

Comments on the Rapid Increase in Nuclear Fears (1981)

Abstract

In this opinion piece, a journalist discusses widespread fears of nuclear annihilation in the Federal Republic. Such fears linked the environmentalists' protests with a growing peace movement against NATO's deployment of intermediate-range missiles on West German soil.

Source

The Return of Fear

What would things be like today if the first atomic bomb had fallen in 1945 on the country for which it was invented and built: on Germany? Only the delay in finishing the doomsday weapon prevented the first two atomic bombs used against people from being dropped on Berlin or Dresden instead of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Among the Japanese, that stoic and brave people of the samurai and the kamikaze pilot, a kind of national panic still erupts today if it turns out that American missile submarines have nuclear warheads onboard when they enter their Japanese base, or that such weapons are stored at that base in the first place.

This shows how profound the horror from those August days 36 years ago still is, even for the postwar generation. It is evidently incomparable with the horror of the "conventional" carpet bombing raids that fell on German cities. The Japanese also experienced some of that, the devastating firebombing of Tokyo in March 1945, for example, when almost 100,000 people are said to have died. Still, the memory of that pales in comparison with the incomprehensibility of the two atomic blasts.

More than 6,000 nuclear warheads are stored in the Federal Republic. The heaviest one that can be used on one of the 180 Pershing 1A missiles stationed in the Federal Republic today has an explosive force of 400 kilotons, thirty times the strength of the Hiroshima bomb.

How have the Germans managed to regard as tolerable, and even highly desirable, a situation that would have resulted in a total collective nervous breakdown in Japan?

One of their secrets is that they have transferred their faith in a miracle weapon, aroused by Hitler but disappointed, to nuclear weapons. At last: a surefire way to "keep the Asian hordes in check"—and cost-effective at that. Finally: a weapon that will keep the peace in Europe, because the more you have of it, the less it will go off—what an optimal combination of security and arms race.

But this belief in miracles is not as childlike and naïve as it seems. It is a product of fear, as was the German belief in a miracle weapon during the final war years. At that time, it was supposed to numb people's consciousness of the approaching collapse. But even in the past two decades it has been one of the many clever methods by which contemporaries (and the especially threatened Germans, in particular) have tried to forget, deny, play down, and banish the real dangers of nuclear armaments from their thoughts through all forms of self-deception.

[...]

They developed a specialized language that, for example, subsumed the mutilated, charred, and

radiation-contaminated civilians that would result from a nuclear attack on a military target under the term “collateral damage.” Unimaginable catastrophes become mathematical trivia (“How many warheads will I have left to destroy the enemy’s population centers if he wipes out all my land missile silos first?”). The unthinkable is becoming more and more thinkable.

Animals faced with an unavoidable danger often resort to “displacement activity.” As if to distract themselves from their paralyzing helplessness, they do something absurd, like preen themselves. Many worried citizens, especially among the younger generation, have done something similar in recent years. Either they did not comprehend the main danger of nuclear armaments, or they felt helpless in the face of it, so they turned to other problems—important yet secondary problems such as environmental protection.

And so the curious thing happened that tens of thousands fought bitterly against the nuclear power plant in Brokdorf, but for a long time totally ignored the planned deployment of new nuclear weapons systems in their country—this situation is comparable to that of a person who lives in a house built on dynamite but is only concerned with the operational safety of his toaster.

But that is starting to change. The controversy over the escalating arms race has roused slumbering fears, has forced open repressions and denials that were already fraying at the seams, has raised the first and only truly existential question for Germans and their neighbors with greater poignancy than ever before.

A realization is spreading through this country that it makes little sense to worry about all of society’s other problems if nothing is done about the question of its basic survival. It makes as little sense as a man on a minefield who worries himself to death about his retirement pension.

Source: Wilhelm Bittorf, “Die Wiederkehr der Angst,” *Der Spiegel*, no. 25, June 14, 1981, pp. 28–29.

Available online at:

<https://www.spiegel.de/politik/die-wiederkehr-der-angst-a-df017e97-0002-0001-0000-00001433899>

3. Reproduced with permission.

Translation: Allison Brown

Recommended Citation: Comments on the Rapid Increase in Nuclear Fears (1981), published in: German History in Documents and Images,

<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-1121>> [July 05, 2025].