

Global Dangers

*The new abnormal:
from nuclear
weapons to extreme
nationalism and
intolerance*

Victoria Brittain

Victoria Brittain has spent much of her working life in Asia, Africa and the Middle East writing for The Guardian and other journals. Her most recent book is Shadow Lives: The forgotten women of the war on terror (Pluto Press). Her next book is Love and Resistance in the films of Mai Masri, forthcoming from Palgrave Macmillan.

Today the entire future of our planet is threatened, and dark shadows are over the lives of our children and grandchildren. These are the twin existential threats: nuclear war and devastation of our planet in climate change. These are truly terrifying times, compounded by the reckless political class in so many countries defying these realities.

For 75 years since the US nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki we have lived under the threat of nuclear blackmail and the annihilation of life on earth. There is a willed forgetting of the tortured ghosts of those cities. They must *never* be forgotten.

In 2019, the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* unveiled the most recent Doomsday Clock – the hands again were at two minutes to midnight. The hands have never been closer, even at the height of the Cold War. The scientists described the global situation as ‘the new abnormal’ – hence my title. The scientists warned of a general erosion of the taboo against the use of nuclear weapons.

Our new abnormal is the general acceptance of nuclear weapons. How far our civilization has come in the wrong direction since the searing words of four decades ago when the great Sean MacBride, winner of both the Lenin and Nobel Peace prizes, spoke of the ‘absolutely obscene arms race’.

Nuclear weapons are illegal — on the basis of targeting civilians and of causing indiscriminate damage. No one can remember Hiroshima and Nagasaki without condemning these weapons as utterly immoral. Like chemical and biological weapons, they must be stigmatised and outlawed.

Last autumn we marked as usual the UN's International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons. It is 50 years since the UK ratified the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Yet, far from disarming, here we are with the UK in the deep hypocrisy of planning to update Trident – the continuous at-sea presence of our nuclear submarines, armed with US missiles – which every sane person believes fervently will never be used.

The estimated cost of this – £205 billion – is indeed obscene. Our years of austerity have seen our schools, hospitals, local government starved of resources and our society frayed as a result of political choices like Trident, which make no sense – look no further than the homeless on our streets, the escalating child victims of knife crime and the scourge of child exploitation by ‘county lines’ drug gangs.

When NATO met in London in December 2019 we had an opportunity for civil society – that is us – to demonstrate that we have had enough of hypocrisy and want action from European governments to support the 2017 UN Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. It is time to stop leaving that responsibility to local governments and cities – like Manchester, the first city in Europe to back the Treaty.

There was a Counter-summit in London on November 30 and then a demonstration. Our passionate committed turnout should have been bigger, and where were the politicians? They should be the voices of Britain as a leading voice for making a complete U-turn on arms spending, and in particular lead the world in renouncing nuclear weapons.

The new nuclear threats

Today we are already – unbelievably – into a new nuclear arms race, the scientists warn. All nine, yes nine, nuclear weapons holding states are now developing new weapons – including the appallingly named ‘mini nukes’, which are quick and easy to move. The political leaders of the US, UK, France, Russia, Pakistan, India, Israel, China and North Korea are in this shameful group – opposed by scientists, academics, students and every other layer of civil society in countries across the world.

Today five decades of arms control architecture is being systematically dismantled. Last summer the US withdrew from the INF Treaty (on Intermediate Range nuclear weapons). Another treaty, New Start, which limits the number of warheads, is due to expire in 2021. Meanwhile, new US nuclear bombs are due to be installed in Europe this year – in Belgium, Italy, and the Netherlands – and in Turkey.

And, new states, with ruthless, unpredictable leaders – Turkey and Saudi Arabia – now want their very own nuclear bombs. Last autumn

President Erdogan announced his desire for Turkey to have its own nuclear weapons. In fact Turkey has actually had US nuclear weapons secretly stored in the country for six decades, in a bunker guarded by US soldiers. These are a leftover of the Cold War years and were unacknowledged until last autumn when President Trump boasted publicly about how safe they were there in Turkey. He said this just as Turkey launched an invasion of northern Syria, which undercut years of US policy in Syria fighting ISIS side by side with the Kurds, who are Erdogan's targets. A new and unpredictable front then opened in the eight year war in Syria which has ruined the country, sparked a million-strong refugee tide and fired insecurity across the region and beyond.

As far as Saudi Arabia is concerned, last summer multiple whistleblowers came forward to warn US Congressional leaders about efforts inside the White House, by the president's son-in-law Jared Kushner, for the transfer of highly sensitive US nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia – whose effective leader is his personal friend.

