Abolishing Nuclear Weapons, Abolishing War

by

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Abstract: Nuclear weapons are part of the broader system of state violence developed by certain governments to maintain control and coercion at home and abroad. While separate from military budgets and war, nuclear weapons are intimately bound to the culture, economics, and politics of militarism and the military-industrial complexes, as well as other structures of state violence, in the countries that possess and deploy them. Organising for the abolition of nuclear weapons therefore needs to learn from and be connected to other abolitionist movements, including those working to end war and build solidarity, peace, and justice for all.

20 years of DEP has also seen 20 years of intense war. The US-led debacle known as the Global War on Terror. Russia's invasion and occupation of Ukraine. Israel's genocide of Palestinians. Syria's war against its own citizens. Saudi Arabia's bombing of Yemen. Civil wars in Sudan, Myanmar, Ethiopia, Yemen, and so many other places, most of which can be tied directly to the brutal legacies of colonialism or the ongoing cruelties of imperialism and capitalism, or all of the above. Nuclear weapons, while not detonated in any of these conflicts, have nevertheless been used constantly to provide cover for military misadventure while producing their own harms through development, testing, and possession. Amid all this violence, it is essential for academics, researchers, activists, organisers, and those determine to end war and build peace to look to the roots. To be radical, in this purest sense – to understand how this violence has manifested so relentlessly for the past twenty years, for the past century and counting. And most importantly, to find, in these roots, the paths and tools for building a different world.

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In this anniversary edition of DEP, authors look at women's responses to militarism and contributions to antiwar and antinuclear organising and activism. They also explore the contributions of feminism to understanding war, weapons, and militarisation of society, and to articulating and imagining futures that promote the well-being of all people, other living things, and the planet. This edition looks at the impacts that the work of feminists, women, and gender non-conforming people have had – and should have – on the development of disarmament law, on the literature and poetry of peacemaking, and on challenging nuclear imperialism and global military injustice. All of these pieces are important for tracing the history of militarism and illuminating feminist resistance to it.

Part of this history is the history of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). In 1915, in the midst of World War I, women from various countries gathered in The Hague to discuss the war and to outline a path to permanent peace. In the first resolution of what would become WILPF, these women identified the main impediment to ending war as the private profits accruing from the manufacture of weapons (WILPF 1915). Thirty years later, during World War II, British politician Fenner Brockway and journalist Federick Mallay (1944: 8) drew the same conclusion, articulating that "the existence of an elaborately organized and financially powerful vested interest devoted to the propagation of aggressive nationalism and the multiplication of armaments." Emerging from these periods of relentless and gory slaughter, none other than US President Eisenhower (1961) warned that the United States had created "an immense military establishment and a large arms industry" that had accumulated unprecedented "economic, political, even spiritual" influence over nearly every aspect of public and private life. He highlighted the "the potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power" and the need to "guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence".

During World War II, the US government turned on a faucet of military spending unlike any the world had ever seen, building a military machine involving millions of troops, weapon producers, base construction workers, and countless others. Spending dropped after the war, but the faucet remained open perpetually. The US built a permanent war economy, suited only for permanent war. Since then, beyond recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US military has been part of armed conflicts in Somalia, Libya, Syria, Pakistan, Yemen, the Philippines, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Grenada, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Viet Nam, Laos, Cambodia, and Korea, among others. The US government also built a vast network of military bases on foreign soil. Today, it has about 750 bases in 80 countries and colonies – three times more than it has embassies or consulates, and three times more overseas bases than all other countries combined. The US military and special forces have used these bases to launch wars or military operations in at least 25 countries since 2001 (see Vine, Deppen, and Bolger 2021). The US also developed, alongside the Soviet Union, a nuclear arsenal capable of destroying Earth many times over, and a system of nuclear weapon deployment and war planning enabling the commission of mass atrocities on a world-ending scale.

Of course, other countries have engaged in war and militarisation during this period too, and other countries have built up their own national military-industrial complexes (MIC). In every country where it exists, the MIC is a network of the

military, private military and security companies, weapons manufacturers – and now also increasingly, technology companies operating under military contracts (e.g. Klare 2023). The MIC also includes politicians with military or weapon facilities in their districts, parliaments or Congresses, lobbyists, academics and universities funded by weapon contractors or laboratories, think tanks and research institutes and even, especially in the United States, the entertainment industry.

