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Between Accidental Armageddons and Winnable Wars: Nuclear Threats and Nuclear Fears in the 1980s

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In 1977 the board game “Fulda Gap: The First Battle of the Next War” hit the shelves in the United States. Playing on the central geostrategic role of West Germany in the Cold War, publicity for the game stated, “If war ever again comes to Europe, the major Soviet thrust must be aimed at the powerful US forces guarding southern Germany. In order to breach NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] defenses and break through to the heart of Europe, the armored columns of the Warsaw Pact must force their way through the Fulda Gap.”¹ As a war simulation on the brigade level, the game underscored the vulnerability of US troops to a Soviet advance. Through its two main scenarios – the “Tripwire” (a Soviet surprise attack) and “Advance Warning” (partial mobilization/redeployment of NATO forces), as well as their variants “Warsaw Pact/NATO Disintegration” – it also reminded its players of the drastic consequences of war, which might include the use of chemical, biological, and even nuclear weapons.

Only a few years later, the military strategy and security policy of the superpowers had vastly overtaken the premises of the game. The introduction of the Soviet SS-20 and the planned stationing of Pershing II and Cruise Missiles as NATO’s response – the policy centerpieces of what contemporaries perceived as a “second Cold War” – intensified both the speed of any potential conflict and its destructive impact on Europe.²

The choice to deploy the Pershing missiles represented a fundamental diplomatic departure, working against years of détente efforts, from West Germany’s *Ostpolitik* to East-West disarmament and human rights agreements (1972: SALT I; 1975: Helsinki Accords; 1979: SALT II). Alarmed by the 1975 introduction of the SS-20, the NATO Council

in December 1979 ratified the “Double-Track Decision,” followed in short succession by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The NATO document called for negotiations with the Soviet Union to correct the strategic imbalance and to establish a mutual limitation on intermediate-range ballistic missiles. Should these talks fail, NATO would immediately undertake a modernization of its nuclear arsenal, including the production of Pershing II and Cruise Missiles and their placement in Western Europe.³ As negotiations sputtered, due both to the Soviet Union’s refusal to withdraw the SS-20s and, at least in part, to the West’s weak interest in an agreement, NATO initiated the rearmament plan, further heightening superpower tensions.

Concomitant with this escalation was a strategic shift in US security policy from the concept of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) prevailing in the early decades of the Cold War to a “countervailing strategy” expressed in Presidential Directive 59 in July of 1980. The reorientation now allowed for the possibility of a winnable nuclear war, especially if confined to the European theater. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 reconfirmed the widespread impression of a departure from the traditional balance-of-power doctrine to a more aggressive phase of global competition between the two superpowers and a remilitarization of East-West conflict.⁴ Reagan presented his proposed Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) as defensive and even antinuclear, as it promised to deter a nuclear attack. But, as critics loudly noted, it also made an intercontinental nuclear war newly viable, insofar as one side might now “win” by knocking its opponents’ missiles out of the sky (or upper atmosphere). In addition, Reagan included Colin S. Gray, a key architect of the winnable nuclear war doctrine, among his top military advisors.

These developments greatly increased public fears of nuclear calamity. Anxiety abounded throughout the world during the 1980s, spanning mass culture, the literary world, the news and entertainment media, religious and civil society institutions, activist enclaves, alternative arts scenes, government bodies, and the highest echelons of security policy.⁵

Most notable, in the cultural realm, was the made-for-television American movie *The Day After*, which first aired on November 20, 1983, to nearly 100 million viewers. In gripping melodrama, it envisioned the cataclysmic destruction brought on by a full-scale nuclear war and the dismal life for its survivors. The film incited torrents of commentary from pundits, security experts, and scientists. Activists, for their part, used it as an organizing tool, holding screenings in college dormitories, community centers, and churches. The movie was occasion for probably the greatest

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attention Americans had paid to the prospect of nuclear war since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

Indeed, the movie provoked such alarming reactions even before its screening that the American Broadcasting Corporation organized a post-broadcast discussion with heavyweights like Secretary of State George Shultz, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, as well as journalist William F. Buckley and author/activist Elie Wiesel.⁶ Successfully or not, the panel tried to at least soften public fears. The film made an impression on President Ronald Reagan himself, who mused in his diary that it was “powerfully done,” “very effective & left me greatly depressed.” He wondered whether it would “be of help to the ‘anti nukes’ or not” and was resolved “to do all we can to have a deterrent & to see there is never a nuclear war.”⁷ In that sense Reagan may even have felt confirmed and legitimized in what he had declared as the ultimate goal of his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), namely “to give us the means of rendering these nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete.”⁸

