

Between Pacifism and Environmentalism: The History of Greenpeace

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Abstract

The essay focuses on the intermingling of pacifism, anti-nuclearism and political environmentalism and the interconnection between foreign and domestic policy. In particular it offers a nuanced understanding of the role played by the antinuclear movement in inducing Reagan to change his negotiating strategy on nuclear weapons reductions. Besides the article introduces a research agenda for a project that looks at the history of Greenpeace investigating it as a significant political and social phenomenon that produced a truly global conversation on environmental issues.

Keywords: Anti-nuclearism; Pacifism; Environmentalism; Reagan.

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The history of the Cold War overlaps with the history of nuclear weapons and the political and military doctrines associated with them. The development of nuclear weapons, the nuclear arms race, nuclear doctrines, the threat of their use and their non-use, the cultural dimension of nuclear arsenals and the political and diplomatic implications of nuclear weapons have attracted historians' attention as a constitutive aspect of the Cold War itself.¹ Less attention has, instead, been given to another aspect inherent to the birth of nuclear weapons themselves, namely, forms of opposition and organized criticism against them.²

My broad research interest lays in the interaction among policymakers and political and social movements during the Cold War. Specifically, in my previous research I have analyzed the interplay between the U.S. antinuclear movement of the 1980s and Reagan's administration. This research is focused on the antinuclear protest wave that emerged in the U.S. between 1979 and 1987 and, in particular, on the birth and development of the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign (NWFC), the umbrella organization through which the American antinuclear movement became a mass phenomenon as well as the response to the antinuclear criticism articulated by the Reagan's administration and the emergence of a public debate on the disarmament issue.³

Obviously, the antinuclear mobilization of the 1980s was not a novel phenomenon. Indeed, the opposition to the use of nuclear weapons started with the beginning of the *atomic age* itself. From 1945, some segments of public opinion in Europe, the United States, Japan and Australia expressed their rejection toward the proliferation and use of nuclear weapons through different forms of protest. The public criticism against the nuclear arms race has had different phases, and the expansion or the ebb of the antinuclear movement has been influenced by changes in the international context. In phases of growing bipolar tensions, characterized by an acceleration in the arms race, the antinuclear movement has often forcefully reemerged.

In the 1970s, the antinuclear movements, which had lain dormant after the signature of the Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963, began to re-emerge along two lines that ended up overlapping and mutually reinforcing themselves. On one hand, antinuclear pacifism resurfaced on the public scene denouncing the danger of the constant accumulation of nuclear weapons in a climate of growing bipolar tension. On the other, environmental groups started to criticize the peril of nuclear power, in particular, the peril of radioactive contamination, resulting from nuclear power plants.

Therefore, at the end of the 1970s the target of antinuclear protests was double, namely, the nuclear power plants and the nuclear arms race. In my previous research, the issue of the protests against nuclear power was touched on only marginally, focusing instead on antinuclear pacifism and the challenge it posed to Cold War statecraft.

Starting in 1979, the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union deteriorated again and it seemed that *détente* and the arms control process were at a standstill. In this tense inter-

1. On these aspects there is a vast historiographical production. On the non-use of nuclear weapons see Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons since 1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007 and McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years*. New York: Random House, 1988. On the cultural dimension of the atom see Paul Boyer, *Fallout. A Historian Reflects on America's Half-Century Encounter with Nuclear Weapons*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998 and Allan M. Winkler, *Life Under a Cloud. American Anxiety About the Atom*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999. On the nuclear arms race see David Holloway, "Nuclear weapons and the escalation of the Cold War, 1945–1962," in *The Cambridge History of Cold War. Origins*, eds. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 and Francis J. Gavin, "Nuclear proliferation and non-proliferation during the Cold War," in *The Cambridge History of Cold War. Crises and Détente*, eds. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
2. The most comprehensive historical reconstruction of the antinuclear movement is Wittner's trilogy *The Struggle Against the Bomb*: Lawrence S. Wittner, *One World or None. A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement Through 1953*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993; Lawrence S. Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb. A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1954–1970*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997; Lawrence S. Wittner, *Toward Nuclear Abolition. A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1971 to the Present*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. In the three volumes he analyzes what he identifies as the three waves of the antinuclear movement in different areas of the world. On the antinuclear movement as a transnational force see Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Trans-national Movement to End the Cold War*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.
3. The results of this research have been published in Angela Santese, *La pace atomica. Ronald Reagan e il movimento antinucleare (1979–1987)*. Firenze: Le Monnier, 2016) and Id., "Ronald Reagan, the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign and the Nuclear scare of the 1980s," *The International History Review*, 3 (2017): 496–520.

