
Britain And The Cold War

The Early Cold War period in Britain was a time of nationwide uncertainty. Britain was continuously trying to keep up with its allied superpower, America. An abundance of fiction was written by authors such as Ian Fleming, who created James Bond. Bond was a prominent figure in the early Cold War period and was used heavily as propaganda by the British government. The media also played a pivotal role when shaping the public's opinion regarding the justification or the condemnation of nuclear weaponry and its usage.

This essay will discuss how the British population responded to the development of nuclear weapons during the Early Cold War period, by analysing British 'Nuclear Culture'. This will be done by discussing three aspects of 'Nuclear Culture' which may have affected the British public opinion. Firstly, the essay will introduce Dominic Sandbrook's view that the British public was not as fearful of nuclear war as other historians may suggest. Secondly, it will discuss the importance of the media, British propaganda, and the influence it had during the early Cold War period. And finally, discuss how and why certain anti-nuclear campaign groups formed during the mid-late 1950s.

Dominic Sandbrook's 'Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain, from the Suez to The Beatles' is very critical of the CND. Sandbrook argues that the CND had very little influence when attempting to address the threat of nuclear war and states that 'people were too busy worrying about the problems of austerity to have much time for anti-Communist purges.' Sandbrook utilises Gallup's predictions, re-printed in Wybrow's 'Britain Speaks Out, 1937-87'. Sandbrook uses these predictions, made by the British public in 1959, to illustrate the lack of concern they had regarding the threat of nuclear war. When asked by Gallup, 'what might have happened by 1980', a mere 6% said that 'an atomic war was likely'. However, it appears that Sandbrook has misrepresented Gallup's findings. Gallup originally asked, 'how likely is an atomic war between Russia and America'. Due to the distance between the two countries, in the late 1950s, an atomic missile covering that distance was impossible regardless. Sandbrook has re-worded the question, and in doing so invokes criticism questioning the validity of his research.

Of course, the argument could be made that these predictions were based on the future and that the public could have assumed that a missile's range could have been extended due to technological advancements. However, out of seven predictions made by the British public, which amounted to 30% or more who thought these predictions would become true by 1980, only one became a reality —that man would have landed on the Moon. 61% of people thought that it was possible that man could land on the Moon by 1980, to which man did in 1969. It is reasonable to suggest that the percentage of people that predicted this fact would have declined if the question was re-worded to 'do you think man will land on the Moon by 1970'. It is also worth noting that 65% of the British public predicted that there would be a cure for cancer by 1980 — even today, there is still an on-going search for one. Moreover, 41% of people in 1959 thought that 'a new World War would be likely by increasing the number of nuclear powers, such as France'. It was in 1958 that France started to 'gain its nuclear momentum', and it is reasonable to assume that the British public would have known that when making their predictions.

As a result of these contradictions, it is perhaps best to adopt Jonathan Hogg's view when analysing the British public and their response to nuclear development — stay clear of vague predictions which are 'simply assumed' and are 'too general' of a way to analyse nuclear culture. This portion of the essay will discuss the influence of British media and fictional art during the Cold War. Tony Shaw states that 'All wars, especially cold wars, are fought in part through words and images. Ian Fleming, a great British fictional author, capitalised on Britain's unequivocal national pride during the nuclear post-war period by creating James Bond. Bond symbolises Britishness to its core. Charming, witty, well-spoken and a man who can restore Britain's rightful position as a global superpower. Christoph Laucht argues that 'The construction of Britishness in the James Bond phenomena', is due to 'Britain losing its Empire and the countries relegation into the second league of superpowers in the Cold War'. The Bond series played a very crucial role as a form of propaganda in Britain and a very important part of British Nuclear Culture. The British Government often used Bond films as a way to downplay genuine fears regarding nuclear war. During the early Cold War period in Britain, nuclear fallout was not fully understood. However, with attempts from journalists such as Chapman Pincher and James Cameron, the effects of atomic bombs became more recognised. This is an issue the British government attempted to address in Bond films such as *Moonraker* (1979) and *Dr No* (1962).