The film had international resonance as well. This was true, above all, in West Germany, as both the quintessential “frontline” state in a potential nuclear conflict and home to a spirited peace movement with roots in environmental and student activism, as well as prior antinuclear campaigns. The movie’s German distribution company held an exclusive screening for journalists and members of the German parliament before its broad release.⁹ Hitting German theaters one month after its US airing, the film attracted 3.6 million viewers in its first five weeks; its gross of \$50 million equaled the US box-office revenues for the blockbuster *Star Wars: The Return of the Jedi* during the same period. Capturing the symbiosis of escalating geopolitical tensions and public worry – as well as the American penchant for exporting both its power and its protest culture – *Die Zeit* said of the film’s German release, “Aren’t they wonderful, these Americans? They sent us the Pershing and *The Day After* – the bomb and the [survival] manual at the same time.”¹⁰

The Day After was only the most prominent cultural representation of a nuclear showdown in a time-period saturated with them, on both sides of the Atlantic. The 1983 techno-thriller *War Games* further elevated the atomic threat to the level of mainstream debate. *When the Wind Blows*, the 1986 animated British film with a soundtrack featuring David Bowie and Pink Floyd’s Roger Waters, achieved cult status as a dour, antinuclear polemic. Precedent had been set for this genre of doomsday verité (as opposed to the more allegorical “disaster film” or sci-fi dystopia) by the

time of the release in 1979 of *The China Syndrome*, which depicted a meltdown at a commercial nuclear power plant. In an apparent case of life imitating art, just twelve days after its release there was a severe accident at a nuclear reactor at Three Mile Island (TMI) in Pennsylvania. The film, the panicked reaction to TMI, and the fierce protests against nuclear power already taking place helped establish another hallmark of the era: the twinning of concerns about nuclear weapons and nuclear power in a novel mix of atomic-age fears.

Both European and American musicians took up the nuclear issue, whether in apocalyptic musical visions or passionate appeals for peace. The Clash's "London Calling," the title song of its seminal 1979 album, described a nuclear attack in England's capital.¹¹ Kate Bush's "Breathing" (1980) imagined survival after an atomic explosion: "Breathing the fall-out in, / Out in, out in, out in, out in. / We've lost our chance. / We're the first and the last, ooh, / After the blast. / Chips of Plutonium / Are twinkling in every lung."¹² Such British groups as Ultravox, Frankie Goes to Hollywood, Nik Kershaw, and Pink Floyd released their own antinuke compositions. Sting's 1985 ballad "Russians" made a powerful plea for geopolitical rapprochement, declaring that "In Europe and America, there's a growing feeling of hysteria" and wondering "How can I save my little boy from Oppenheimer's deadly toy." "99 Red Balloons," the antiwar pop anthem by West Germany's Nena, instantly topped the West German charts in 1983, with the German original even making it to second place on the American Billboard Hot 100. American musicians mobilized against nuclear power as well. In 1979, A-list acts, including Paul Simon, Crosby, Stills and Nash, and Bruce Springsteen, held a series of now-famous No Nukes benefit concerts in New York City. The handsome triple-album from the concerts featured pages of information about nuclear hazards.¹³

In more traditional media, *Time* magazine – a standard-bearer of American journalism – made the nuclear threat a recurring cover story from 1979 to 1985. In his 1982 bestseller *The Fate of the Earth*, US journalist Jonathan Schell detailed the danger that nuclear warfare posed to the survival of humankind and the planet, while West German author Udo Rabsch's 1983 novel *Julius oder Der Schwarze Sommer* (Julius or The Black Summer) depicted the psychological anguish of the renewed arms race. The novel's nuclear-obsessed protagonist "had been preparing himself for the end of the world for years. His private library on the apocalypse filled an entire IKEA bookcase." After the city of Stuttgart is hit by an atomic bomb, he experiences a sense of relief, steeped in irony:

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“He knew that it had finally happened. It was all good now. Only one moment longer, and he would have gone crazy.”¹⁴

These cinematic, musical, and literary expressions of nuclear anxieties both emerged from and bolstered a transnational antinuclear protest movement. Producing massive demonstrations, the movement shaped the political and cultural landscape in the United States and much of Europe. On October 10, 1981, in the biggest peace protest Germany had ever seen, at least 250,000 demonstrators of diverse social, political, and cultural backgrounds gathered in Bonn to protest the escalating arms race. Two weeks later, two hundred thousand people rallied in Brussels, home to the headquarters of NATO. On November 21, nearly four hundred thousand demonstrators rallied in Amsterdam; held in the Netherlands, a country of minor geostrategic significance, the protest indicated how deeply nuclear fears had touched Western Europeans.