In the US context, but also in other countries, military spending goes to private companies that provide goods including weapons and services to the military. These companies then reinvest to keep the money coming. Military contractors spend hundreds of millions of dollars on political contributions, lobbying expenses, and donations to think tanks, helping to shape a hypermilitarised approach to foreign policy. As this approach becomes dominant, and as the MIC grows, it systematically diverts money, labour, and energy away from meeting human and planetary needs. The growth of the MIC and the dominance of a militarised foreign policy also leads to a burgeoning international arms trade. Weapon contractors don't just build weapons for their host governments to use in battle, but also create technologies of violence for export. The United States currently sells weapons to at least 96 countries, far more than any other supplier, but many other – predominantly Western countries – also make a killing on the arms trade (e.g. SIPRI 2023).

Overall, the world spends more than $2 trillion per year on militarism: on weapons, war fighting, and military personnel. The United States is responsible for about 38 percent of this figure, more than the next ten countries combined (Tian et al 2023). And this amount does not even account for US black budget – the funding for its 16 intelligence agencies – nor for the resources spent on its Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), or its police forces, all of which are increasingly militarised. While their funding is not counted in military budgets, these agencies use military equipment, receive military training, employ former military personnel, and deploy increasingly militarised operational styles (see, e.g., Federation of American Scientists and *The Washington Post*).

The last 20 years of the so-called Global War on Terror, led by the United States, resulted in about $2 trillion going to weapon companies, hundreds of billions to private military and security companies, about $8 trillion overall for the wars, and over $20 trillion once all the funding for domestic militarism like DHS, CBP, ICE, and police is included (Costs of War). Of course, the Global War on Terror did not just cost trillions of dollars. It also cost millions of lives and continues to disrupt millions more today and for future generations. In the last 20 years alone, US-led wars have killed an estimated 4.5 million people, injured tens of millions, and displaced 38 million. The total cost of these wars extends also to militarism's carbon footprint. Once again, the US military is the main culprit – its greenhouse gas admissions are larger than that of any other organisation on earth. Between 2001 and 2021, the US military emitted 1.2 billion metric tons of greenhouse gases – more than twice the annual emissions of the nearly 300 million cars in the United States (Crawford 2019).

Despite these extraordinary costs in lives, resources, and climate chaos, global military spending has continued to climb through economic recessions and even

the COVID-19 pandemic, crossing the $2 trillion threshold for the first time in 2021 (SIPRI 2022). Stock prices of weapon manufacturers surged as Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and again as Israel intensified its genocide of Palestinians in 2023. And just as the CEOs of private contractors speak gleefully about the expanding markets for armed drones and the rising returns generated from increasing tensions between China and the West, nuclear strategists have also used these opportunities to clamour for more funding for modernisation of nuclear forces. All nine nuclear-armed states are already pouring billions of dollars into so-called nuclear modernisation programmes, through which they are upgrading or extending the lives of their nuclear warheads, missiles, bombers, submarines, and/or production facilities (Kristensen et al 2023). The United States, Russia, and China are all revamping their nuclear weapon testing sites (Cheung, Lendon, and Watson 2023). The nuclear arms race is not a relic of Cold War history, it is an ever-present danger lurking in the shadows, hiding behind the more obvious and tangibly felt impacts of the climate crisis, war, rising inequalities, and other lived experiences of the horrors of capitalism. But nuclear weapons have a role in generating these horrors, even without being "used".

The nuclear-armed states are collectively spending at least $82.9 billion a year on their nuclear arsenals (ICAN 2023). This is part of the rising tide of global military expenditure, yet is separate from those budgets – additional money spent on mass death instead of social good. The physical harms of constructing nuclear weapons are also extreme – the harm to humans, animals, plants, water, and air from uranium mining, from milling and processing fissile materials, from the construction of the weapons and their delivery systems, from radioactive waste, from leaks and accidents at nuclear facilities, and of course, from the more than 2000 nuclear "test" detonations around the world, mostly on stolen land, colonised or treated as disposable by the nuclear-armed states. These harms are borne primarily and disproportionately by Indigenous nations and by poor communities of colour around the world. Like all other harms of the MIC, and of capitalist and militarist exploitation and imperialism, the harms of nuclear weapons are not indiscriminate at all.

The environmental and human costs of nuclear weapon production is then overlayed with fears of their use. Nuclear war, like the arms race, is not a ghost of Cold War-past but a spectre haunting the here and now. The political leaders of Russia, the United States, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) have all threatened to use nuclear weapons in recent years. The mere threat of use, implicit or explicit, has enabled wars of aggression, shielding those waging war from consequence. Yet nuclear proponents continue to claim the opposite – that nuclear weapons prevent war – even as the calamites escalate, cascading into each other and inching the world closer to global conflagration. In astonishing denial of this reality, each of the nuclear-armed states and some of their allies have doubled down on the theory of deterrence to justify their possession of these weapons of mass destruction.

