

Disarming the Discourse from Grassroots

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament's Influence on British Nuclear Discourse During the Cold War

Introduction

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), since its establishment in 1957, has been the main socio-political challenger advocating for the unconditional renunciation of use and production of nuclear weapons in the UK. Although its goal has not been accomplished, it significantly influenced the nuclear discourse. Through its organisational strengths and the pressure on the political parties, the CND successfully established anti-nuclear ideals within communities, introducing the pertinent issues into the broader debate.

Methods

Following Charles Tilly's mobilisation model, the CND's performance is analysed through five interconnected variables characteristic of a social movement's power grouped into organisational strengths and creation of opportunities. The former focuses on mobilisation (the resources), organisation (common identity and structures) and collective actions. The latter revolves around its relationship with major parties. The project draws from both secondary and primary sources, employing materials from the archives of the Modern Records Centre at Warwick University.

Relevance

As an interdisciplinary study of a social movement's impact on the government and the public discourse between 1957 and 1991, it is built upon archival work as well as socio-political theories and insights. The project goes beyond enriching our understanding of the past and largely contributes to the present debates concerning the relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy, the influence of non-state actors in creating and internalising international norms as well as the sociology of social movements.

Organisational Strengths

Mobilisation: Rallying the Masses

The CND mobilised its membership base as a pivotal resource, although precise figures remain elusive owing to firstly, the official registration beginning in 1967 and secondly, the confidentiality of information. Initial marches saw up to 10,000 participants, with subsequent events drawing 50,000 to 150,000 supporters. Despite a decline in popularity after 1962, a resurgence in the early 1980s peaked in 1985 with nearly 100,000 members. The movement's resilience was evident in its ability to mobilise non-member supporters, culminating in large-scale demonstrations. The biggest in-scope manifestation occurred in London on 22 October 1983, gathering between up to 400,000 participants.

Organisation: Out of Many, One

The Campaign created a common identity and a unifying narrative through its structural organisation and communication with the members. It represented a unique form of movement balancing the importance of individual autonomy with the collective strength of an incorporated federation of subgroups. With specialist sections such as Labour CND and Christian CND, each focused on specific community outreach, the CND fostered diverse approaches while maintaining a unified goal. Christian CND was especially standing out as it was the most active subgroup with around 150 local groups, 6000 subscribers to its newsletters in 1985 and successful lobbying efforts. Publishing activities, including the "Sanity" magazine and newsletters, furthered identity-building.

Collective Action: Disobedience & Solidarity

The CND engaged in collective action through two primary modalities: large-scale demonstrations with non-violent direct actions and public campaigns with calls for civil disobedience. During the 1980s, the CND demonstrated remarkable mobilisation, with significant participation in demonstrations. Particularly noteworthy were the protests at Greenham Common, where the women's peace camp, though independent, received support from the CND. The unity between the Greenham Women and the Campaign was displayed, e.g. by a 14-mile human chain linking Aldermaston and Greenham, receiving wide media coverage. The CND became synonymous with the peace movement. Many initiatives, such as the Greenham Women, were presented as part of CND. In parallel, public campaigns aimed to educate and inform the public, demonstrating CND's commitment to raising awareness.

Creating Opportunities

Labour Party: Navigating the Left

Central to CND's impact was its dynamic with the Labour Party, the sole major political actor susceptible to its influence. The 1980s and particularly the elections of 1983, marked by debates on disarmament due to the Trident nuclear program and Cruise missile system, witnessed the zenith of the Campaign's power. Labour, swayed by CND's burgeoning popularity, pledged to unilateral nuclear disarmament in its Election Manifesto, a significant departure from previous stances. This echoed the objectives of the CND. Labour MPs started participating in anti-nuclear actions such as 'A Call for Global Survival' signed in majority by their parliamentarians. Furthermore, the CND's activities reconfigured the British left as a whole, bringing back long-forgotten internationalism. It was strengthening the internationalist aspect of the movement, e.g. by establishing working groups abroad and supporting activists such as Mordechai Vanunu.

Conservative Party: Politics of Confrontation

Despite the adherence to nuclear armament and alliance with NATO, the Conservative Party could not ignore the growing influence of the CND. In the 1980s, the governments introduced new bye-laws restricting the protest activities around major bases, alongside devoting considerable resources to the policing of demonstrations. The Conservatives were concerned about the Campaign's impact on other associations, institutions as well as, predominantly, public opinion. Furthermore, in the advent of the 1983 general elections, numerous CND activists raised concern about the potential interference with their telephones and mail. These measures coincided with depicting the Campaign as an epicentre of extremism and communism, working for the interest of the 'evil' Soviet Union. The Secretary of State for Defence Nott went as far as saying 'you would have to be demented in the Kremlin and the KGK if [you] did not look upon all these campaigns as a god-given opportunity'. The CND's influence is especially visible by the engagement of the Conservative Party in refuting the peace movement's arguments. The intellectual confrontations between the Campaign and the Party enriched the public discussion with these issues, leveraging their significance and bringing them forward in the political agenda. Both Conservative Party and the Campaign were trying to persuade citizens of their own views, confronting each other in similar social groups.



Musicians and demonstrators in Holy Loch, Scotland protesting against Polaris missiles, 1961
Source: People's History of CND - Polaris, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament



Marchers gather in Trafalgar Square for the first march, 1958
Source: People's History of CND - The Symbol, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament

Conclusion & Future Research

Despite not securing its primary goal, the CND played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and political discourse on nuclear disarmament. Through effective mobilisation, organisation, and collective action, the CND demonstrated the power of civil society in influencing national policy debates, even in the absence of direct policy changes. Its impact on the Labour Party and its ability to provoke responses from the Conservative Party, underlined the movement's influence in the political arena and capacity to create future opportunities. The CND's strategic use of demonstrations, public campaigns, and engagement with various societal segments fostered a widespread anti-nuclear sentiment, contributing to the broader peace movement and affecting policy discussions within major political parties. In terms of future research directions, more archival research should be dedicated to its sections such as the Christian CND and Green CND owing to their impacts as well as to the Campaign's interactions with political parties. Furthermore, the interviews with the involved past members of the movement would reveal more about the climate of the engagement.