Though on a lesser scale, antinuclear protest emerged even in Eastern European countries, whose peace activism helped pave the way for the mass democracy movements of the end of the 1980s.¹⁵ In the fall of 1983 alone, a total of about five million people, mostly in Western Europe, took part in demonstrations against the so-called Euromissiles. In the United States, more than a million people participated in a Nuclear Weapons Freeze demonstration on June 12, 1982, in New York City. The gathering remains perhaps the largest political demonstration in a single locale in US history. Throughout these years of protest, an elaborate infrastructure of think tanks, NGOs, grassroots groups, and peace communities agitated for the freeze, reduction, or abolition of nuclear arsenals. Antinuke militants, often from the Catholic left, engaged in “high-risk” activism at nuclear sites and at the offices of weapons manufacturers, despite the threat of lengthy prison sentences. The Cold War of the 1980s, if centrally defined by superpower tensions, was also an era of unprecedented anti-nuclear protest.

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Nuclear Threats, Nuclear Fear, and the Cold War of the 1980s brings together scholarship from the United States and Europe to address responses to both the arms race of the 1980s and the ascent of nuclear energy as a second, controversial dimension of the nuclear age. Diverse in its topics and disciplinary approaches, the volume is varied as well in its core themes and ambitions.

Most broadly, this volume contributes to the emerging historiography of the 1980s by focusing on an underresearched aspect of the decade.¹⁶

The era's nuclear tensions have been addressed by scholars mostly from the standpoint of security studies, focused on the geostrategic deliberations of political elites and at the level of state policy. Yet nuclear anxieties, as the essays document, were so pervasive that they profoundly shaped the era's culture, its habits of mind, and its politics, far beyond the domain of policy. As during the "high Cold War" of the 1950s and early 1960s – and after an interregnum dominated by proxy conflicts between East and West in Vietnam and other "Third World" hotspots – the nuclear standoff between the Americans and the Soviets served in the 1980s as the alpha and omega of so much global politics.¹⁷ Renewed worries over an actual nuclear war, amplified by new scientific models spelling out the grisly consequences of nuclear conflict, made fear itself and a perpetual sense of crisis hallmarks of the era. This volume seeks to make palpable that elusive, ambient – yet essential – quality of the times.¹⁸

Nuclear Threats, Nuclear Fear also chronicles, following another major thread, the destiny of protest movements in the Western world after their assumed heyday in the 1960s. The 1980s are both commonly recorded and remembered as a period of social movement decline, dominated by the electoral ascent of the political right and the retreat of many on the left from activism. The administrations of Ronald Reagan in the United States, Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, and Helmut Kohl in the Federal Republic of Germany are thought to typify this rightward turn in both domestic and foreign policy, with the latter defined by a newly resolute Western stand against Soviet communism. Ideologically tinged, much popular memory of the era credits President Reagan's harsh stand toward the Soviets – and his aggressive embrace of a new arms race especially, which further damaged the Soviet economy – as key causes of the collapse of communism. Domestic political conflict, according to such portrayals, concerned mostly "cultural" issues such as reproductive rights and questions of diversity (in the United States at least), as well as debates over the size and scope of the welfare state, raging throughout the developed world.

Another, more complex narrative exists, as this volume seeks to elucidate. The mobilization against nuclear arms and nuclear power in the 1980s are among the most robust social movements in human history, likely exceeding in its size international opposition to the Vietnam War or any other global cause.¹⁹ And though based in the political left, with organizational roots reaching back to early public responses to Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Ban the Bomb efforts of the 1950s and 60s, the movement cut substantially across ideological

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lines, uniting diverse actors in promoting a “culture of life” against nuclear threats.

Nuclear Threats, Nuclear Fear seeks to capture the distinct qualities of antinuclear activism within the evolution of social movements. On one level, antinuclear campaigns were marked by the professionalization of its brand of activism. Expert advocates such as the Union of Concerned Scientists, lobbying organs such as SANE/Freeze, and countless think tanks and NGOs worldwide were drivers of debates over nuclear issues, wielding considerable influence on at least the articulation of policy options. As local governing bodies declared their jurisdictions “nuclear-free zones,” career politicians became antinuclear leaders as well.

By the same token, the antinuclear movement was very much animated by grassroots activism. Opposition to nuclear energy in particular bred a new kind of “accidental activist,” motivated less by ideology than common-sense resistance to perceived threats to health, home, and family. Such efforts, moreover, might feature skepticism toward experts and science more generally, as well as a new mistrust of politicians thought to be in collusion with industry and dangerously out of touch with the public. In this sense, the nuclear anxiety of the late 1970s and 1980s further cast suspicion on establishment authority, whose credibility had already been damaged by the saga of the Vietnam War, in which so many government claims proved untrue, and by the corrosive malfeasance of the Watergate scandal. Significantly, women organizing as women were among the most spirited and influential antinuclear activists. Whether appealing to women’s maternal identities as guardians of the species and the planet, or to the presumed affinity of women for peace, they made gender a vital trope in antinuclear discourse and a basis for mobilization. Paradoxically, both feminism, versions of which posited women as more peaceful than men and averse to ego-driven militarism, and conventional views on femininity, which celebrated traditional motherhood as the great protector against the predations of out-of-touch elites, rallied to the antinuclear cause.

