



## Book reviews

### *International Peacekeeping, Volume 13, No. 3, 2006*

#### **Towards Nuclear Abolition: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1971 to the Present**

(Volume 3 of *The Struggle Against the Bomb*) by Lawrence S. Wittner. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003. Pp.657. £24.50 (pbk). ISBN: 0-8047-4862-4.

The history of the cold war is usually told as a conflict between states and alliances - the US vs the Soviet Union, Nato vs the Warsaw Pact. In the context of super-power conflict, history is played out in phases - the 'first' cold war, détente, the 'second' cold war - and through crises - the Berlin blockade, the Cuban missile crisis, the shooting down of KAL 007 and so on. Lawrence Wittner's big, impressive book (the third in a trilogy that covers the post-Second World War period) records the cold war from a different angle. He aims to show that, in the East-West relationship of the 1970s and, even more so, in the 1980s, the anti-nuclear weapons movements played a key role. Some of this story has been told elsewhere. But this is the first time, to this reviewer's knowledge, that an attempt has been made to embrace in one account and in such detail both states *and* peace movements in this period of the post-war era - and to do so on a global scale.

Wittner ends his account with a plea for the replacement of the 'pathological nation-state system' by an international 'system of security' based on the UN, the ICC and other such institutions, to which 'war-making' states' would be made subordinate (pp.490-91). But, he argues, this long-term goal must be accompanied by a 'short-term' strategy of 'fostering nuclear arms control and disarmament' (p.490). Wittner's

book is an attempt to show how the 'citizens' anti-nuclear crusade' helped promote just such a strategy: specifically, that this crusade was the *primary* cause of governments passing 'nuclear arms control and disarmament measures' (p.485) - and that it thus, by implication, helped end the cold war.

When Wittner charts, for example, the emergence and campaigning of peace movements in 1981-85, he describes a 'dynamic political force that could not be ignored' (p.155). West European governments, trying to 'avoid political disaster by bending gracefully during the storm of popular protest' (p.296), 'sought to modify the hard-line position' on arms control of the U.S. government (p.292); while Congress, feeling the impact of the movements' work, pressured the US administration to change course. It was these pressures, not 'Soviet compromise or capitulation', that produced changes in the Reagan administration's stance: serious negotiations replaced opposition to nuclear arms control and disarmament; conciliation replaced Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union; and 'talk of waging nuclear war came to nothing' (p.333).

Then, in 1985-88, under 'enormous pressure from the anti-nuclear movement, the public policy dam finally burst' (p.369). Reagan 'eagerly grasped at the chance for securing nuclear arms control and disarmament agreements', but it is Gorbachev who 'deserves the lion's share of the credit for [the] turnabout' in Soviet-U.S. relations. However, the 'bulk of the credit for the new course ... lay with the nuclear disarmament campaign and the tidal wave of anti-nuclear sentiment that it generated' (p.403). Influencing Gorbachev as well, for 'either directly or filtered through his reformist advisers', Gorbachev 'imbibed the key ideas of the "new thinking" [in foreign policy] from the non-aligned anti-nuclear movement' (p.371).

Wittner's argument has some force. Other commentators, too (for example, Strobe Talbott and Matthew Evangelista) have shown plausibly how western peace movements, directly or indirectly, influenced government policies. But surely Wittner - to put it mildly - overstates his case? He barely allows, for example, for the influence of domestic factors - political and economic - on the foreign and defence policies of either superpower. Ignoring, in particular, the possibility that Gorbachev's reforms were a response to the growing complexity, produced by rapid urbanization, of Soviet society, as powerfully argued by Moshe Lewin in *The Gorbachev Phenomenon* (1988).

However, more frustrating than Wittner's exaggerated claims for the peace movement's influence, is the fact that, in two respects, he misrepresents the actors he is describing. First, it should be noted that he provides accurate, short descriptions of independent activists in the Soviet bloc - for example, he describes Charter 77 as a group of 'intellectuals and workers' set up to 'monitor' the Czechoslovak government's compliance with international human rights accords. However, he *also* presents these groups as being part of an *anti-nuclear movement* - an 'anti-nuclear campaign' (p.214); 'anti-nuclear movements' (p.215); 'intrepid anti-nuclear forces' (p.238) - as *part of a global phenomenon*, and which, *as an anti-nuclear movement*, influenced the politics of the region, 'challenging dictatorial regimes and, ultimately, helping to sweep them away' (p.485).

This won't do. While these groups certainly did engage in dialogue and cooperate with parts of the western peace movement, their concerns, tactics, and strategies were decisively shaped by *domestic* issues and the specific nature of the societies in which they lived. While some groups (say, Women for Peace in the GDR) were peace groups, others are more accurately described as either *human rights* groups, some (by no means all) of whose members took up the peace issue (for example, Charter 77), or *human rights and peace groups* (Freedom and Peace in Poland). Moreover, these groups' peace concerns were not often related to specific nuclear weapons systems or strategies but to the activists' immediate situation: the militarization of society, or 'dialogue' - between state and society at home and between East and West - or, so important for many groups, the 'interdependence' of peace and human rights.

Secondly, Wittner gets too much wrong about the European Nuclear Disarmament (END) initiative. He doesn't seem to know that, after the launching of the END Appeal in 1980, which expressed opposition to the weapons of both sides and called for an end to the cold war, *two distinct entities* called END emerged. Firstly, the *British* peace group END (whose best-known figure was E. P. Thompson); and secondly, from 1982, the END Convention, an annual gathering of mainly *West European* (including British) supporters of the Appeal. The END Conventions were organized largely by the 'END Convention Liaison Committee', a body made up of many groups, organizations and individuals (for example, IKV from Holland, or CODENE from France) who supported the END Appeal. END (the British organization) was only *one* of these groups. The END Conventions were not the conventions *of* (British) END, as Wittner implies. Rather, they were Conventions *about* 'European Nuclear Disarmament'. Further - though the END Convention/Liaison Committee was arguably the main institutional expression of a pan-European 'current' within the western peace movement - Wittner does not make clear that there was *no* Europe-wide (or even West Europe-wide) campaigning body called END. The Liaison Committee just planned the next Convention; the Conventions themselves were discussion and planning forums.

Wittner also calls END 'the conceptual glue, the mass base, and the central rallying point ... the very heart and soul of the massive [European] anti-nuclear campaign' (p.234). As a former END activist, I wish this had been so. But it wasn't. For many, probably most, activists, while they didn't support Soviet weapons, the 'central rallying point' was *opposition to US missiles*: the need to stop the deployment of Cruise and Pershing II. With these campaigns over (at the latest by 1985) activists struggled to find a new 'conceptual glue'.

Wittner has clearly done a vast amount of research. The argument can be challenged and his account misleads in places; however, this detailed conspectus is important reading for anyone interested in the anti-nuclear weapons movements of this period.

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