

Accidental Armageddons: The Nuclear Crisis and the Culture of the Second Cold War, 1975-1989

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Conference at the GHI

Conveners: Eckart Conze (University of Marburg), Martin Klimke (GHI Washington), Jeremy Varon (New School for Social Research)

Participants: Dolores Augustine (St. John's University), Philipp Baur (University of Augsburg), Frida Berrigan (New America Foundation), William Burr (National Security Archive, Washington), Michael Foley (University of Sheffield), Tim Geiger (Institut für Zeitgeschichte), Thomas Goldstein (Clemson University), Jan Hansen (Humboldt University Berlin), Kyle Harvey (Macquarie University Sydney), William Knoblauch (Ohio University), Reinhild Kreis (University of Augsburg), David Lazar (GHI Washington), Wilfried Mausbach (Heidelberg Center for American Studies), Stephen Milder (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), Katrin Ruecker (University of Geneva), Jonathan Schell (New Haven, CT), Susanne Schregel (Technical University Darmstadt), Tony Shaw (University of Hertfortshire), Laura Stapane (Heidelberg Center for American Studies/GHI Washington), Tim Warneke (University of Heidelberg), Lawrence Wittner (State University of New York at Albany), Natasha Zaretsky (Southern Illinois University Carbondale), Marianne Zepp (Heinrich Böll Foundation, Berlin)

After having been lost for almost thirty years, Albert Sonneman's photo-realist piece "The Last Washington Painting" was recently rediscovered. The painting is a classic of nuclear doom. It shows a mushroom cloud exploding over the American capital city as cars speed across Fourteenth Street Bridge straight into disaster. "It was painted in the days of mutually assured destruction, the daily business of parents of people I knew in D.C.," Sonneman recalled in a recent interview with the *Washington City Paper*: "This is the business of Washington. My girlfriend's father arranged the distribution of nuclear warheads for NATO."¹ The painting very nicely reflects the cultural mood of the early 1980s, when the resurgence of Cold War tensions, the rearmament decisions of NATO, and the election of Ronald Reagan to the American presidency fed into a new bout of nuclear angst.

¹ "How 'The Last Washington Painting' Became 'The Lost Washington Painting,'" *Washington City Paper*, July 16, 2010, <http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/articles/39439/how-the-last-washington-painting-became-the-lost-washington-painting>.

The story of the loss and the recent rediscovery of Sonneman's painting, which can now be seen at American University,² is almost metaphorical for the returning interest in the controversies of the 1980s about an impending "nuclear Holocaust"—as the atomic doomsday scenario was commonly referred to at the time. By historical accident, this resurging interest is now accompanied by a new anti-nuclear movement in Germany. This conference at the German Historical Institute in Washington studied the historical context in which artworks like Sonneman's painting clearly resonated in Western cultures. As the conveners explained in their introduction, the "Accidental Armageddons" conference sought to explore the political and cultural discourse on nuclear weapons and atomic energy in the 1970s and 1980s—the Second Cold War--by analyzing diplomatic and strategic debates as well as the "anti-establishment" perspective of protest movements, and by linking political debates with cultural representations of nuclear death in music, literature, and film.

The first panel on "Doomsday Ideologies," chaired by Martin Klimke, started with a comparative discussion by Michael S. Foley of the environmental protests of the Clamshell Alliance against the Seabrook (NH) and Diablo Canyon (CA) nuclear power plants, on the one hand, and the grassroots campaign of Love Canal (NY) residents, on the other, who had discovered that their houses had been built on a toxic waste site. As Foley argued, Love Canal activists were more successful than their anti-nuclear peers because they could see concrete "visible evidence" of pollution from their "front porches." This "front porch politics" succeeded in mobilizing the critical support of representatives in Congress, whereas the dangers of nuclear power remained more abstract even after the Three Mile Island (TMI) disaster in March 1979. Wilfried Mausbach then analyzed the "Nuclear Winter" scenario, which burst onto the scene in the fall of 1983 and which he characterized as "the one and only new concept that separates the struggle against nuclear weapons in the 1980s from its antecedents in the 1950s." Although the science behind it was not particularly new, the idea of "nuclear winter" resonated because it was an outgrowth of a new environmental awareness that had not existed two to three decades earlier. It also tapped into the general sense of doom and crisis that became characteristic of the 1970s. Eckart Conze examined the "instrumentalization of Auschwitz" during the early 1980s debates about nuclear rearmament in West Germany. He highlighted the mobilizing effect of the term "nuclear Holocaust," which was meant to provoke anxiety and fear of death. It stipulated a "special German responsibility." German as well as American politicians were linked to Nazi crimes, which