In his introduction to *Einstein's Monsters*, Martin Amis (1987: 2-3) writes:

What is the only provocation that could bring about the use of nuclear weapons? Nuclear weapons. What is the priority target for nuclear weapons? Nuclear weapons. What is the only established defence against nuclear weapons? Nuclear weapons. How do we prevent the use of nuclear weapons? By threatening to use nuclear weapons. And we can't get rid of nuclear weapons, because of nuclear weapons.

This is the relentless circular (il)logic of nuclear deterrence, the principal tenet of which is that the possession of nuclear weapons makes their use impossible and thus prevents war. But whether it is the United States attacking Iraq, Russia invading Ukraine, or Israel committing genocide in Palestine, it should be clear to all that nuclear weapons do not prevent war. They enable it.

Furthermore, nuclear weapons are the backbone of a mentality that "security" can best be achieved through militarism. These weapons of mass destruction provide the governments that possess them with the ultimate tool of militarism – the capacity to commit mass murder, and the ability to threaten to do so if their "interests" are not met. In this sense, nuclear weapons are part of a continuum of violence deployed by a nuclear-armed state. And while the budget lines for nuclear weapons may be separate, the bombs themselves are not separate from the larger project of militarism. Financial investments in nuclear weapons provide profits for weapons manufacturers that also build conventional bombs, missiles, guns, fighter jets, and other technologies of war. Thus, nuclear weapons provide sustenance to the war machine, and exist as the pinnacle of violence produced by that machine.

The possession of nuclear weapons also drives the development of self-destructive plans masquerading as national security. Nuclear-armed governments willfully put people and the planet in harm's way while arrogantly asserting that this is the best way to protect them. One example is the land-based missile silos in the United States, which are *intended to serve as targets for enemy nuclear weapons* with no concern for the communities or land upon which they are based. Sébastien Philippe (2023: 48) writes, "a key argument for the continued existence – and now the replenishment – of the land-based missiles is to provide a large number of fixed targets meant to exhaust the enemy's resources." Yet the most recent, 3000-page report from US government on these silos does not mention what happens if the missiles are attacked. As Philippe's modelling of these "sacrifice zones" shows:

A concerted nuclear attack on the existing U.S. silo fields – in Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, Montana and North Dakota – would annihilate all life in the surrounding regions and contaminate fertile agricultural land for years. Minnesota, Iowa and Kansas would also probably face high levels of radioactive fallout. Acute radiation exposure alone would cause several million fatalities across the U.S. – if people get advance warning and can shelter in place for at least four days. Without appropriate shelter, that number could be twice as high. Because of great variability in wind directions, the entire population of the contiguous U.S. and the most populated areas of Canada, as well as the northern states of Mexico, would be at risk of lethal fallout—more than 300 million people in total. The inhabitants of the U.S. Midwest and of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario in Canada could receive outdoor whole-body doses of radiation several times higher than the minimum known to result in certain death (Philippe 2023: 49).

"Higher than the minimum known to result in certain death." How can anyone read these words and think, "No, this is not relevant for a study on the impacts of our weapon systems." Or, more broadly, think, "No, this is not relevant for our consideration of the possession and deployment of these weapons at all. In fact, we will base our security strategy on the possibility of mass death and unspeakable suffering, and this is normal and fine for us, and a few select others – this is how we will dominate. This is how we 'win'."

This mindset is what lies at the root of the nuclear problem, and of the problem of the broader war machine, of militarism and of "national security". This mindset has become profitable – a century of warmongering setting in stone the manufacture of weapons as the surest, most reliable way to make money in a capitalist world order, and itself ensuring the survival of this world order through extraction and dominance. The self-reinforcing loop of profitability and necessity; the colonial, murderous spirit inherent from "manifest destiny" to "full spectrum dominance;" the sense of exceptionalism of being nuclear-armed armed and of being *capable* of being of nuclear-armed – each is a clear reminder of the ways in which nuclear weapons are part and parcel of a bigger system of state violence.