national context, the antinuclear movement, having lain dormant for much of the previous decade, experienced a resurgence in both Europe and in the United States. In Europe, the origin of this fresh antinuclear wave is often traced back to NATO's double track decision of 1979, which was greeted with public protests in the countries expected to deploy the euro-missiles, namely Italy, Great Britain, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium.⁴ The antinuclear wave of this period led to both the revival of established organizations, such as the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), and to the creation of new ones, such as the European Nuclear Disarmament Campaign (END), whose main short-term target was to block the deployment of the euro-missiles and remove the already deployed Soviet SS-20 missiles. Almost simultaneously, in the U.S., antinuclear pacifist groups started to oppose the Reagan administration's massive military build-up, its harsh anti-Soviet rhetoric, its abandonment of détente and its loose talk about the possibility to wage (and win) a limited nuclear war. In 1981, pacifist and antinuclear environmental organizations coagulated in the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign that was designed to stop nuclear testing and to call off the development and the deployment of nuclear weapons. Actually, anti-nuclear groups in the Old Continent had known a timid phase of mobilization already in 1977 when they protested against the possibility of deploying the neutron bomb that was proposed by the Carter administration on European soil. This limited resumption of anti-nuclear protests was soon replaced by the widespread protest against euro-missiles.

1 Some Historiographical and Methodological Notes

The interplay between pacifism, anti-nuclearism and political environmentalism is historically relevant, and my research on this phenomenon is placed at the crossroads of different historical sub-fields: diplomatic history, political-institutional history and environmental history. In studying the interplay between the NWFC and Reagan's Administration as well as the complex issue of nuclear negotiation, different interpretative paradigms were made use of in order to avoid privileging one to the detriment of the others. A multilevel approach was adopted, analyzing traditional state actors and non-state actors, such components of the movement that were transnational in their structure and capability to mobilize people. This study also attempts to interconnect international and domestic factors, foreign and domestic policy, and to analyze, within the U.S., the political and intellectual debate about nuclear weapons in order to detect the influence played by the movement on the Regan administration.

Moreover, while the traditional historiography of the Cold War, looking only at the role of state actors and governments, tends to not take adequate account of protest movements, on the contrary, pacifist historiography tended to emphasize their role to the point of identifying, in some cases, a cause-and-effect relationship between the mobilization against atomic weapons of the 1980s and the conversion to the cause of anti-nuclearism by the leaders of the two superpowers. As far as the historiography of the NWFC is concerned, most of the literature focuses on what is considered the period of maximum expansion of the campaign, i.e. the years between 1981 and 1984, thus setting aside both the gestation phase of the movement and its persistence in political space, well beyond the beginning of Reagan's second term. In addition, these works were produced in most cases by people involved in various capacities in the development of the campaign and, although they are useful for reconstructing the movement's point of view based on the use of primary sources as well as personal memories, they cannot fully articulate the White House's response.⁵

4. The double-track decision is considered the crucial factor for the beginning of the third anti-nuclear wave by many scholars: Carter April, *Peace Movement-International Protest and World Politics since 1945*. London-New York: Longman, 1992; David Cortright, *Peace: A History of Movement and Ideas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008; David S. Meyer, *A Winter of Discontent: The Nuclear Freeze and American Politics*. New York: Praeger, 1990.