During a scene in *Moonraker*, James Bond voices his concerns about nuclear fallout to M, to which M replies 'Apparently it's not worrying them too much...the cloud is going to be passed off as the normal formation after an explosion of that size'. Bond films often paralleled British government narratives and propaganda. Moreover, in *You Only Live Twice* (1967), the United Kingdom is portrayed as a third superpower during the Cold War, reinforcing British capabilities alongside Russia and The United States of America. This further altered the British public's perception of nuclear war. The propaganda used in Bond films, which attempts to reinstate Britain to the top of the hierarchy, stems from criticisms of Britain's nuclear technology.

Daily Mirror, October 4th, 1952. On the front page of the Daily Mirror, a day after Britain's first atomic bomb test in 1952, it states 'The world asks: Was it H-Bomb'. Above the caption is an unimpressive image of an explosion with a cloud that does not match the USA's mushroom shape in any way. As time passed, journalists became increasingly critical of British nuclear capabilities. Chapman Pincher and James Cameron aimed to make the bomb 'more meaningful'. They did so by using particular journalistic techniques such as: adding 'superimposing circles' around areas of London to illustrate the damage that could be inflicted and used alarming language to best describe the use and testing of nuclear weapons.

Furthermore, one of the most influential stories to be printed in the British newspaper was the 'Family that Feared Tomorrow'. In August 1957, a married couple gassed their three children, before subsequently committing suicide by leaping into the sea. The suicide note attracted the most attention as the mother, Elsie Marshall, stated that 'The talk of new wars... means extermination of the masses especially children, we decided that we could not allow this to happen to our children'. This suicide story was printed in the Daily Mirror — one of the most popular newspapers at the time. It is perhaps no coincidence that this story affected the British public strongly enough to spur the formation of anti-nuclear campaign groups such as the CND in the late 1950s. Anti-nuclear campaign groups deviated from political to moral terms when considering the future of Britain in the Cold War. In the mid-late 1950s, anti-nuclear groups began to gain momentum. In 1956, the National Council for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons Tests (NCANWT) was founded by a group of pacifists, inspired by Gandhi's campaigns in the

1940s. The NCANWT was one of the first groups to galvanised public scepticism about nuclear weapons in general.

In the Spring of 1957, an Emergency Committee for Direct Action against Nuclear War (DAC) was founded to aid Harold Steele, a pacifist, in sailing into the Pacific Ocean to protest British nuclear testing. Nevertheless, the DAC was never able to acquire much support in Britain, due to its eccentric ways of gaining attention. However, on the 28th January 1958, a group of intellectuals named themselves the 'Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament' (CND). The CND now allowed the British population to express their concerns and fears of nuclear war. On the 17th February 1958, the CND first went public by orchestrating a meeting in the Methodist Central Hall, Westminster. The CND had gained so much attention that the hall could not contain everyone present and overflow facilities had to be arranged.

However, differing policies amongst the CND led to fragmentation, which resulted in the creation of a new group — 'Council of 100', named after the Guelphs' Council of 100. Nonetheless, with philosopher Bertrand Russel as the new group's figurehead, the Council of 100 attracted significant media attention through its elaborate non-violent protests such as the occupation of military bases. By the early 1970s, the CND could no longer afford to publish *Sanity* monthly. However, these anti-nuclear campaign groups present a real representation of the British public's fear and anxieties during the early Cold War period. Groups such as; the CND, DAC and the formation of many others, demonstrates that there was a genuine fear present in Britain and that these groups allowed the British public to respond accordingly. Mark Pythian states that 'Where Cold War history catches the omnipresent anxieties that the nuclear era brought, CND's part in it is likely to be regarded in a more noble light'. Pythian insists that the reputation of the CND is not yet fully understood as history is still incomplete. This is an important point to address due to parliament members in the UK such as Jeremy Corbyn, who did exceptionally well in the 2017 general election, promotes the disarmament of nuclear weapons entirely in Britain. So perhaps the CND had a lasting influence as well as a contemporary one during the early Cold War period. In conclusion, this essay has addressed the question concerning the British public's response to nuclear weapons.

This essay did so, by first arguing a perspective that the British public had no genuine fears of a nuclear war. Secondly, it introduced ways that the British public was directly affected by the role of the media and British propaganda. And finally, this essay has discussed particular campaign groups that were able to give the British public a voice and an opportunity to address genuine fears of nuclear war. To explicitly argue that the British public had no genuine fears of nuclear war proves difficult, and it is perhaps better to elaborate on the British public's response.