



Volume 9. Two Germanies, 1961-1989

Comments on the Rapid Rise of Nuclear Fears (June 15, 1981)

In this op-ed piece, a critical journalist reflects on the proliferation of fears of nuclear annihilation in Germany. Such fears linked environmental protest with a growing peace movement that opposed the stationing of medium-range NATO missiles on German soil.

The Return of Fear

What would things be like today if the first atomic bomb had fallen in 1945 on the country it was invented and built for: Germany? Only the delay in finishing the ultimate weapon prevented the first two atomic bombs used against people from being dropped on Berlin or Dresden instead of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Among the Japanese, that stoic and brave people of the samurai and the kamikaze pilot, a kind of national panic still breaks out today if it emerges that American missile submarines have nuclear warheads onboard when they enter their Japanese base, or that such weapons are stored at that base in the first place.

This shows how profound the horror from those August days 36 years ago still is, even for the postwar generation. It is evidently incomparable with the horror of the “conventional” carpet bombing that fell on German cities. The Japanese also experienced some of that, the devastating firebombing of Tokyo in March 1945, for example, when almost 100,000 people are said to have died. Still, the memory of that pales in comparison with the incomprehensibility of the two atomic blasts.

More than 6,000 nuclear warheads are stored in the Federal Republic. The heaviest one that can be used on one of the 180 Pershing 1A missiles deployed in the Federal Republic has an explosive force of 400 kilotons, thirty times the strength of the Hiroshima bomb.

How have the Germans managed to regard as tolerable, and even highly desirable, a situation that would have resulted in a total collective nervous breakdown in Japan?

One of their secrets is that they transferred to nuclear weapons the belief in a miracle weapon that was aroused, but undercut, by Hitler. Finally: a surefire way to “keep the Asian hordes in check” – and cost-effective at that. Finally: a weapon that will keep the peace in Europe, because the more there are, the less they will go off – what an optimal connection between security and the arms race.

But this belief in miracles is not as childlike and naïve as it seems. It is a product of fear, as was the German belief in a miracle weapon during the final war years. At that time, it was supposed to numb people's consciousness of the approaching collapse. But even in the past two decades it has been one of the many clever methods by which contemporaries (and the especially threatened Germans, in particular) have tried to forget, deny, play down, and banish the real dangers of nuclear armaments from their thoughts through all forms of self-deception.

"A natural reaction to the knowledge that the nuclear apocalypse is definitely within the realm of possibility is rapid repression," writes British author Nigel Calder in his book *Nuclear Nightmares*. "I myself plead guilty to deliberately evoking forgetfulness. When I watched my children grow up and sailed happily in my boat, I tried not to think about the multiple warheads of the large missiles."

Aside from a handful of peace researchers who were shaken off like annoying drunkards over all these years, just about every politician and journalist would also have to sign this confession. Even the strategists in the Pentagon, in Brussels, in Bonn, who did nothing the whole time but think up new varieties of nuclear horror for the purpose of preventing it, even they encoded and abstracted the reality of this horror to make it inaccessible to themselves and others.

They developed a specialized language that, for example, subsumed the mutilated, charred, and radiation-contaminated civilians that would result from a nuclear attack on a military target under the term "collateral damage." Unimaginable disasters turn into mathematical quiz questions ("How many warheads will I retain to destroy the conurbations of the enemy after he has annihilated all my land-based missile silos?"). The unthinkable is becoming more and more thinkable.

Animals faced with an unavoidable danger often resort to "displacement activity." As if to distract themselves from their paralyzing helplessness, they do something absurd, like preen themselves. Many worried citizens, especially among the younger generation, have done something similar in recent years. Either they did not comprehend the main danger of nuclear armaments or they felt helpless in the face of it, so they turned to other problems – important yet secondary problems such as environmental protection.

And so the curious thing happened that tens of thousands fought stubbornly against the nuclear power plant in Brokdorf, but for a long time totally ignored the planned deployment of new nuclear weapons systems in their country – this situation is comparable to that of a person who lives in a house built on dynamite, but is only concerned with the operating safety of his toaster. But that is starting to change. With greater intensity than ever before, the dispute over the escalating arms race to "catch-up" to the enemy has roused slumbering fears, forced open the repression and denial that had already been creaking at every joint, and raised the first and only really existential question for the Germans and their neighbors.

An awareness is spreading through the land that it makes little sense to worry about all of society's other problems if nothing happens regarding the question of its basic survival. It makes as little sense as a man on a minefield who worries himself to death about his retirement pension.

Source: Wilhelm Bittorf, "Die Wiederkehr der Angst" ["The Return of Fear"], *Der Spiegel*, June 15, 1981, pp. 28-29.

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