5. David S. Meyer, Thomas R. Rochon, *Coalitions & Political Movements. The Lessons of the Nuclear Freeze*. Rienner: Boulder, 1997; Robert Kleidman, *Organizing for Peace. Neutrality, the Test Ban and the Freeze*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993; Pam Solo, *From Protest to Policy. Beyond the Freeze to Common Security*. Cambridge: Ballinger Publishing Company, 1988; Douglas C. Waller, *Congress and the Nuclear Freeze. An Inside Look at the Politics of a Mass Movement*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987.

The aim of this research was, therefore, to offer a point of view that, starting from the integration between the perspective offered by both the traditional studies of the Cold War and the pacifist historiography, including specific references in the literature to the NWFC, focuses on the evolution of the NWFC during the period between 1979 and 1987 and on the reaction planned by the White House. Specifically, the administration's response was studied, not only by looking at public statements by Reagan and by other government officials, but also by examining the strategies of the *Nuclear Arms Control Information Policy Group* (NACIPG), the interdepartmental group created specifically to implement an offensive against the antinuclear movement.

In analyzing this framework of events, an attempt was made to examine both the international situation and the political and institutional context within the United States, as factors that affected the articulation of the interaction/clash between the freeze campaign and the Reagan administration. In particular, considering the interaction between the NWFC and the White House, this research has examined how *nuclear fear* has contributed to increasing public awareness of disarmament issues and, at the same time, to swelling the ranks of antinuclear organizations; as well as to how the movement attempted to influence government decisions; how the administration tried to condition the debate on defense policies and respond to antinuclear criticism; and how public inclinations were influenced by the confrontation/clash between the antinuclear movement and the government.

The research is based on primary sources, that are mostly unpublished, coming from both public and private collections. The archival work followed three directions: firstly, the funds relating to the NWFC kept at Swarthmore College Peace Collection (Swarthmore, PA) and at the Center for the United States and the Cold War - The Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives (New York, NY); secondly, documents related to the Reagan Administration, available from the National Archives and Records Administration (College Park, MD) and from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (Simi Valley, Ca). Thirdly, in order to reconstruct the public debate that developed in the 1980s regarding the issue of nuclear weapons, some newspapers were consulted (including the New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Boston Globe, Wall Street Journal, Christian Science Monitor) and a series of surveys conducted between 1980 and 1987.

Looking simultaneously at the Reagan administration's records, in particular, at the documents of the NACIPG and nuclear freeze campaign documents, this research put together both the perspective of the traditional diplomatic history and peace history by analyzing both state actors and the movement. The assumption was that to study the complex issue of nuclear negotiation during the 1980s in a comprehensive way, it was necessary to interconnect international and domestic factors. The aim was to understand how the White House tried to respond to the domestic antinuclear challenge as well as comprehend in what way the movement influenced U.S. public opinion and, in the end, affected policy making on the nuclear issue.

In my research I argue that, actually, public opinion was, eventually, the battleground where and for which the White House and the NWFC were competing. Given the impact of antinuclear protests on domestic public opinion, Reagan could probably not ignore this domestic factor. First, as shown by the creation of the NACIPG, he was forced to deal with the challenge of a movement that was putting his foreign policy strategy under siege. Second, under the pressure of public opinion, of the Congress and of allied governments, mobilized by the antinuclear movement, Reagan was persuaded to change his approach toward arms reductions at least from a rhetorical point of view and to prove, as shown by the Eureka College and the SDI addresses, that he was willing to achieve an agreement with the Soviet Union, and that in some way he shared the same concerns as the antinuclear activists.

2 From Antinuclear Pacifism to Environmentalism

During the past few months, I begun a new research project devoted to the history of the Canadian organization Greenpeace. I therefore took up an aspect that had remained secondary in my first research, that of political environmentalism, a complex phenomenon which, in order to be properly studied, requires the consideration of political, social and cultural aspects.

