

# Nuclear-Free Europe

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General Lee Butler once sat at the centre of the United States' nuclear capability. He was a member of the 'nuclear priesthood' tasked with maintaining and expanding a nuclear infrastructure whilst keeping the political flock on the 'correct path'. Following retirement, Butler was able to break free from the nuclear doctrine and has devoted himself to the cause of nuclear abolition. His example is not unique but it is rare enough to warrant the highest praise (see *Spokesman* 129).

So, how to tackle the "powerful, deeply rooted beliefs" in nuclear weapons to which Butler points? If we look at the political landscape in the nuclear-armed states, where the nuclear doctrine is deeply entrenched, then the task seems daunting. In these states, the political establishment is wedded to expanding nuclear capabilities in defiance of Treaty commitments and moral good sense, and the media and institutions of public culture are geared towards legitimising nuclear weaponry and the notion of 'deterrence'.

What are the actual mechanisms that allow the nuclear doctrine to embed itself and spread? Tom Sauer argues in a recent article in the *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* ('Power and Nuclear Weapons: The Case of the European Union') that they differ between the political and public spheres. In the political sphere, the promise of nuclear force modernisation allows politicians to pledge support for arms control treaties and generates consent from the military without fundamentally undermining a commitment to the nuclear doctrine.

Much of this part of the process happens

behind closed doors, “without much debate, let alone approval, of the respective parliaments.” These ‘hidden’ processes are part of the nuclear ‘secret cities’ described by Becky Alexis-Martin in her recent work, *Disarming Doomsday* (see *Spokesman* 144). Nuclear weapons grew and spread from the ‘secret city’ of Los Alamos, they spread and mutated into ever more dangerous devices: the A-Bomb became the H-Bomb, then the N-Bomb. The ghastly realities of what these bombs might unleash upon humanity are hidden beneath the notion of ‘deterrence’.

If, rather than using the term ‘nuclear deterrence’, politicians and military personnel referred to ‘genocide machines’ – that is, if nuclear weapons were referred to in accurate terms – then they would quickly lose legitimacy. Sauer argues:

“The public legitimation for nuclear weapons is deterrence and in second order prestige. What these mechanisms show is that public legitimation for nuclear weapons is a narrative that does not reveal the complete picture. This may explain the gap between what the general public thinks about nuclear weapons and the objective characteristics of nuclear weapons ... Public opinion in the nuclear armed states is reinforced in thinking that nuclear weapons are ‘good because they make the country safe and secure.’”

There are considerable hurdles which must be overcome if we are to win widespread public support for and then achieve nuclear disarmament. Hurdles not mentioned so far include the self-interest of the massively convoluted ‘military-industrial complex’ which reaps enormous material rewards from the development and upgrading of nuclear weapons; the military alliances – some bilateral, between the US and UK for example, others networks of alliances such as NATO – which criss-cross the planet and the reflexes of bodies and institutions – ‘think tanks’, some trade unions representing workers involved in nuclear weapon manufacture, political parties or lobby groups – for whom open discussion of this topic is *verboten*.

This situation points to the fact that purely ‘national’ initiatives for nuclear disarmament are unlikely to succeed without regional or international cooperation. The ‘national barriers’ existent in nuclear-armed states will be more easily overcome through regional and international cooperation. Not only that, but to an increasing degree the most pressing and immediate issues faced by nuclear disarmers – as with the multiple threats and issues with which humanity faces – manifest transnationally. A transnational response is demanded.

## Europe in focus

### *Germany*

An opinion poll commissioned by the International Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), the organisation that has spearheaded the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), provides encouragement. In a survey of four European Union states that currently host US nuclear bombs, clear majorities are in favour of their removal: 57% in Belgium, 56% in the Netherlands, 70% in Germany and 65% in Italy. None of these nations are nuclear-armed states in their own right, but as NATO-member states they are ‘committed’ to the ‘delivery’ of US nuclear weapons if required to do so. The fact that 70% of Germans surveyed are in favour of ridding their nation of US nuclear weapons leads us to the first transnational ‘problem’ that demands a transnational answer.

In May 2020, the leader of the German Social Democrats (SPD) in the Bundestag, Rolf Mützenich, called for US nuclear weapons to be removed from the country. He told the *Tagesspiegel* newspaper that: “Nuclear weapons on German territory do not heighten our security, just the opposite ... The time has come for Germany to rule out a future stationing.” The ‘Merkel’ era of German politics is drawing to a close and it is not wholly inconceivable that a future government will be composed of parties which share Mützenich’s view. Although the call for the removal of US nuclear weapons is not SPD policy, it may become a bargaining chip in settling a future coalition government. Such a proposal would be popular, as evidenced not only by the ICAN survey but by the 100,000 Germans who recently called for TPNW ratification.