² http://wpadc.org/catalyst/?page_id=82.

provoked conservative politicians, such as CDU General Secretary Heiner Geissler, to fortify their political positions by also using historical analogies to the 1930s. Geissler famously claimed in the West German Federal Parliament (Bundestag) that the pacifism of the 1920s and 1930s had “paved the way to Auschwitz.”

Nuclear death in film and popular culture was the theme of the second panel, chaired by Jeremy Varon. Tony Shaw used the 1979 movie *The China Syndrome*, which dealt with a near disastrous turn of a fictional safety cover up at a California nuclear power plant, to look at the cultural dimensions of the Cold War. He asked how Hollywood’s skepticism of nuclear energy connected with a critique of corporate power and the media. Originally conceived of as a small-scale docudrama, the film became a major blockbuster thanks to the input of activist actors like Jane Fonda and Michael Douglas and its auspicious timing, since it was released shortly before the near meltdown at TMI. In fact, the movie seems to have framed the reaction to TMI of journalists who had had little knowledge of nuclear energy up to that point. William Knoblauch then examined British anti-nuclear pop music of the 1980s. Geography, memories of World War II, and British civil defense propaganda made Britain a unique case. MTV enabled activist musicians to convey their political messages and even export them to the United States. Overall, however, Knoblauch concluded that nuclear pop was more popular in Great Britain than in the United States, which seemed to be less exposed to nuclear threats. Furthermore, anti-nuclear pop came to a sudden end in 1987, when Cold War tensions eased and groups shifted their focus to other political issues.

Panel three, chaired by Eckart Conze, continued to explore nuclear themes in music as well as in the arts more generally. Laura Stapane spoke about the “Artists for Peace” (Künstler für den Frieden) movement, which in the early 1980s served West German musicians, artists (e.g., Joseph Beuys), actors, and intellectuals as a platform for utilizing artistic expression as a means of political protest. Politically triggered by NATO’s double-track decision, the movement aimed to disseminate the idea of a nuclear-free world in a series of cultural events. Thanks to a wide variety of genres and artists—a plethora of different types of music such as rock, pop, classical, folk, and the so-called German Schlager was offered—these art festivals were highly successful both financially and in terms of participation. The organizers were also able to mobilize groups not normally interested in political issues. Martin Klimke then linked anti-nuclear expressions in West German popular music at the beginning of the 1980s (such as Nena’s “99 Luftballons”) to the “Green Caterpillar” bus tour that was organized by the newly

founded West German Green Party as part of its 1983 electoral campaign. A fusion of cultural and political event, the tour not only forced the Social Democratic Party to reconsider its ties to critical artists but also strengthened the Greens' appeal as an "anti-party party." In addition, the tour's emphasis on regional input helped pull the party together. Finally, it also helped to broaden the draw of Green politics beyond the alternative milieu.

