

Weapons of bewilderment

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One World or None: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement. Vol. 1 — The Struggle Against the Bomb. By Lawrence S. Wittner. *Stanford University Press*: 1993. Pp. 456. \$24.95.

SOON after the Second World War, Enrico Fermi's sister wrote to him from Italy: "Everyone is talking about the atomic bomb. . . All are perplexed and appalled by its dreadful effects, and with time the bewilderment increases rather than diminishes." Ever since then, despite ebbs and flows, this bewilderment has increased. Nuclear dread has become a prominent feature of the modern world, periodically leading to enormous public demonstrations against atomic weapons. Indeed, opposition to these weapons has been around longer than the weapons themselves, dating back to 1903, when a British chemist warned that radioactivity could lead to explosives "inconceivably more powerful than any we know of". In 1913, H. G. Wells published *The World Set Free*, in which a war fought with "atomic bombs" was so devastating that its survivors decided to form a world government to avoid future wars. So striking to the imagination is it, that dread of the bomb preceded the bomb itself.

Lawrence Wittner describes nuclear policies and, especially, public responses to them, from Wells's novel in 1913 through to the end of Harry Truman's presidency of the United States in 1953. The first of three projected volumes on the movement — or, more precisely, movements — for nuclear disarmament, *One World or None* has appropriately universal coverage, from major players such as the United States and the Soviet Union to smaller countries such as Denmark and New Zealand. It is smoothly written, generally accurate and amply documented (for example, in the bibliography Wittner refers to 37 movement periodicals and 100 collections of private papers). Almost half the book describes the non-aligned movements that developed from 1945 to 1951, another quarter the communist-led movements of the same period, and another quarter the consequences of the movements (despite Wittner's best efforts, he finds precious little evidence of benefits).

Although Wittner surveys region after region, including Eastern Europe, the Third World, the countries defeated in the Second World War, as well as the former Allied nations, the story is similar for most of them, making the book seem repetitive even when it is not. Although the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 were widely acclaimed as a means to end the Second World War, nuclear weapons

became more controversial in the following five years because of US government secrecy, the emerging arms race, development of the hydrogen bomb and Truman's loose talk about using nuclear weapons in Korea.

Opponents of nuclear weapons faced a challenge: what position to take on the

IMAGE
UNAVAILABLE
FOR COPYRIGHT
REASONS

Politics and pacifism: CND handbill, 1963.

nation-state and war in general. Pacifists, having been discredited during the war (Hitler's regime, after all, was cogent evidence in favour of just wars), were unable to take the lead in antinuclear mobilization. Besides, they had broader goals than fighting one form of weaponry, no matter how destructive. All wars and weapons were wrong, and the only way to stop nuclear weapons was to stop wars. One-worldists, who favoured a strong international government to curtail the competitive urges of national governments, became more popular as a result of the war. Nuclear weaponry made their crusade more urgent, suggesting that "Or None" be added to their slogan. Also, there were communist-led peace organizations preoccupied with US weapons but excusing Soviet ones as guarantees of world peace; they spent much of their time attacking noncommunist peace groups as myrmidons of imperialist warmongers. Finally, nuclear scientists often formed the best organized and most creditable

groups to question nuclear weapons.

For obvious reasons, these assorted groups made little headway with national governments. Once a government and its military had the bomb, the most powerful tool in their arsenal as a nation-state, they were quite unwilling to give it up. When, after 1950, anti-communist crusades got into high gear, the antinuclear movement faded rapidly.

Although Wittner is concerned to present facts carefully and not to interpret them, his book lays out several sharp contrasts and paradoxes. One is that innumerable people have been aroused to protest against nuclear weapons in the past 50 years, perhaps more than joined any other political cause, yet their efforts have had almost no influence on government policies. Only governments without these weapons favoured policies to curtail them. From being merely a weapon, atomic bombs became the centrepiece of world diplomacy, especially for the two so-called (and they are called this because of their large nuclear arsenals) 'superpowers'. The mindset of international strategists remains alien to most people.

Equally unsettling is the gap between the mental worlds of government officials and those of the scientists who worked on the bomb. Throughout the history of both civilian and military nuclear energy, scientists and technicians have usually tried to move slowly and work out the flaws of their risky technologies, whereas politicians, the military and even regulators have pushed technologies into use as quickly as possible. This tension began as early as the Manhattan Project, whose director, General Leslie Groves, was constantly suspicious of the scientists working under him, especially when they expressed any doubts; the Nobel prizewinner Fermi, for example, was dismissed as a "wop". Surveillance by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation, removal of security clearances and even dismissal from their jobs awaited scientists who expressed reservations.

The symbolic power of the bomb matches its explosive power. For diplomats, presidents and generals, its lure was almost magical. For many scientists, including those who had helped to develop it, this magic was diabolical. Fear, confusion, national pride and — occasionally — indifference can all be found among public attitudes. Atomic weaponry usually inspires apocalyptic rhetoric, by supporters as well as detractors. Even among its opponents the bomb has meant different things to different groups, but it has always meant a lot. As a result, the awe and bewilderment that Fermi's sister described have never subsided. □

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