How abnormal and dangerous is this? Amateur politicking at the highest level:

* A clueless and ruthless businessman making US policy on behalf of his erratic father-in-law – the most powerful man in the world. While Mr Kushner's other close personal friend, Benjamin Netanyahu, worked successfully to make sure that Israel's policies became America's through this relationship.

* Mr Kushner has pursued policy – including nuclear proliferation and ignoring US official policy channels – on behalf of a rogue regime already spreading war and instability in the whole region against real US interests. This is Saudi Arabia, whose greatest regional rival is Iran.

The US provocation of Iran

Tehran has come in for obsessive and unprecedented provocation of Iran by the Trump White House. And as 2020 opened with the US shock assassination of Iran's revered military leader Qassem Suleimani in Iraq, along with his closest military associates in the fragile country, the danger of a conflagration in the whole Middle East region was imminent. President Trump, his Vice-president Mike Pence and Secretary of State Pompeo have lighted a touch paper with an international war crime which dwarfs the dangerous errors of the previous year's provoking of Iran.

Over a year ago President Trump reneged completely on US

commitments under the Iran nuclear deal – the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA – see *Spokesman 143*). This 2015 multilateral agreement involved years of painstaking diplomatic work by the European Union and the Obama administration in Washington with the Iranian government. It restricted Iran’s nuclear programme and closed all possible paths to a nuclear weapon. It was a landmark achievement for world nuclear security and its breaking is another of the scientists’ danger warnings.

In return for accepting the restriction Iran was promised relief from US economic sanctions. But in May last year the US unilaterally re-imposed oil and financial sanctions on Iran, and made it almost impossible for European or any other world business to reopen their links with Iran, promised under the treaty, because US sanctions threatened those companies and banks concerned.

Ever since, the US administration has waged what can only be called economic warfare on Iran. Tehran for a whole year none the less observed its obligations under the JCPOA.

Iran’s reaction in the last months was to resume some enrichment over the 300kg limit for low-enriched uranium stockpiles, and threatened to do more. It was a signal to the European Union that Iranian patience has an end, and it is up to the EU to save the international treaty their American ally has tried to sabotage.

The Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Zarif provided an important insight into the treaty when he explained last autumn, ‘JCPOA was not, as is often said, built on trust – it was indeed based on explicit recognition of mutual mistrust. That is why it is so long and detailed’. He cited the provision of Paragraph 36 of the treaty which provided for a move such as the restarting of enrichment if one party broke the treaty. As the US did.

Now, where is the UK government response and the popular outrage and fear in the UK at the US’s reckless sabotage of successful years of international diplomatic effort towards maintaining peace and heading off nuclear confrontations? In the Cold War days, fear of nuclear war was everywhere. It was a priority preoccupation for any thinking person. That is just no longer true – and some reasons for this dangerous oblivion are in media shortcomings as well as political leadership, which I refer to below.

The Climate Emergency and the military/industrial complex

Away from nuclear and onto Climate Change, which is every bit as bleak. The end of 2019 saw the US definitively pull out of yet another

international treaty — the Paris climate agreement, and an extremely disappointing lack of political will by many other leaders at the Climate Summit in Spain. But the Climate Emergency has at last begun to come to the centre of global and individual consciousness in much of the West. All over the Global South people are *living* the destruction of Climate Change, and part of the great tidal waves of migration destabilizing even the West are driven by that.

The President of the United States and his fossil fuel tycoon friends go on trying, but they can no longer dominate the media on this issue. The global conversation has changed, triggered by the efforts of an heroic 17 year old Swedish schoolgirl's wake-up call for people to listen to the scientists' work.

What has not yet changed, however, is the explicit consciousness that war and the military industrial complex are the greatest drivers of the Climate Emergency. Though CND was very much on the streets as XR Peace in the street actions of late 2019.

Today, as so very often, giant US and Israeli War planes are in the skies, and bombs drop on Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan or Gaza. It has been going on for so many years now that it has become a normalised part of Middle East life, and barely registers in the West. Every now and again the bombing of a wedding party, a school bus trip or a hospital wakes a brief response of outrage in the West. But not nearly enough outrage to stop it happening again. And again. Yet this all involves our military hardware, our bombs, our logistical support.

It has to stop.

What do we imagine is the carbon footprint of these wars without end which we mostly choose not to pay attention to? One figure from CND sticks in my mind – carbon emissions from the US military contributed 80% of US government energy consumption. 80%. Unthinkable priorities.