Nuclear weapon aren't just about foreign policy or war and imperialism – they are also about power at home. They are part of a system that relies on policing, surveillance, and the carceral system to maintain a state's control over the people living within it. From Russia's repression of antiwar activists to China's comprehensive surveillance of its population – particularly its Muslim population – to Israel's control, detention, and murder of Palestinians, to India's persecution of minorities to US racialised police brutality to the UK's expansion of its nuclear arsenal and shrinking of its social services – each of these is reflective of government policies based in violence and control as the means to sustain and reproduce power of the state.

Understanding where the nuclear industry fits into the broader system of state violence is important for challenging it collectively with other working for peace and justice. The relationship between nuclear weapons and other instruments of coercion and control in foreign and domestic policy illuminates the need for – and possibilities of – combining efforts for disarmament, demilitarisation, decarceration, decolonisation, decarbonisation, and degrowth. To counter any system of state violence, abolition as practice, theory, and approach is critical.

The language and practice of abolition provides context and clarity to our efforts for social transformation. W.E.B. Du Bois' classic analysis of abolition refers to "the political struggle led by formerly enslaved people in the wake of the Civil War to construct new institutions while also eradicating violent ones" (Berger and Stein 2020). The frame of abolition speaks directly to the need to not just put an end to a particular source of harm but to fundamentally transform the political, economic, and social relations that allowed that source of harm to grow and persist. By dismantling state structures of violence, abolition helps diminish the state's capacity for war, incarceration, and other acts of oppression. By disrupting capitalism and militarism, abolition impedes extraction, exploitation, inequalities, and related harms. All of this reduces the proclaimed "need" for state structures of violence.

Abolition is, in this sense, about building a cycle of peace instead of a cycle of violence.

A divest-invest approach is essential to abolition. This means divesting money and support from institutions that cause harm – including nuclear weapons, militaries, prisons, police, etc. and investing instead in care – in education, housing, jobs, food security, ecological sustainability, etc. Abolition can be read as having three main components: dismantling structures of harm; providing support to people targeted by the current system; and building the new systems we need to live in a world without police, prisons, borders, war, and other institutions of violence.

In relation to nuclear weapons and the broader MIC, this work is already underway. The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapon (ICAN)'s Don't Bank on the Bomb campaign has resulted in the diversion of billions of dollars from pension funds and financial institutions from nuclear weapon producing companies. Other campaigns to divest from the war machine, such as those led by Palestine Action, Dissenters, Campaign Against Arms Trade, Stop the Arms Fair, and the Stop Cop City movement, have targeted specific companies or financial backers to deter investments in weapon production, arms trade, or militarised police training compounds. Much more is needed, of course, as the arms industry continues to rake in deadly profits. Divestment also needs to be complemented by other initiatives to end the political influence and economic power of militarism in many countries, including for example the nationalisation of weapon manufacturers and the conversion of weapon producers and militaries into other industries for the social good. Closing foreign military bases, ending arms transfers, preventing new military and special forces operations, reducing military budgets, stopping exchange programmes and transfer of military equipment between police and militaries, and eliminating nuclear weapons are all part of the work needed for abolition of war.

Abolition also requires the cooperation between those working to end nuclear weapons and war with other movements against state violence – in part because there are material relationships between, for example, the MIC and the prison-industrial complex, border enforcement, and fossil fuel extraction, but also because the intersectional organising helps build and reinforce power outside of the state. In antinuclear organising, some of the most successful campaigns have been led by Indigenous nations in so-called Australia in preventing nuclear waste dumps and uranium mines. In prison and police abolitionist organising, many of the leading strategies for care and community have come from queer and trans activists and sex workers, who know how to provide safety and security in the face of state repression. Learning from the experiences of those who already operate in contestation with the state will be imperative to confront the deep pockets and thickly rooted culture of militarism and nuclearism.

An end to nuclear weapons may sound inconceivable to some, and more so an end to the MIC, and to war. But as abolitionist organising has shown time and again, building towards another world is imperative to achieving anything. Banning nuclear weapons through the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons does not eliminate all the bombs immediately, but it has created a community of states, survivors, activists, and academics working to dismantle deterrence theory, divest

from nuclear production, and disrupt the politics and policies of those who support nuclear weapons. It has been effective in doing so already – and becomes more relevant, not less, as the world becomes increasingly volatile and unhinged as it has with mounting war and genocide. The current trajectory of more and more violence cannot, will not, hold forever. Ensuring that our movements are interconnected – that the abolition of nuclear weapons is part of global disarmament and demilitarisation; that demilitarisation and dismantling of the war machine goes together with dismantling police states and violent border regimes; and that care for all becomes the priority of politics and policies – this is how we build change even amidst the seemingly insurmountable violence in which we currently live.

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