The fourth panel, chaired by David Lazar, turned its attention to literature. Philipp Baur argued that one of the Second Cold War's characteristics was "the intentional use of fiction to warn and educate the public." By looking at Gudrun Pausewang's *Die Letzten Kinder von Schewenborn* (The last children of Schewenborn) and Anton-Andreas Guha's *Ende. Tagebuch aus dem 3. Weltkrieg* (End: Diary of World War III), he came to the conclusion that regionalism and the localization of Armageddon were peculiar features of the artistic anti-nuclear engagement during the 1980s. These scenarios also fed on scientific visions of a post-apocalyptic world (like those presented in the concept of nuclear winter). Thomas Goldstein examined how the official East German Writers Union (Schriftstellerverband) served the regime's propagandistic purposes with mixed results. Whereas the government had some success in co-opting even critical writers to its "peace agenda," the narrow focus on NATO missiles that it fostered became increasingly untenable as Gorbachev's reforms and a growing environmental consciousness in the GDR triggered increasing criticism of the dictatorship. Dolores Augustine's examination of the representations of the peace and anti-nuclear movement in the West German print media focused on the weekly *Der Stern*. The Second Cold War saw a confluence of the debate about peaceful and military use of nuclear power. In contrast to debates of the 1950s, those during the Second Cold War utilized visual strategies to convey the horrors of nuclear destruction; protests were generally portrayed in a sympathetic light, and the synergy between anti-nuclear power and anti-nuclear weapons issues made media coverage during this period a "force" to be reckoned with.

Establishment reactions were the focus of the fifth panel, chaired by William Burr. Jan Hansen summarized his findings on the political and cultural discourse on nuclear weapons within the West German Social Democratic Party. NATO's double-track decision shattered party unity over central foreign policy questions. Driven by cultural anxiety and deep-seated fears regarding modernity, the Social Democratic split over nuclear weapons led to a renegotiation of the possibilities and nature of legitimate political action within the political mainstream. In his presentation, Tim Geiger asked: "Did Protest Matter?" According to

Geiger, the peace movement did not have to push the government very hard for détente, because the SPD-FDP government coalition aimed to reduce nuclear arsenals anyway. Furthermore, the peace movement helped the federal government to present itself as a proponent of a moderate approach and to bolster its international position. It was forced, however, to step up its propaganda efforts. Reinhild Kreis then analyzed the discourse about a “successor generation” as a master trope that structured the debate about an alleged “transatlantic crisis” among diplomats, politicians, and experts. Fears of estrangement, which were couched in generational terms, need to be read in the context of the contemporary discussions about “value change.” Leaders therefore focused on bringing the “next generation” on board for German-American friendship, which they feared anti-nuclear sentiments and widespread anti-Americanism had sundered.

The sixth panel, chaired by Philipp Gassert, on “Security Cultures” focused on the emergence of particular national discourses structured around nuclear issues. Natasha Zaretsky discussed how, following incidents such as Watergate or the oil crisis, the TMI accident led to a further erosion of public trust in governmental policies and official insurance. TMI now placed the human body—and, more specifically, the pregnant, the young child’s, or fetal body—in the center of a question of trust. TMI emerged as a fully-fledged cultural crisis because the “grammar of human life” enabled female members of a largely white, conservative, rural Pennsylvanian community, especially, to remain good Christians and patriots while opposing nuclear energy at the same time. Tim Warneke’s presentation explored the discourse about “madness” in the United States and West Germany. Taking his clues from *Dr. Strangelove*, Warneke argued that the consensus of “what was reasonable and what was insane” broke down in the context of shifting values, resulting in an almost complete rupture of communication between the two warring camps. Finally, Katrin Ruecker explained why France did not experience a prolonged period of nuclear anxiety. The small, and mostly communist, French peace movement operated in a “discouraging context” (Wittner), with all major parties strongly in favor of the *force de frappe* (the French nuclear program) and NATO’s rearmament decision. Also, public opinion was either strongly in favor of nuclear power and nuclear weapons or indifferent. Finally, French international aspirations and, thus France’s national identity were closely linked to having access to nuclear weapons. The nonaligned French peace movement therefore had only limited access.

