires that we grapple with the intersection of peace activism and *Realpolitik*, rather than presume that they are separate and distinct fields of endeavor. One could make the case that the most successful peace advocates were not the most eloquent and courageous thinkers, but instead those who managed to find a place for their ideas in the traditional functions of states. To be a peace activist, therefore, does not necessarily mean that one is opposed to war and the defense of the “national interest.” The nation-state system certainly has its pathological elements, but so does a society where reformers protest without working to change institutions from within. Wittner’s extraordinary work opens the door for new research that studies peace activism as an integral part of state behavior, not a purely oppositional element.

Notes

[1]. This is a point, made particularly for the international scientific community, in Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the*

Cold War (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

[2]. For a similar argument about the 1960s and early 1970s, see Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[3]. See some of the representative works from the large and impressive body of literature on Gorbachev and his “new thinking.” These studies emphasize Gorbachev’s attempts to use progressive ideas for strengthening the Soviet state: Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Robert English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals, and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Jeffrey T. Checkel, *Ideas and International Political Change: Soviet/Russian Behavior and the End of the Cold War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Thomas Risse-Kappen, “Ideas Do Not Float Freely: Transnational Coalitions, Domestic Structures, and the End of the Cold War,” in *International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War*, ed. Richard Ned Lebow and Thomas Risse-Kappen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); and Dmitry Volkogonov, *Sem’ Vozhdey: Galeria liderov SSSR v dvukh knigakh*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Novosti, 1995).

[4]. On the role of the United States in pushing Gorbachev to expand his “new thinking,” see Don Oberdorfer, *The Turn: From the Cold War to a New Era* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991); Jack F. Matlock, Jr., *Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador’s Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 1995); George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1993); and Jeremi Suri, “Explaining the End of the Cold War: A New Historical Consensus?” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 4 (Fall 2002): pp. 60-92.

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