Antinuclear activists in the United States and Europe, whether building on the tactics of the civil rights, anti-Vietnam War, or student movements of the 1960s, also practiced nonviolent, extralegal resistance on a massive – and historically underappreciated – scale. Opposition to the building of nuclear power plants in Seabrook, New Hampshire, and Diablo Canyon, California, produced among the largest civil disobedience campaigns in US history.²⁰ In Wyhl, West Germany, tens of thousands of Germans occupied the proposed site of a nuclear power plant, preventing

its construction. During the 1980s the same happened in the Bavarian town of Wackersdorf, the proposed site of a nuclear reprocessing plant, before the project was given up as politically unfeasible in 1989. With such tactics, antinuclear activists lent a radical edge to expanding understandings of nonviolence as a comprehensive ethic that was politically and spiritually opposed to nuclear arms, nuclear power, and what they considered a broader “culture of death.” In addition, such activism kept alive civil disobedience within the repertoire of civic action, for rediscovery and reinvigoration by subsequent movements like HIV/AIDS activism, the alter-globalization struggle of the late 1990s, and the campaign against fossil fuels in the present day. Documenting this aspect of antinuclear protest, *Nuclear Threats, Nuclear Fear* explores legacies of dissent within larger narratives of public engagement and civic action. Religious opposition to the arms race gave great moral weight to the antinuclear movement while enriching, especially in the “high-risk activism” of America’s Catholic left, traditions of prophetic moral witness. Recognizing the spiritual strain of antinuclear activism, the book speaks as well to efforts to define the political imperatives of faith and reimagine religion for the nuclear age.

The era’s antinuclear dissent both presupposed and reacted against pronuclear sentiment, which experienced its own surge. Such sentiment coursed through the highest levels of establishment politics, most obviously in the administration and policies of Ronald Reagan. In the United States, a parallel network of think tanks promoted hawkish stances on nuclear issues, echoing a defense industry ever eager to develop and manufacture new armaments in response to new, perceived threats. Pro-nuclear feelings had a popular dimension as well. Indeed, much of the appeal of President Reagan stemmed from his rededication to the anti-Communist crusade and promise to restore, following the fiasco of the Vietnam War, American military prowess and “greatness” in the international arena. Above all, Reagan’s uncompromising stand toward the Soviets in a newly escalating arms race epitomized this resolve and catalyzed a resurgent Cold War patriotism.²¹

The essays in this volume understand pronuclear sentiment – whether at the level of policy or public feeling, elite or grassroots opinion, and whether directed against the military or the civil use of nuclear energy – to be the backdrop against which antinuclear politics existed. The pronuclear position is, in a sense, the story of Reagan’s policy footing and the ascent of the political right – topics thoroughly engaged in existing literature on the 1980s. The volume therefore addresses those narratives

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only indirectly, focusing mostly on the development of an antinuclear counterpolitics and culture.

Another major theme of *Nuclear Threats, Nuclear Fear* is the very interpenetration during the 1980s of politics and culture with respect to nuclear issues. Its essays attest to the vital role of culture in communicating and popularizing antinuclear messages, with bearing on transformations in culture in the 1980s as a whole. Once again, the 1960s are an initial point of reference.²² Many of the artists rallying against nuclear weapons and energy, such as Crosby, Stills, and Nash, were long identified with the '60s-era counterculture and known for taking up political causes. Punk rock, as the great rebel genre of 1970s and 1980s music (within broadly white culture), inveighed against the nuclear militarism of President Reagan and the larger Reagan-Thatcher juggernaut.

Yet the 1980s also featured antinuclear-themed works from performers such as Sting, not conventionally thought of as “political” (and even less as creatures of the left). Commanding enormous pop audiences, they expressed themselves substantially through the new medium of the music video, conveyed through a new entertainment apparatus, MTV (Music Television). MTV itself became a major cultural institution of a kind that scarcely exists any longer in our current age of mp3 players, digital downloads, and the fragmentation of the cultural marketplace into innumerable niches. As a cultural commons with mass viewership, the network gave the political messages of its pop icons enormous reach and resonance. (The 1985 Live Aid benefit concert for famine relief in Africa, broadcast in full on MTV and England’s BBC, set an unsurpassed standard of celebrity activism as cultural spectacle.)²³ So, too, American network television, which had often censored even oblique expressions of opposition to the Vietnam War, embraced controversies over nuclear policy, both generating and shaping public debate. Political dissent, as this volume details, had clearly moved from the countercultural margins to the mass culture mainstream.