The final panel, chaired by Marianne Zepp, explored grassroots initiatives at the local level. Stephan Milder discussed the protests against the planned Wyhl nuclear power plant in South Baden, Germany. Local grassroots opposition, which included conservative farmers and middle-class citizens from the neighboring university town of Freiburg, served as the model on which many subsequent anti-nuclear protests were built. The media portrayed them mostly in a positive light, and their opposition to what they perceived as non-responsive government officials proved to be contagious. In “Radical Feminism and the Anti-Nuclear Movement” Kyle Harvey looked at the emerging “eco-feminism” of the 1970s and 1980s. Exposing deep rifts within feminism, the movement was characterized by clashes that were as much about womanhood as they were about politics. Using the example of the tensions over the Seneca Falls Women’s Encampment in upstate New York, Harvey demonstrated that feminist radicalism turned off many potential supporters. Finally, Susanne Schregel analyzed Nuclear Free Zones as part of the transnational oppositional movement to nuclear war, which was both global and local at once. Within this movement, the local was seen as the place where global transformations would emerge. This special, localized nature of protest seems to have been one further characteristic of the 1980s peace movement that distinguished it from its predecessors in the 1950s, as some of the other papers demonstrated as well.

An evening keynote lecture and a public panel discussion rounded out the conference. In his keynote on “The Rise of the Hawks and the Revolt of the Doves: Writing the History of the Second Cold War,” Lawrence S. Wittner raised the question of the impact of the peace movements. Whereas some politicians like former U.S. President George H. W. Bush retrospectively claimed that pursuing “peace through strength” had worked, Wittner came to a different conclusion: in fact, governments listened to anti-nuclear activists. From Jimmy Carter’s inaugural address to Ronald Reagan’s stunning course reversal in the mid-1980s, the idea of nuclear abolition proved to be irresistible. A “remarkable popular uprising” against “nuclear madness,” along with the “rise of world citizenship,” led to a considerable reduction in the nuclear danger. With nuclear arsenals now significantly diminished (there are now about 20,000 nuclear warheads worldwide, down from a peak of more than 60,000 in 1990) Wittner stressed that real progress had been made.

A panel discussion on the second night of the conference provided a contrast to Wittner’s upbeat message. It featured the author and anti-nuclear activist Jonathan Schell, whose book *The Fate of the Earth* (1982) remains one of the key texts of the nuclear apocalyptic genre.

Sharing the panel with Frida Berrigan and Philipp Gassert, Schell highlighted some of the failures of earlier anti-nuclear movements, discussing how his 1980s prophecies had stood the test of time and what their contemporary relevance was. As Schell insisted, the dangers of “exterminism” are still with us, and with global warming, they seem to have taken on a dimension that would have been unimaginable in the 1980s.

Whereas Jonathan Schell, from the perspective of his own involvement, stressed continuities between then and now, the final discussion of the conference explored some of the discontinuities and specificities of 1970s and 1980s culture that particularly interest historians. Eckart Conze proposed that “a real and perceived crisis of modernity” is the common denominator of the various anti-nuclear movements and groups. Martin Klimke submitted the interaction of the transnational and the local levels as a 1980s peculiarity, including how human rights discourse unified or divided peace activists in Eastern and Western Europe. He asked what the impact of both popular movies and the 1986 meltdown in the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Soviet Union was. Jeremy Varon underscored the lessons and examples that the 1970s and 1980s still provide in how to cope with global problems. Wilfried Mausbach asked to what extent the Second Cold War had a specific culture different from the 1950s and what the parameters for distinguishing between a First and a Second Cold War should be. Reinhild Kreis emphasized the importance of different perceptions of time and timeliness in contemporary debates on nuclear and environmental issues. Philipp Gassert stressed that the “nuclear crisis” provides raw materials for a history of the political culture of the 1980s, when people were trying to make sense of multiple crisis scenarios and got stuck in the most dramatic one. As the conference’s discussion demonstrated, historical research into the 1980s, which has only just begun, is propelled by new questions and exciting source materials, some outstanding examples of which this conference brought to the fore.

Philipp Gassert (University of Augsburg)