

## Nuclear fear in Europe: from weapons to power stations

Yves BOUVIER

### ABSTRACT

The Cold War context led to the emergence of new fears in Europe, including those related to nuclear weapons. Scientists, pacifists and citizens expressed their emotion, usually in combination with reasoned debate, in the face of the threat of global destruction. The 1970s witnessed a shift towards fears associated with nuclear power, expressed both as a fear of major accidents and through protests against the day-to-day environmental impact of this energy source.



The history of fear in European societies is part of historiographical tradition that includes the work of Jean

Delumeau on the 'great fears' of the medieval period as well as the study of defence mobilisation during the last six months of 1789 in France. Classified within the genealogy of emotions, nuclear fears also reveal socio-cultural relationships with technology, conveying both the hope and the distrust that such technology arouses. It is advisable to distinguish between fears and opinions as historical objects. While technophobic or 'technocritical' discourses play on emotions to mobilise collective action, they differ from emotions in their reasoning strategies and in the way they develop alternative proposals. At the intersection of the history of emotions and the history of technology, nuclear fears are based upon certain characteristics of the technology in question: the invisibility of radiation, the apparently paradoxical relationship between the infinitesimally small nature of the material and the destructive capacity of its uses, and the unknown duration of its impact on public health.

## **Nuclear Destruction: Europe in the Shadow of the Cold War**

While the dangers of radioactivity gradually became apparent during the interwar years, it was the detonation of the atomic bombs at Hiroshima (6 August 1945) and Nagasaki (9 August 1945) which marked a historic break. The manufacture and stockpiling of nuclear weapons brought about a dramatic change in international relations. The doctrine of 'nuclear deterrence' was based both on the rationality of the actors (to avoid self-destruction) and on the fears linked to the power of the bomb. In the context of the 'Cold War', Europe became the most likely setting for a third world war that would, inevitably, be a nuclear war. Pacifist movements thus reached an unprecedented level as a demonstration of protest against the coming conflict. The Aldermaston Marches were organised annually from 1958, bringing together 100,000 British protesters in 1960 and echoing the Movement for Peace (Stockholm Appeal, 1950) and its demonstrations from 1948 onwards, generally organised by the communist parties in France and Italy. The Movement against Atomic Weapons (*Mouvement contre l'arme atomique*) organised nearly 100 Easter demonstrations between 1964 and 1967. In France, Great Britain, West Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and Italy, the 1960s saw a disparate coalition of actors involved in anti-nuclear pacifism. This included the churches, particularly in Germany (Heidelberg Declaration, 1959), protest movements (the Provos in the Netherlands, 1965-1967) and appeals by scientists and intellectuals (Russell-Einstein in 1955, the Göttingen Appeal, Jean Rostand), who emphasised the global nature of the threat that nuclear weapons presented.

In the end, it was not so much the symbol of Hiroshima as the conviction that Europe would be at the centre of any potential war that aroused the greatest fears. While only Great Britain and France possessed their own atomic weapons, it was above all Germany that was concerned by the introduction of Soviet SS4 and SS5 and American Pershing missiles. The gradual rise of Green politics in the 1970s was reinforced by the Euromissile crisis. The treaties on the limitation of nuclear weapons (Salt I, 1972) and nuclear non-proliferation (Moscow Treaty, 1968) had opened the way for a Europe that, though passive, was preserved within a global balance of power. The decision of the USSR to replace its old-generation missiles with SS20s in 1977 broke this pattern and caused, through the U.S. refusal to ratify the 1979 SALT II Treaty and the planned replacement of American nuclear missiles by Pershing II from 1983, a sudden rise in nuclear fear that was firmly rooted in public opinion (350,000 demonstrators in Bonn in 1982). The Euromissile crisis thus linked together geopolitical issues (François Mitterrand's speech reiterating the unshakable position of Western Europe within the Western camp) and the pacifism of the ban the bomb movement ('better red than dead'). The fear of 'mutually assured destruction' (Kissinger, 1979) subsided with the end of the communist bloc, but it resurfaced in the 2000s amid fears of attack, based on the recent nuclear proliferation in Asia.

## **Civilian Fears of Nuclear Power: Between Disasters and Daily Life**

Unlike fears of nuclear war, involving weapons that had never been used in Europe, the fear of contamination related to nuclear accidents brought into play not only the impact of such accidents on public health but also the attitude of the political authorities accused of playing down or even covering up the realities of the situation. From then on, civilian nuclear power became associated with a lack of transparency, expert opinion biased by political

interests and a technocratic system cut off from public opinion. The accident at Windscale (UK, 1957) was the crucible of such fears, bringing to light the power of a techno-political system that repeatedly kept reliable information and critical expert opinion away from public view (B. Wynne). While other accidents in the 1960s (the Saint-Laurent-des-Eaux power station, 1969) did not meet with the same response, the implementation of nuclear programmes in most European societies aroused a great deal of opposition from a variety of ideological quarters, with some groups even turning to violent action.

The Three Mile Island accident on 28 March 1979 revived European institutional cooperation in terms of safety standards. However, it was the accident at Chernobyl (26 April 1986) which left an enduring mark on European opinion. The path taken by the radioactive cloud had implications for the entire continent, giving rise to different reactions in different countries (the precautionary principle in West Germany, the playing down of radiation data in France). In the eastern part of Europe, omissions and disinformation on the part of the Soviet authorities were subsequently associated more with the nature of the regime than with nuclear technology itself. As a Europe-wide event, Chernobyl marked a loss of confidence in the authorities in charge of nuclear power, leading to moratoria on, or the abandonment of, this energy source (Italy). In 2011, the accident at Fukushima led to new policies of partial withdrawal from nuclear power (Germany), while other countries have not changed their energy policy (France, United Kingdom). What is clear is that, while a fear of accidents and a need to take risks into account are shared throughout Europe, no common European policy on nuclear power exists to date, except in terms of crisis management.

Beyond accidents, nuclear power has also raised 'citizens' fears' (Labbé) related to day-to-day risks. The implications of nuclear power have become a material fact of daily life in communities close to power stations: evacuation plans, the distribution of iodine tablets, regular safety drills, information devices, etc. However, it is not necessarily near the power stations themselves that most fears are expressed. Opinion polls show a core of support for nuclear power in countries that have developed large-scale programmes (France, Germany, Belgium) while, conversely, stronger opposition is expressed in countries that have abandoned nuclear power (Austria, Italy).

Fear, an emotion expressed in the face of nuclear weapons as well as nuclear power, is not necessarily irrational. Closely tied to a range of key issues facing the continent (the Cold War, the energy supply, the environmental turn), nuclear fears espouse the temporality of the technology in question. Belonging to the register of emotions, they express the deep concern of societies at any given historical moment, but do not provide the basis for lasting social movements.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

LABBÉ, Marie-Hélène, *La grande peur du nucléaire*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2000.

TOURAINÉ, Alain, HEGEDUS, Zsuzsa, DUBET, François, WIEVIORKA, Michel, *La prophétie anti-nucléaire*, Paris, Seuil, 1980.

WEART, Spencer R., *The Rise of Nuclear Fear*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2012 (1988).

---

## Source URL:

<https://ehne.fr/encyclopedia/themes/material-civilization/risks-and-security/nuclear-fear-in-europe-weapons-power-stations>