

Civil defence planning in the 1960s & 1970s: A propaganda exercise?

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Civil defence planning in the 1960s & 1970s: A propaganda exercise?

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JOHANNA KOHLER, NOV 10 2011

'A thousand years scarce serve to form a state: An hour may lay it in the dust.'[1]

While earthquakes, as natural catastrophes, have plagued mankind for thousands of years, the disaster from nuclear bombs as well as – accidentally – from nuclear power stations such as in Japan in 2011 is man-made and has only existed since 1945. As they are man-made catastrophes, governments are in different ways accountable, since their policies can result in direct misery for their own people – be it through failure of deterrence, or the continued policy of building nuclear power stations. Thus a system of protection for the worst-case-scenario has to be developed: civil defence. This system is a propaganda tool to justify policies among the population as well as to keep them calm. This essay assesses civil defence in the 1960s and 1970s, the time when nuclear war was not so remote a possibility. Propaganda was thus used in its most basic sense, as 'information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause,'[2] namely that a nuclear war against the communists could be fought and won. How should one hide from a nuclear bomb and its impact? The age of civil defence in its traditional setting was over. Its end was marked by the explosion of two atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. State officials in the 1960s and 1970s pretended that the threat of fifty-mega-ton-weapons could be countered with a defence agenda that might protect against attacks with conventional bombs of six tons of TNT – the largest bomb used in the Second World War.[3] This essay argues that civil defence in the nuclear age has never been more than a political tool for governments used for emotions management and as a political tool for winning public consent on key Cold War issues. Deterrence could only be pursued if the population stood firmly behind the government and was prepared for nuclear war. To illustrate this it will first be shown that the preconditions of dealing with the threat of atomic war differed, politically and psychologically, due to varying previous experiences in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany. Then the different schemes and rhetoric behind civil defence in these countries are examined in order to show that national mentality, and the nation's political security culture as well as societal relations impacted upon its development. Finally, the farce of civil defence will be dismantled, as reflected in public protest.

In 1979/80, at a time of heightened international tension, the British government 'decided to spend £5,000 million...on four Trident submarines, one of the most destructive weapons ever invented; it agreed to install 160 American-owned and operated cruise missiles in Britain, and it issued *Protect and Survive*.'[4] This rather critical account epitomises the political culmination of both the advancement of weapons and the question of public safety or the lack thereof. The threat of nuclear war had evolved from the Soviet explosion of Joe-1 in August 1949 to the Tsar Bomba in October 1961. In 1958, America started deploying intercontinental ballistic missiles and in the 1960s France and China had successful nuclear tests. An area of twenty to a hundred square miles can be set on fire within minutes by one strategic nuclear weapon detonated over a city.[5] Deterrence, the main policy of the Cold War, came to a test with the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, which was also a test of the efficacy of previous civil defence programmes. During the crisis, the sense of impending doom undermined well-publicised civil defence programmes, and led to doubts about the government's trustworthiness.[6] It has been estimated that as many as 10 million Americans took 'vacations' in rural areas far away from potential targets.[7] Panic increased and it is evident that people were not ready to follow the government guidelines in a calm and orderly manner; instead, on 24 October the *New York Times* phone lines were jammed with 15,000 calls in nine hours with queries about personal safety

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