Culture was vital to the antinuclear movement in a second sense, insofar as activists tried to build their communities of resistance as a far-reaching alternative to a mainstream culture thought largely to celebrate – whatever its strains of dissent – militarism and war. Peace encampments against nuclear weapons and the mass occupations of proposed sites of nuclear reactors were prime venues for elaborating the values, aesthetics, and existential demands of this oppositional culture. As investments in that culture grew, the movement experienced a sharp version of the tension – common among social movements – between the

emphasis on prefigurative politics and personal transformation and the goal of building a maximally large base and elite support to effect actual policy change.

This brings us to a related dimension of this volume: assessments of the impact of antinuclear activism on geopolitics, security policy, and the nuclear power industry.²⁴ Such determinations engage persisting methodological issues in diverse disciplines – of great concern to activists as well – over how to measure the efficacy of political protest. For all the official handwringing and activist sound and fury over nuclear perils in the 1980s, it remains unclear what the consequences of antinuclear protest were. Did world leaders ultimately listen to the great swaths of their terrified populations and bend policy to the public will? Or did the narrow geopolitics of the Cold War, executed by rarified circles of world leaders only weakly accountable to their publics, drive policy? Rather than proposing definitive answers to these questions, the essays in this volume seek to pose the questions anew and consider highly mobilized public opinion and civic action as variables within complex sociopolitical processes.²⁵

A final theme of this book, touched on by nearly all of its essays, is the quality and texture of nuclear worries in the 1980s. These ranged from fears of “accidental Armageddons” persisting from the first decades of the Cold War to intensifying anxiety stemming from the apparent belief of a new generation of leaders in “winnable wars.” The volume posits these as two poles within a continuum of fear. Such fear both reflected and addressed not just the geopolitical hazards of the moment, or even the constitutive perils of the nuclear age, but also humanity’s Janus-faced relationship to technology writ large.

Fear over nuclear calamity is as old as the advent of nuclear arms, spiked by the Soviet acquisition of the bomb and the rapid development of the hydrogen bomb to replace its vastly weaker, atomic predecessor.²⁶ For the two decades following the nuclear equilibrium reached around 1960 as a result of the experience of the Berlin and Cuban Missile Crises, the prevailing security doctrine between the superpowers was deterrence based on the morbid wages of mutually assured destruction (MAD). Given the suicidal irrationality of a nuclear war, any nuclear attack – even if ordered by political or military leaders – could be nothing that its perpetrator (unless a malevolent, rogue actor) ultimately wanted. The presumption of a mutually shared rationality placed nuclear war at the far margins of willful, political calculation.

The postwar world was nonetheless haunted by the prospect of nuclear war, instigated by varieties of accidents. One possibility was a literal,

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technical accident, whether the unintentional delivery of nuclear ordinance via the malfunction of a nuclear armed airplane or submarine, or the errant launch of missiles from silos. But perhaps the greater likelihood – and the more richly imagined tragedy – was that breakdowns in communication systems could produce nuclear responses to ultimately phantom threats. The 1964 American film *Fail Safe* brilliantly depicted this scenario. In it, a minor technical-procedural glitch instructs a US bomber, believing the United States is facing attack, to strike the Soviet Union. Even after the error is identified, the strike protocols prove impermeable to the safety mechanisms built into their design and even the desperate attempts of the US president to call the attack off. The result is the sacrifice by the US president – portrayed in the film as a model of judiciousness and probity – of New York City for Moscow as the only way to prevent a wider war.

Beyond its particular scenario, the film expressed the fear that a strategic-technological-military apparatus could escape the control of its master to assert, in effect, a will of its own. Such fear has deep roots in modern consciousness, running from Goethe's 1797 tale of "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" through the Frankfurt School's dystopian images of instrumental rationality run amok. Nuclear weapons made the stakes of control infinitely high.

A variant of nuclear fear recognized that geopolitical conflict could quickly escalate into brinkmanship culminating in a nuclear war. In this script, nuclear war results from political decisions, and thus is not, *prima facie*, accidental. Nonetheless, such a war might emerge from a rapidly intensifying conflict that, ceding to the rules of a geostrategic game of move and countermove, drives its antagonists down increasingly narrow decision pathways, as if inexorably, they wind up where neither had wished to go. This was, more or less, the doomsday momentum of the Cuban Missile Crisis, halted only when the Soviets blinked.