The removal of US nuclear weapons from Germany would be a major victory for nuclear disarmers, but we cannot escape the question of ‘what then?’ If, as seems possible, the US simply moves the weapons from Germany to neighbouring Poland or another allied state closer to the Russian border then what kind of victory will we have?

### *France*

In February 2020, President Emmanuel Macron raised the prospect of ‘Europeanising’ France’s nuclear capability. In a speech to military officers, Macron called for further military coordination between EU member states – a process already under way – and proposed that France’s nuclear weapons system should play a central role. Although Macron is not the first French leader to raise such a prospect, the proposals are significant, and significantly troubling, given the context in which they were made.

Macron points to the near-collapse of the global system of nuclear treaties and control measures as one of the motivations for a new approach to ‘deterrence’ and ‘security’. He has previously called NATO “brain dead”. In his speech he correctly referred to a new ‘arms race’ and worries that Europe “must collectively realise that, in the absence of a legal framework, they could quickly find themselves exposed to the resumption of a conventional, even nuclear, arms race on their soil.”

France has pledged to extend its ‘nuclear umbrella’ to Germany. The promise is implicit in the *Treaty of Aachen* signed between France and Germany in January 2019. The Treaty was intended to cement plans for future reforms of the EU, including a French-German defence and security council intended as the decisive political body to guide these reciprocal engagements. The Treaty is particularly significant in that its provisions extend beyond NATO’s Article 5. The new Treaty uses the phrase “by all means” when Article 5 states “such action as it deems necessary”. Through this treaty, France and Germany have already established a nuclear relationship above and beyond the ‘security arrangements’ embedded in NATO membership. How long before serious efforts are made to extend such ‘assurances’ to other EU member states?

Sauer outlines three possible future scenarios: ‘Status-quo’, where the mutual defence clauses of the Lisbon Treaty remain the only EU-wide provisions and where France maintains its existing bilateral agreements (including with the now non-EU United Kingdom); ‘Upgrading’, where French nuclear weapons are ‘Europeanised’; and ‘Downgrading’, where France dispenses with its nuclear weapons and the EU becomes nuclear-weapon-free. In all three scenarios, a transnational nuclear disarmament campaign will surely play a vital role.

### *Europe: Nuclear battleground?*

The formal collapse of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty on Friday 2 August 2019 opened a dangerous new era for nuclear security in Europe. The United States quickly followed up on its sabotage of the INF Treaty by testing a Treaty-busting, ground-launched, nuclear-capable missile on 19 August.

Does Europe risk becoming a ‘nuclear battleground’ and, if so, what can we do to resist such a risk? It seems clear that the US will look at Europe once more as a staging post for nuclear war and, as such, a potential nuclear battleground. This horrible reality was starkly illustrated in a recent US ‘war gaming’ exercise. On 21 February 2020, ‘Senior Defense Officials’ from the United States Department of Defense convened a

‘Background Briefing on Nuclear Deterrence and Modernization’. The Briefing was extraordinary for a number of reasons: firstly, because of the level of detail on US nuclear operations; secondly, because these details included the revelation of a ‘war gaming’ exercise focused on a scenario in which Europe was the ‘battleground’; thirdly, because the ‘war game’ involved the use of low-yield nuclear warheads; and fourthly, because of the utterly shameless complacency on display. US defence officials clearly exposed the fact that in terms of nuclear strategy, the US considers Europe to be its territory.

With the sabotage of the INF Treaty now an established fact and given the testing of new intermediate-range missiles, it seems likely that the Trump administration or a future US President will seek to station such weapons in Europe or, given technological developments, on ships close to Europe. Any such move requires decisive opposition. A transnational problem requires a transnational solution.

### **The case for a nuclear-weapons-free zone**

The sample of evidence offered above – there are many other issues, not least the UK’s capability – points to the need for a Europe-wide, coordinated, creative peace movement. The transnational problems – from differences in perception to immediate risks – require transnational solutions. As ever more non-nuclear states ratify the TPNW, the overall legitimacy of nuclear weapons is diminished. When the Treaty comes into force, nuclear disarmers in non-ratifying states will have a powerful tool at their disposal. However, there are time sensitive – that is, urgent – issues which require immediate and energetic responses. In terms of Europe, they require a European movement and European solutions. Thus a coalition of peace organisations discussed, drafted and then launched the following appeal, ‘For a nuclear weapons free Europe’:

On the occasion of the 75th commemoration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear bombing, we, the signatories join our voices to those of the survivors and call upon our fellow citizens, politicians and governments to support a **European nuclear- weapon-free zone** as a matter of urgency.

We call on European governments to:

- end the modernization of all nuclear weapons
- end nuclear sharing
- sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

The situation is urgent. Now is the time to respond.

***See [www.nukefreeeurope.eu](http://www.nukefreeeurope.eu) for more and to endorse the Appeal.***