Besides the twin existential crises I have highlighted – rapid climate change and escalating nuclear ambitions and proliferation – I want to draw attention to some other real global dangers. All of them are linked and are threats within our own society which we cannot afford to be indifferent to, or tolerate, any longer.

The changing role of media and misinformation in undermining democracies

At the centre of these questions is the work of a lazy, compliant and commercialised media, mainly captured by Western political and

economic interests and their local clients, which shapes public opinion to accept a complacent narrative of what is normal and what is, in the words of the scientists I mentioned earlier, the new abnormal. Their responsibility in amplifying dangerous populism and nationalism is very great.

And then there is new media. We know now how *Cambridge Analytica* harvested data from millions of Facebook users without their knowledge and used it to target them and their Facebook friends, to recruit for the Brexit Leave campaign, and later for Boris Johnson's Conservative party on behalf of a hard Brexit and then a General Election. The victim is our democracy, lost in waves of systematic government lies and false promises. Under questioning from the New York congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio Cortez last autumn, Mark Zuckerberg essentially confirmed that the Trump campaign will essentially have *carte blanche* to use the *Facebook* platform to wage an information war ahead of the US 2020 election. They have then a bottomless war chest for the lies and false data which is the Republican stock in trade.

We have no plan or mechanisms to stop all this, and though the EU has signalled great determination to enforce new rules, the UK will not benefit.

Widening wealth gaps and forgotten history

The new normal of dramatic gaps in both income inequality and wealth inequality, and the normalisation of corruption is a seeping poison in our society as in so many others and a reversal of the ideals and promises for progress of the mid twentieth century.

How have we all allowed our multilateral institutions, built painstakingly in the aftermath of World War Two and its horrors, to become so weakened that there is almost no public pushback against these unilateral illegalities by the US which so enhance our world's dangers?

Today's UN weakness would have deeply shocked the idealistic founding generation of the mid 20th century. Those great women and men believed in a world based on international law, the principles of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, and a world order which would reduce poverty, increase education and health chances, restructure inequality and safeguard peace.

Now unstable world leaders are hugely responsible for the dangerous rising tide of nationalism, sectarianism and xenophobia. We can see it from India and the Philippines to Turkey, Israel, Hungary, Poland, all over Western Europe, to Brazil and the US.

In all of them we can say that social media amplifies lying by leaders,

but also bites back with rage against obvious wealth and opportunity differentials, leading to a corroding cynicism from the young who see wasted lives ahead for them.

Recently, Hong Kong, India, Iraq, Lebanon and Chile have been on fire with unprecedented mass demonstrations rejecting governments' corruption and their own lives of poverty and without hope. The young are fighting back without weapons – for their future.

Where are the carrying voices of responsible leadership for them and against the current tide? At least we can count on the Pope for a strong true voice with an echo – on migration and climate change.

Politicians? At home in the UK, we have the ethical voice against wars and for climate change action of Caroline Lucas; in Europe, on migration Angela Merkel was the voice of morality and compassion who opened Germany's doors; further away, New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinta Arden's immediate response to the massacre in her city's mosques was to act on gun control; in the US, you can hear truth daily on the issues which concern us from the fearless congresswoman Alexandra Ocasio Cortez.

And we have artists like Ai Weiwei, who uses his brilliant art work and films to expose searing truths of dictatorship, repression, war and migration. Artists and writers inspire us to see, and to act.

The changes in our society and in our inter-linked world – which we need so urgently – will come about because we all, individually and collectively, rise to the occasion of these dramatic challenges to our collective future and take the responsibility for demanding change in every possible and noticeable way.

CND was on the streets with Extinction Rebellion, handing out our fact-filled leaflets, speaking on the stages wherever possible. Greta Thunberg spoke for each of us when she told Barack Obama, 'I have learned that you are never too small to make a difference'. She's right. And I want to end with a variation on another of her dictums: when she was invited to speak to the US Senate, she gave them a copy of the 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change saying, 'I don't want you to listen to me. I want you to listen to the scientists'.

On nuclear weapons and the obscenity of our government spending on them, beyond those scientists, listen too to the ghosts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; on climate change, listen to the ghosts of the thousands of migrants under the Mediterranean, and, most recently and symbolically close to us, of the 39 migrants, including a teenager, who were murdered in a refrigerated lorry trying vainly to find a life – in our shamefully inhospitable country.