

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

Veranstalter: Eckart Conze, Universität Marburg; Martin Klimke, German Historical Institute in Washington; Jeremy Varon, New School for Social Research, New York

Datum, Ort: 04.11.2010 - 06.11.2010, Washington, DC

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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.¹ The painting very nicely reflects the cultural mood of the early 1980s, when the resurgence of Cold War tensions fed into a new bout of nuclear angst. The loss and rediscovery of the „Last Washington Painting“ is almost metaphorical for the returning interest in the 1980s controversies about an impending „nuclear Holocaust“ - as the atomic doomsday scenario was commonly referred to at the time.

A conference at the German Historical Institute in Washington (GHI), organized by Eckart Conze (University of Marburg), Martin Klimke (GHI), Jeremy Varon (New School for Social Research, New York) studied the historical context in which artworks like Sonneman's painting 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 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“ started with a discussion by MICHAEL S. FOLEY (Sheffield) of the environmental

protests of the Clamshell Alliance against the Seabrook and Diablo Canyon nuclear power plants, on the one hand, and the grassroots campaign of Love Canal 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“. These „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 (Heidelberg) 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 new, the idea of „nuclear winter“ resonated because it was an outgrowth of a new environmental awareness that had not existed three decades earlier. ECKART CONZE (Marburg) 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 provoked conservative politicians, such as CDU General Secretary Heiner Geissler, to fortify their political positions by also using historical analogies to the 1930s.

Nuclear death in film and popular culture was the theme of the second panel. TONY SHAW (Hertfordshire) 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 cor-

¹ „How 'The Last Washington Painting' Became 'The Lost Washington Painting,'" Washington City Paper, July 16, 2010, <<http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/articles/39439/>> (15.12.2010).

porate power and the media. The film became a major blockbuster thanks to 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 (Athens, OH) 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 export their political messages to the United States. Overall, however, nuclear pop was less popular in the U.S., 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.

Panel three continued to explore nuclear themes in the arts more generally. LAURA STAPANE (Heidelberg) spoke about the „Artists for Peace“ (Künstler für den Frieden) movement, which in the early 1980s served West German musicians, artists, actors, and intellectuals as a platform for political protest. Thanks to a wide variety of genres and artists 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 (Washington, DC) 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 during its 1983 electoral campaign. A fusion of cultural and political event, the tour not only forced the Social Democratic Party (SPD) to reconsider its ties to critical artists but also strengthened the Greens' appeal beyond alternative milieus.

The fourth panel turned its attention to literature. PHILIPP BAUR (Augsburg) argued that one of the Second Cold War's characteristics was „the intentional use of fiction to warn and educate the public.“ By analyzing works by Gudrun Pausewang and Anton-Andreas Guha, he came to the conclusion that regionalism and the localization of Armageddon were peculiar features of the artistic anti-nuclear engagement during the 1980s.

THOMAS GOLDSTEIN (Clemson, SC) 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 became increasingly untenable as Gorbachev's reforms triggered increasing criticism of the dictatorship. DOLORES AUGUSTINE'S (Jamaica, NY) examination of the representations of the peace and anti-nuclear movement in the West German print media focused on the weekly „Der Stern“. Protests were generally portrayed in a sympathetic light, and the synergy between anti-nuclear power and anti-nuclear weapons issues made media coverage a „force“ to be reckoned with.

Establishment reactions were the focus of the fifth panel. JAN HANSEN (Berlin) summarized his findings on the political and cultural discourse on nuclear weapons within the SPD. 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 (München) 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. REINHILD KREIS (Augsburg) 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 need to be read in the context of the contemporary discussions about „value change“. Leaders 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 on „Security Cultures“ looked at particular national discourses structured around nuclear issues. NATASHA ZARETSKY (Carbondale, IL) discussed how the TMI accident led to a further erosion of public trust in governmental policies. TMI 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 rural Pennsylvanian community to remain good Christians and patriots while opposing nuclear energy at the same time. TIM WARNEKE (Heidelberg) 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 (Geneva) 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 nuclear weapons.

The final panel explored grassroots initiatives. STEPHEN MILDER (Chapel Hill, NC) discussed the protests against the planned Wyhl nuclear power plant in South Baden, Germany. Local opposition, which included conservative farmers and middle-class citizens from neighboring 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 (Sydney) 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. As the tensions over the Seneca Falls Women's Encampment in upstate New York demonstrated, feminist radicalism turned off many potential supporters. Finally, SUSANNE SCHREGEL (Darmstadt) 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.