Throughout the 1970s, modern environmentalism developed around the world, leading to "the emergence of global-scale environmental anxieties and awareness" and to the birth of environmen-

talist campaigns and movements.⁶ Although mobilizing issues were different from place to place, environmentalism rose as a response “to the environmental disruptions that came with pell-mell economic growth in the Age of Exuberance.”⁷ In particular, the huge quantities of energy and materials that had fueled the unprecedented post-war economic growth and the wastes and pollution generated in the process, together with oil spills and accidents at nuclear and chemical plants, combined “to raise public concerns about negative externalities of economic growth,” highlighting the increasing decay and devastation of the environment.⁸

In the United States, the origin of the modern environmental movement can be situated between the publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962 (the popular book in which biologist Rachel Carson exposed the damage produced by pesticides both on the environment and on human health) and the celebration of the first Earth Day in 1970.⁹ The latter, promoted by Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson, was meant to highlight how “the obsession with industrial growth and consumerism was straining the environment to the breaking point,” introducing first, to many Americans and then to international public opinion the problem of the negative effects of human activities on the ecosystem and the possible depletion of natural resources.¹⁰ Another turning point for the emergence of the modern environmental movement, at least for the United States, was the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill. The accident highlighted “the danger of oil production and insufficient regulation of industries with a potential for environmental threats,” helping to popularize the environmental cause.¹¹ Moreover, on March 28, 1979, at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, the core of reactor number two was seriously damaged due to a series of technical malfunctions and human errors, causing a leakage of highly radioactive substances into the atmosphere. It was the most serious accident that has ever occurred in the history of commercial nuclear power production, which revealed “security problems that had so far been ignored” and pushed public opinion to deal with the consequences of accidents or malfunctions in the nuclear field. The Three Mile Island incident caused what the *Washington Post* referred to as “emotional fallout,” with a wave of protests against nuclear power plants that was not limited to the United States but that also reached Europe. In Hanover, West Germany, 35,000 people protested against the construction of a nuclear waste deposit with the slogan, “We all live in Pennsylvania,” underlining the global dimension of the nuclear threat.¹²

Among the environmental organizations that emerged in this cultural and political context, Greenpeace occupied a central position, not only due to its geographical expansion, reached in a few years after its own creation, but also due to its longevity and for being one of the most famous environmental organizations in the world. Indeed the creation of Greenpeace, officially founded in 1971 in Vancouver, should be placed in the context of growing environmental and ecological awareness from the late 1960s to the beginning of the 1970s, and also of the social and political mobilization of that period.

Its genesis actually can be traced back to 1969, when a group of Quaker pacifist activists, the American spouses Bohlen and Stowe, who immigrated to Canada to escape the draft for the Vietnam War, joined Bob Hunter, an exponent of the local counter-cultural movement, in a campaign against American nuclear testing scheduled to take place near the island of Amchitka, Alaska. The initial name of the group, crated in the context of the Sierra Club’s local chapter, was *Don’t make a wave committee* and

6. John R. McNeill, “The Environment, Environmentalism, and International Society in Long 1970s,” in *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspectives*, eds. Niall Ferguson, Charles S. Maier, Erez Manela, Daniel J. Sargent, Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 263.

7. *Ibid.* 278.

8. *Ibid.* 14.

9. On Rachel Carson see Chad Montrie, *The Myth of Silent Spring. Rethinking the Origins of American Environmentalism*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018.

10. Benjamin Kline, *First Along the River. A Brief History of the U.S. Environmental Movement*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007, 81-82.

11. Eric Smith, *Energy, the Environment and Public Opinion*. Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002, 3.

12. “Reaction to Plant Mishap Spread Across Country,” *The Washington Post*, 2 April 1979. On Three Mile Island see Mario Del Pero, “We are all Harrisburg-. Three Mile Island and the Ultimate Indivisibility of the Atom,” *RSA Journal*, 26 (2015): 143-172.

it was motivated by the fear that American underground nuclear testing could produce earthquakes and tsunamis.

Within a few months, the original group expanded, including environmental and pacifist activists from the Vancouver area, eventually separating from the Sierra Club, which was considered too moderate, and then developing a precise protest strategy based on direct actions and nonviolent resistance, thus evolving into Greenpeace.