Paradoxically, in the early decades of the Cold War, nuclear war was at once rationally prohibited by the ironclad logic of mutual deterrence and MAD; made possible by potential system failures; and endorsed by a politics of brinkmanship, whose efficacy requires that at least one side believes the threat of its adversary is credible. All the while, America's civil defense apparatus promoted the idea – believable to some, ludicrous to others – that even a thermonuclear war is survivable if one takes proper refuge at a public fallout shelter, in a private bomb shelter, or under a school desk as instructed in the notorious "duck and cover" exercises of the 1950s.

A final paradigm of nuclear fear imagined that the power to execute a nuclear strike might be seized by abject madmen, impervious to rational restraints. This was the nightmare depicted – in tones both macabre and absurd – in Stanley Kubrick’s iconic, 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove*. Viewed soberly, the film identifies through its freakish characters the American ideologies, impulses, and temperaments that exacerbate nuclear peril: zealous anti-Communism tinged with paranoia; a cowboy super-patriotism tinged with nihilism; and a ghoulish fascination with the science of destruction. (Recall that Senator Barry Goldwater lost the presidential election in 1964 in part because he was perceived by many voters as an extremist who could not be trusted with a nuclear arsenal.²⁷) But more deeply, the film suggests that the entire arms race and broader standoff between the superpowers are intrinsically insane, even if political and military leaders – unlike the caricatures in the film – are nominally “reasonable.” No degree of retail sanity, the satire implies, can ultimately disguise the wholesale madness at its core.

The overarching fear, as the sum of all particular worries, was that the entire system was so prone to accidents – both narrowly and broadly defined – that its continued existence made nuclear war increasingly likely or even inevitable. Put another way, the vagaries of chance, when locked in a certain structure of conflict, fed a fatalistic sense of Armageddon as destiny.

Fear of accidental Armageddon, as many of the volume’s essays document, persisted and even intensified in the 1980s. The film *War Games* (1982) updated *Fail Safe* for the computer age. It imagines the more perfect automation of war through computer programs designed to limit the exercise of human discretion and, hence, human error. But the system is also therefore resistant to efforts to halt or reverse computerized commands to launch nuclear strikes. Worse still, as a hacker discovers, the computer cannot adequately distinguish simulated war from the real thing. Only quick thinking and technical skill prevent a war game from becoming Armageddon. The film’s grand metaphor is that humanity – or at least its obtuse leaders – is playing perilous games with lethal toys it cannot control. That sentiment was echoed in other media, by diverse voices. It also drove opposition to nuclear power, conceived as a second great site of a potential, catastrophic mishap.

In a more political register, antinuclear activists feared that President Reagan’s often-bellacose rhetoric and reinvigorated militarist ethos might themselves precipitate crises with the potential to escalate into a nuclear exchange.²⁸ Reagan’s harshest critics worried that he, no matter his “aw

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shucks” charm, was deep down a Strangelovian figure with a reckless appetite for war.

The greatest catalyst for the era’s antinuclear protest was, however, the emerging doctrine of winnable war apparently underwriting both the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons and efforts to develop missile defense systems. With this doctrine, nuclear Armageddon potentially shifted from cruel destiny to clear-eyed choice.

The story of antinuclear dissent in the 1980s presented in this volume describes the diverse efforts – ranging from the push for a nuclear arms freeze, to advocacy for superpower adoption of no first-strike policies, to calls for the outright abolition of nuclear weapons – to meet both old and new constellations of danger and fear.

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The first section of *Nuclear Threats*, *Nuclear Fear* focuses on new perceptions of the nuclear threat and how they shaped political, moral, and scientific discourse. Wilfried Mausbach traces the history of the idea of “nuclear winter,” first introduced in 1983 by the American scientist Carl Sagan, best known as the impresario of the 1980 TV series *Cosmos*. Holding that nuclear explosions could trigger catastrophic climate change threatening the human race with extinction and planet Earth with ecological ruin, the theory caused great alarm among the public, while attracting the attention of policymakers. Though the science remained disputed, “nuclear winter” framed the nuclear threat in newly apocalyptic terms, helping to fuse issues of arms control with ecological concern, and the peace movement with environmental activism.

Natasha Zaretsky, in a similar vein, examines how the reactor meltdown at Three Mile Island in 1979 was constructed in thought largely as a hazard to public health, and reproductive biology especially. Cast in this way, it incited local activism cutting across ideological lines to include both antinuclear advocates and elements within the Christian “right to life” movement. Together they promoted a “culture of life” deeply critical of unchecked technology, the “experts” promoting it, and the government officials evidently failing in their charge to protect the public. Finally, Eckart Conze analyzes how in West Germany in the 1980s the National Socialist past and the Second World War were invoked on all sides to frame the stakes of the nuclear threat, especially with the deployment of the Pershing II missiles. Warning of a “nuclear Holocaust” and “Euroshima,” peace and environmental activists – in a remarkable shift to a victim-centered discourse – declared Germany an “occupied country”

at the mercy of US policy. Proponents of the missiles, in turn, accused the peace movement of a moral rigidity reminiscent of the Nazis and even linked disarmament with the “appeasement” policy of the 1930s. Valid or not, such constructions conveyed the intensity of German concern over nuclear perils. The brave new world of unprecedented nuclear threats was intimately bound up with interpretations of the German past and the complex wages of good and evil.