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 (Albany, NY) raised the question of the impact of the peace movements. Whereas former U.S. President George H. W. Bush retrospectively claimed that pursuing „peace through strength“ had worked, Wittner concluded that in fact governments had 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“ led to a considerable reduction in the nuclear danger. With nuclear arsenals now significantly diminished Wittner stressed real progress.

A panel discussion on the second conference night provided a contrast to Wittner's upbeat message. It featured the author JONATHAN SCHELL (New York), 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 (New York) and PHILIPP GASSERT (Augsburg), Schell highlighted some of the failures of earlier anti-nuclear movements and what their contemporary relevance was. As Schell insisted, the dangers of „exterminism“ are still with us, and with global warm-

ing, they seem to have taken on a new dimension. Whereas Schell stressed continuities between then and now the conference mostly explored the specificities of 1970s and 1980s. The „nuclear crisis“² 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 discussions demonstrated, historical research into the 1980s is propelled by new questions and exciting source materials, some outstanding examples of which this conference brought to the fore.

Conference Overview

Panel 1: Doomsday Ideologies

Michael Foley (Sheffield): „No Nukes and Front Porch Politics: Environmental Protest Culture and Practice on the Second Cold War Home Front“

Wilfried Mausbach (Heidelberg): „Nuclear Winter: Prophecies of Doom and Images of Desolation During the Second Cold War“

Eckart Conze (Marburg): „The Role of National Socialism and the Second World War in the Discourse on Nuclear Armament“

Keynote

Lawrence Wittner (Albany, NY): „The Rise of the Hawks and Revolt of the Doves: Writing the History of the Second Cold War“

Panel 2: Film & Popular Culture

Tony Shaw (Hertfordshire): „Exposing America's Media-Energy Industry Complex During the Late Cold War: Hollywood's The China Syndrome (1979)“

William Knoblauch (Athens, OH): „Selling the Second Cold War: British Anti-Nuclear Pop, 1980-1987“

Panel 3: Music & The Arts

Laura Stapane (Heidelberg): „Artists for Peace: A Commercial Event, Political Demonstration, or Cultural Festival?“

Martin Klimke (Washington, DC): „Between 99 Red Balloons and a Green Caterpillar: Nuclear and Environmental Discourse in 1980s

Popular Music and Electoral Politics“

Panel 4: Literature And The Press

Philipp Baur (Augsburg): „Writing Against the Bomb: German Nuclear Fiction in Between Authenticity and Utopia“

Thomas Goldstein (Clemson, SC): „A Tenuous Peace: Anti-Nuclear Activism Within the East German Writers Union in the 1980s“

Dolores Augustine (Jamaica, NY), „The Peace and Anti-Nuclear Movements in German Print Media During the New Cold War“

Panel 5: Establishment Reactions

Jan Hansen (Berlin): „The Political and Cultural Discourse on Nuclear Weapons in the German SPD, 1979-83“

Tim Geiger (Berlin): „Did Protest Matter? The Influence of the Peace Movement on the West German Government, 1977-1980“

Reinhild Kreis (Augsburg) „Drifting Apart“? German and American Debates on Generational Change in the Early 1980s“

Public Podium

Jonathan Schell (New Haven): „The Fate of the Earth Revisited: Nuclear Dangers Then and Now“

Co-Panelists: Frida Berrigan (New York) and Philipp Gassert (Augsburg)

Panel 6: Security Cultures

Natasha Zaretsky (Carbondale, IL): „Atomic Nightmares and Biological Citizens at Three Mile Island“

Tim Warneke (Heidelberg): „The Ubiquitous Dr. Strangelove: Madness as a Central Topos of Cold War Discourse“

Katrin Ruecker (Geneva): „Why is there no Accidental Armageddon Discourse in France? How Defence Intellectuals, Peace Movements, and Public Opinion Rethought the Cold War During the Euromissile Crisis“

Panel 7: Local Activism

Stephen Milder (Chapel Hill, NC): „Create Two, Three... Many Wyhls!: How Grassroots

²For the term see <<http://www.nuclearcrisis.org>> (15.12.2010).

Protest in the Rhine Valley Inspired the Anti-Nuclear Movement“

Kyle Harvey (Sydney): „Radical Feminism and the Anti-Nuclear Movement: The Politics of Difference“

Susanne Schregel (Darmstadt): „Small Spaces for Peace: A Transnational History of Nuclear Free Zones, 1970-1985“

Tagungsbericht *Accidental Armageddons: The Nuclear Crisis and the Culture of the Second Cold War, 1975-1989*. 04.11.2010 - 06.11.2010, Washington, DC, in: H-Soz-Kult 21.12.2010.