With the arrival of the Canadian journalist Ben Metcalfe, Greenpeace also developed a media strategy, based on the concepts of *mind bombing* and *global village*, which proved to be particularly effective in recruiting other activists and in gaining the attention of international media and public opinion. It is no coincidence that already in 1974, Greenpeace was able to open offices in the United States, the most important of which was in San Francisco; and in 1977 the first European office was created in Great Britain. Also, thanks to the role of David McTaggart, a Canadian activist residing in New Zealand, who returned to his homeland in 1972 to put his boat, the Vega, in the service of Greenpeace. Then in 1978, Greenpeace International was created, which gathered and coordinated the various European offices, which over the years would definitively outclass the role of the original Canadian office.

A fundamental turning point in the history of Greenpeace, in addition to the creation of Greenpeace International, was in 1975, when the non-governmental organization launched the first campaign with an exclusively environmental connotation, that is, the campaign against indiscriminate whaling, transforming itself from an antinuclear campaign with an environmental connotation into an environmentalist organization *tout court*, which began to work on the concept of interdependence between human activities and natural systems.

Building on the recent wave of scholarship into pacifist and environmental movements and organizations as well as the new historical interest for the social and cultural transformation developed since the 1960s, my research aims at reconstructing the history and role of Greenpeace as a significant political and social phenomenon that had produced a truly global conversation on environmental issues.

The research aims at examining the origins and development of Greenpeace, paying particular attention to the political, social and cultural factors that led to the birth of this organization; to the strategies adopted by the founders to gain public attention; to their ideas and reflections on ecological and environmental issues and to the tactics used to engage with policymakers. Furthermore, in this last regard, the history of Greenpeace will be reconstructed by taking into account that, since its creation, it acted as a self-conscious transnational organization, trying to work within a transnational political space, in particular, through its lobbying role at the UN Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm.

Moreover, through the history of Greenpeace, this research aims at analysing a series of issues related to environmentalism and also to examine some more general themes in respect to which the Canadian group acted in some way as a precursor, such as, the issue of the safety of nuclear power plants, the environmental impact of military infrastructures and experiments, the idea that growth could not be unlimited, the recognition of the interconnections inherent in the global ecological system and the campaigns for the protection of individual animal species.

Although Greenpeace has played a fundamental role in raising awareness of international public opinion on issues relating to environmentalism and ecology, and despite having a longer history than other organizations founded in the same period and a still considerable number of members and supporters, it has received little historiographical attention, especially in Italy.

Excluding the volume by Frank Zelko of 2013,¹³ there are no historiographical reconstructions of Greenpeace. There are memoirs of the activists involved in Greenpeace campaigns (which offer a partial and partisan view of the events), journalistic works (that are useful but that do not rely on primary sources), and reports on the history of the organization commissioned and published by Greenpeace itself (and which, as such, have a self-celebratory approach). Consequently, there is no adequate reconstruction of the historical, political and cultural context in which this organization was conceived and created.

13. Frank Zelko, *Make it a Green Peace. The Rise of Countercultural Environmentalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Therefore, this research aims at filling this gap, reconstructing the history and role of Greenpeace using a comprehensive perspective based on the intermingling of different historical sub-disciplinary fields, such as environmental history, social history and political history. Moreover, the research is based on primary sources from different archival repositories. Most of the documents related to Greenpeace can be found in the Vancouver City Archive, (in particular the Greenpeace Foundation Fond and the Mayor's Office Records), and at the University of British Columbia (Rare Books and Special Collections). In this regard, I had the opportunity to consult and collect the relevant documents from these archives during a research trip to Vancouver in January 2020. Further documentation can be found in the repository of the International Institute for Social History of Amsterdam (in particular, the Greenpeace International Archives).

In addition to primary sources and the relevant secondary literature, in order reconstruct the public debate that developed in the 1970s on the issue of ecology, I plan to consult several newspapers and magazines (including *Time*, *The New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*) and a series of opinion polls (for example the Gallup Poll).

The broad aim of the research is to address the emergence and evolution of Greenpeace as a significant political and social phenomenon, which has produced a truly global conversation about environmental issues.

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