

Robin Fior

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*Portugal's Revolution of 25 April 1974 overthrew the country's longstanding authoritarian regime. The English graphic designer Robin (Reuben) Fior found himself in the midst of these historic events. That experience formed one part of a recent exhibition at the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon: **Robin Fior — Call to Action / Abril em Portugal.** 'Call to Action' echoed the young Fior's poster summoning all and sundry to 'join sit-down demonstration outside Ministry of Defence' on 18 February 1961 to demand the UK's nuclear disarmament. Its distinctive design and typography was to be replicated for years to come. Fior's Pluto Press logo will be familiar to many. He designed for the Russell Foundation during its early years, as well as supporting its work.*

The year 1961 proved eventful in Britain. On Saturday 18 February, Bertrand Russell with others answered the 'call to action' to join a sit-down demonstration outside the Ministry of Defence in Whitehall. "Polaris 'NO'" was emblazoned on Robin Fior's colourful, elegant and striking poster for the occasion. Polaris was the nuclear-armed missile delivery system which the United States deployed on submarines. The US would later sell Polaris to the UK for use in nuclear-armed submarines assigned to NATO. The arrangement between the US and UK continues, with leased nuclear-armed Trident missiles replacing Polaris on four Royal Navy submarines.

According to one prominent journalist, at 3pm on that cold February afternoon in 1961, 'the quietist, most orderly, most impressive' mass demonstration senior police officers could recall marched in silence from Trafalgar Square and sat down outside the Ministry of Defence for two-and-a-half hours. Bertrand Russell attached a declaration to the door of the Ministry demanding 'immediate scrapping of the agreement to base Polaris-carrying submarines in Britain,' concluding, 'we hereby serve notice on our Government that we no longer stand aside while they prepare to destroy mankind'.

Robin Fior surely did not 'stand aside'. Earlier, his sombre black and white poster had announced the Easter 1959 Aldermaston March to London, from the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment some 80 km west of the capital. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) was in its infancy, and a new generation had caught the mood to resist nuclear death. This momentum continued into the 1960s,

with the Committee of 100, led by Russell, encouraging civil disobedience and non-violent resistance.

CND was founded in early 1958 as public opposition to Britain's atomic and hydrogen bomb tests increased, while the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States worsened, heightening nuclear tensions. The Direct Action Committee, a committed group of anti-nuclear activists, sowed a seed in 1958 by initiating a march from London to the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment at Aldermaston. The following year, Easter 1959, the direction of travel was reversed, and the mass 'Aldermaston March' proceeded over several days towards central London. These annual Easter marches quickly became a great focus to 'ban the bomb', and attracted participation from all generations and many countries.

Meanwhile, the United States sought to establish and extend air bases and nuclear-armed rocket sites on the eastern side of Britain, which would target the Soviet Union and countries of the Warsaw Pact. This was in addition to operating Polaris nuclear-armed submarines supported from Holy Loch in Scotland. Of course, these bases would themselves become targets for Soviet attack, and this excited great opposition and apprehension among local communities. Nowadays, a similar logic is once again at work in Europe with the US and Russia recently abandoning the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, which outlaws a whole class of nuclear weapons.

Back in the early 1960s, the opposition Labour Party was split on the issue of opposing the rocket bases and on Polaris and Britain's 'independent' nuclear bomb, so that a Parliamentary road to nuclear disarmament was blocked. In the circumstances, direct action and civil disobedience attracted more and more activists. The Committee of 100, established by Russell with encouragement from his close associates, drew support from Lindsay Anderson, Doris Lessing, John Berger and Augustus John, among many notables, as well as from rank and file activists. It called its first action for 18 February 1961, when the *USS Proteus* Polaris submarine tender was due to arrive at Holy Loch, and Robin Fior designed the posters. Many Committee participants declared themselves ready to be arrested, anticipating that the administration of justice and the prisons would be overwhelmed. In fact, no arrests were made that day. In April, at a subsequent sit-down in Parliament Square, 826 people were arrested. They were bailed so that they were not taken into custody.

'Mass resistance against Polaris' proclaimed Fior's red, black and silver poster for Sunday 17 September 1961. Holy Loch and Central London were the two venues. On this occasion, Russell was not able to attend as

he was already in prison, as was Edith, his wife, and some 30 others from the Committee of 100. In this punitive way, the British authorities tried to pre-empt mass civil disobedience, and in so doing guaranteed mass turnouts at both locations. Some 4,000 police arrested 1,314 people in London, while 351 were arrested at Holy Loch. This was the ‘high tide of unconstitutionality’ in Britain, according to the sympathetic journalist.

Robin Fior’s elegant typography and design set a standard which flourished throughout the 1960s and beyond. Set off to the left, words leap out, conveying their essential message. With minimal resources, Fior clarified the never-ending calls for peace around the world in a way that resonates to this day.

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When Robin Fior (1935-2012) arrived in Lisbon in 1973, he could not have imagined that the April Revolution would take place in less than a year. His plan was to replace the ‘shoebox’ workshop and the schools where he taught in London for a six-month stay in Lisbon to train the members of the PRAXIS cooperative. Bringing two decades of experience as a designer and an activist of the independent Marxist left in London, Fior became passionately involved in the Revolution and its various movements, immersing himself in the Portuguese cultural and political environment for four decades.

Exhibition Curator: Ana Baliza