The volume’s second section places culture at the center of the anti-nuclear movement, stressing the reach of nuclear anxieties and the role of artists and entertainers in disseminating them. As William Knoblauch observes, the 1980s saw a “transnational renaissance of atomic pop” in which the United Kingdom played a leading part. Pan-European fears over Euromissiles, as well as the memory of German bombings during both world wars spiked British concern, with major groups recording hit songs criticizing the arms race. A second, substantially global “British invasion” promoted a gospel of peace, both countering the ostensible warmongering of its US ally and protector and declaring a European independence from a hegemonic, American belligerence.

Nuclear anxieties likewise permeated West German music, whose artists decried the apparent recklessness with which politicians jeopardized world peace, and German security especially. Some German artists deepened their political involvement, performing at events hosted by the nascent Green Party as it campaigned in the 1983 national elections. Hiring a seasoned concert promoter to bolster antinuclear performances, the Greens fused politics and culture in novel ways, establishing a firm base in the peace and antinuclear movements. Distancing themselves from traditional parties, while also mobilizing both undecided voters and those normally drawn to the Social Democrats, the Greens secured enough votes to at last enter Parliament. Culture, in sum, was integral to the ascent of a political party that soon took the global lead in antinuclear dissent.

Writers both in East and West Germany, as Thomas Goldstein documents, were also drawn into nuclear debates, revealing both the reach of—and limits to—state power. The East German Communist Party (SED) and the East German Writers Union teamed up to protest the NATO Double-Track Decision as part of a broader pro-Soviet peace campaign. Writers backed by the party published antiwar literature in international venues, while reaching out to like-minded writers in the Federal Republic. Yet instead of transcending the divisions inside the East German Writers Union, these officially orchestrated peace efforts provided a platform for criticism of the East German government, which promoted peace abroad

while curtailing basic freedoms at home. In this way, antinuclear sentiment contributed to domestic political dissent.

The book's third section explores the dynamic between local and transnational activism, starting with an account of how farmers, teachers, housewives, doctors, and others battled against a proposed nuclear power plant in the southwest German town of Wyhl in 1975. As Stephen Milder shows, this highly local movement soon became an object of national attention, drawing thousands of activists to block the plant by occupying its prospective site. The Wyhl protests helped birth the German antinuclear movement and provided grist for 1960s-era German radicals, while contributing to the emergence of the Green Party.

The events in Wyhl inspired as well activists in the United States, whose antinuclear campaigns nonetheless failed to achieve similar success. In the 1980s antinuclear efforts against toxins in such places as Love Canal, as Michael Foley elaborates, benefited from a rising ecological awareness spurred by recent environmental disasters. Yet the mere threat of an accident at a nuclear site – as opposed to an actual hazard, such as the dumping of toxic waste – made it hard for antinuclear activists to attract sufficient support to scuttle the erection of power plants. Nuclear anxieties, as Foley reminds us, remained somewhat abstract, creating special challenges for political mobilization.

Opposition to nuclear weaponry also drove the movement for nuclear-free zones (NFZs). Tracing declarations of NFZs from the Pacific to Europe and North America, Susanne Schregel examines how activists addressed geopolitical issues at the level of local neighborhoods. NFZs, moreover, helped to erode faith in the reigning doctrine of nuclear deterrence, which had failed, in minds of NFZ proponents, to ensure anyone's safety. NFZs represented the collective rejection of the arms race and the coercive civil-defense agenda accompanying it, in favor of local decisions thought to promote the core values of life. If small in number and politically marginal, NFZs represented popular breaks with the ethos of the Cold War that privileged national security over species survival.

Deterrence was questioned as well by European Nuclear Disarmament (END), one of the most influential groups within the Western European peace movement. As Patrick Burke documents, END's goal of building a "transcontinental movement" united activists across Western Europe and served as a basis for reaching out to peace and dissident groups behind the Iron Curtain. (The Dutch Interchurch Peace Council, as Sebastian Kalden illustrates, also played the role of

transnational facilitator, organizing religious opposition to nuclear weapons throughout Western Europe.) Though controversial among Western peace organizations – many of whom favored working with state representatives – such outreach helped form a vision of a “detente from below” that proved influential during the revolutions of 1989 and beyond. Antinuclear activism thus had far-reaching, if sometimes unintended, consequences.

The volume’s final section explores both how nuclear anxieties challenged the basic tenets of domestic and foreign policy during the 1980s and the impact of the peace movement on geopolitics. Lawrence Wittner, a prominent antinuclear activist and scholar of the age under consideration, makes the case for the movement’s strong influence. In his view, public protest not only thwarted the creation of the so-called neutron bomb (which would waste human life, while leaving physical infrastructure in tact) but was also responsible for the introduction of the disarmament track in the NATO Double-Track Decision. Most dramatically, Wittner claims as partial accomplishments of the movement President Reagan’s remarkable shift on nuclear issues (including his 1984 call for the elimination of all nuclear weapons) and the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev’s “New Thinking,” paving the way for the end of the Cold War. Making more modest claims, Tim Geiger and Jan Hansen credit the West German movement with softening the position of Helmut Schmidt on Euromissiles and eventually forcing the Social Democrats to rethink their approach to nuclear issues.

Katrin Rückert, on the other hand, illustrates how the NATO Double-Track Decision did not spark any comparable public debate in France before 1983, where antinuclear activism remained of marginal significance. The French press, the general public, as well as the Socialist President François Mitterrand and his party (once in power) were largely supportive of NATO’s course of nuclear deterrence, primarily considering, as Rückert points out, the stationing of missiles and the rise of nuclear pacifism a “German matter.” Looking beyond the United States, Enrico Böhm illustrates how the emergence of G7 summitry in the second half of the 1970s coincided with the renewal of nuclear tensions in international relations and how the issue of nuclear policy gradually complemented the economic dimension of the summits. Challenged by both the Soviet Union and the public in the West, government leaders used these meetings to demonstrate unity and trust in their security strategies, which were nonetheless drawing increasing public scrutiny and skepticism.

Rigorously researched and passionately argued, the essays in this volume thus aim to chart a new course for understanding the importance of controversies over nuclear technologies to the condition of humanity and the planet we share.

Notes

1. Jim Dunnigan, "Fulda Gap," SPI (Simulations Publications, Inc.), 1977.
2. Although the "nuclear crisis" that emerged as a result of the Soviet deployment of SS-20 missiles aimed against Western Europe and the NATO Double-Track Decision of 1979 was one of the key events of the Cold War – and has recently even been labeled the "last battle of the Cold War" – its academic treatment still remains in its infancy. This is partially due to the fact that the history of the late 1970s and 1980s in general is only slowly beginning to enter historiographical discourse after the possibility of empirically grounded research. Existing studies on the NATO Double-Track Decision and its repercussions are, with the exception of Jeffrey Herf's study, largely situated in the fields of political science and international relations and include Karla Hannemann, "Der Doppelbeschuß der Nato. Genese, Motive und Determinanten einer umstrittenen bündnispolitischen Entscheidung," Ph.D. diss., University of Munich, 1987; Dieter Arndt, *Zwischen Alarmismus und Argumentation: Die sicherheitspolitische Öffentlichkeitsarbeit der Bundesregierungen zur innenpolitischen Durchsetzung des NATO-Doppelbeschlusses* (Munich, 1988); Thomas Risse-Kappen, *Null-Lösung. Entscheidungsprozesse zu den Mittelstreckenraketen 1970–1987* (Frankfurt, 1988); Herbert Dittgen, *Deutsch-amerikanische Sicherheitsbeziehungen in der Ära Helmut Schmidt. Vorgeschichte und Folgen des NATO-Doppelbeschlusses* (Munich, 1991); Jeffrey Herf, *War by Other Means: Soviet Power, West German Resistance, and the Battle of the Euromissiles* (New York, 1991); Anton Notz, *Die SPD und der NATO-Doppelbeschuß. Abkehr von einer Sicherheitspolitik der Vernunft* (Baden-Baden, 1991); Stephan Layritz, *Der NATO-Doppelbeschuß. Westliche Sicherheitspolitik im Spannungsfeld von Innen-, Bündnis- und Außenpolitik* (Frankfurt, 1992); Tim Matthias Weber, *Zwischen Nachrüstung und Abrüstung. Die Nuklearpolitik der Christlich Demokratischen Union Deutschlands zwischen 1977 und 1989* (Baden-Baden, 1994); Manfred Becht, *SPD, Ost-West-Konflikt und europäische Sicherheit. Sozialdemokraten und sicherheitspolitische Zusammenarbeit in Westeuropa* (Aachen, 1997); Helga Haftendrn, *Deutsche Außenpolitik zwischen Selbstbehauptung und Selbstbeschränkung* (Stuttgart, 2001); Eckart Conze, "Modernitätsskepsis und die Utopie der Sicherheit. NATO-Nachrüstung und Friedensbewegung in der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik," *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 7, no. 2 (2010), www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/16126041-Conze-2-2010. See most recently and surveying