The Politics of the Unknown:

Uncertainty and the Nuclear Threat in Britain, 1979-1985

Abstract. This article seeks to map out possibilities for conducting a micro historical study of the socio-political and cultural roles that uncertainty, as a consequence of a lack of verifiable knowledge, played in political debates over the nuclear threat in Britain in the Second Cold War. Focusing on this politics of the unknown in the period from 1979 to 1985 when Britain witnessed resurging fears of nuclear war, this exploratory essay sets out to make three main interventions: first, it conceptualizes 'uncertainty' as a subjective social and cultural construct with fluid meanings that does not necessarily have to hold exclusively negative connotations but might offer opportunities for historical actors. Second, this essay proposes an examination of the politics of the unknown about the anticipated effects of a nuclear war within a wider synchronic economy of non-nuclear-weapons-related concerns such as de-industrialization or unemployment. Finally, the article introduces the periodization of 'Britain's long nuclear 1980s' to allow for a consideration of relevant diachronic aspects of this politics of the unknown, thereby adding further depth to the micro history. Throughout, this exploratory study draws on historical examples to illustrate its key theoretical points.

Uncertainty constituted an integral component in debates over the nuclear threat in Britain and elsewhere in the Cold War, with different historical actors intending to use it – often with seeming certainty – for their political aims and objectives. In this politics of the unknown, consecutive governments relied on the doctrine of nuclear deterrence in their attempts to reduce the uncertainty over the likelihood of a nuclear assault on their country by seeking to prevent it altogether. According to the government position, a working civil defence programme was in place to mitigate the effects of a nuclear conflict on Britain and to ensure the survival of a substantial part of its population in the unlikely event that deterrence failed. By contrast, opponents of nuclear arms denied deterrence and civil defence any defensive nature, let alone effective roles in preventing or containing the consequences of a nuclear war. Instead, they called for nuclear

disarmament as the only effectual means to eliminate the risk of nuclear warfare with its uncertain effects once and for all.

In spite of its dominant role in the Cold War, historians have not yet paid sufficient attention to uncertainty in relation to the nuclear threat. For example, studies of the escalatory potential of the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) 1983 Able Archer command post exercise into a nuclear conflict have only made cursory reference to uncertainty as a key escalatory factor.[1] The case of Able Archer provides a particularly illuminating example: not only has the high level of uncertainty around the actual events of 1983 even trickled down into the historiography of that NATO drill (Voß, 2014, 73-76), but the scriptwriters of *Deutschland 83* (UFA Fiction and RTL, Germany, 2015) exploited these many uncertainties in the plot of that award-winning fictional television series. In this, the state of the historiography of Able Archer is symptomatic of the neglect that uncertainty has suffered within the historiography of the Cold War.

In light of this historiographical desertion, this exploratory essay seeks to map out possibilities for conducting a study of the socio-political and cultural roles that uncertainty, as a consequence of a lack of verifiable knowledge, played in political debates over the nuclear threat in Britain during the so-called Second Cold War (Halliday, 1986; for a critique of this periodization of the Cold War, see Niedhart, 2016). By looking at Britain in the period from about 1979 to 1985 when perceived fears of a nuclear war intensified, it proposes to approach this subject – both geographically and temporally – through a micro historical lens (Ginzburg, 1982 and 1993; Ladurie, 1978; Lepore 2001; Levi, 2001; Brewer, 2010; Magnússon, 2003). Methodologically, a micro

history allows for more analytical depth because it facilitates a thorough examination of the ways in which different actors, including the state, oppositional parliamentary parties and extra-parliamentary groups, experts from various disciplines or popular media, attempted to mobilize the uncertainty about the anticipated effects of a nuclear war for their respective purposes both within its broader synchronic and diachronic dimensions. Historiographically, this micro historical study is set to contribute to two nascent fields: the history of the Second Cold War[2] and 1980s British social and cultural history.[3]

Britain during the Second Cold War offers a formidable case study for a micro historical analysis of the politics of the unknown around the nuclear threat in the Second Cold War. The country ranked amongst those Western European nations where the effects of the so-called Second Cold War from about 1979 to 1985 could be felt particularly strongly. When tensions between the superpowers intensified after a period of détente from the mid-1970s onwards, the country witnessed an increase in perceived public fears of nuclear war. While other European nations experienced similar anxieties in the wake of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) 'double-track decision' with its plans to deploy new American intermediate-range nuclear missiles to Britain, West Germany and other member states, a set of genuine British factors shaped the responses from different historical actors to the nuclear threat. With its high population density, industrial base and many United States military installations on its soil, Britain marked one of the potential nuclear battlefields in a conflict between NATO and the Warsaw Pact – perhaps second only to the two German states. Besides its geostrategic location, the close relationship between the Thatcher Government and the Reagan Administration and, in particular, the decision by the British government to procure the

submarine-based Trident inter-continental ballistic missile system to maintain an independent nuclear deterrent provided a specific British context for the Second Cold War.

This essay makes three chief interventions for the study of the unknowns around the likely effects of a nuclear conflict in Britain. First, it proposes a conceptualization of 'uncertainty' in relation to the nuclear threat. Second, it seeks to locate the unknowns about the consequences of nuclear war within a wider economy of contemporary, synchronic socio-political concerns such as de-industrialization or unemployment that existed alongside the threat of nuclear war in 1980s Britain. And, finally, the present article makes a case for situating this politics of the unknown within long-standing, relevant diachronic developments beyond the Second Cold War through the introduction of the concept of 'Britain's long nuclear 1980s'.

Uncertainty and the Nuclear Threat

Any meaningful analysis of the politics of the unknown about the anticipated effects of nuclear war in Britain in the Second Cold War best starts with a problematization of both the notion of 'uncertainty' itself and its historiographical treatment. Although the American economist Frank H. Knight identified uncertainty, as early as 1921, in his pioneering study *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit* as 'one of the fundamental facts of life', cultural and social historians have largely neglected this crucial subject (Knight, 1971, 347). Ostensibly, this might be the result of the complexity and highly abstract nature of the subject matter that seem to make it a more appropriate theme for intellectual historians. After all, 'uncertain conclusions, uncertain estimates of the uncertainty of our conclusions, using unsystematic methods for estimating uncertainty and an unclear

language for reporting it, all based on unprovable theoretical expectations', as Adrian Blau argues, form 'part of the fun, and the pain, of intellectual history' (Blau, 2011, 366).

While such a great degree of uncertainty, especially if taken to the extreme in a postmodernist-relativist way, might have deterred some scholars from engaging in a fuller conceptualization of 'uncertainty', this historiographical neglect appears, at the same time, remarkable, in particular when it concerns such a highly abstract object as nuclear war. The fact that, with the exception of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, nuclear weapons have never been used in warfare has played a major role in rendering them such a hypothetical, almost unreal threat that is difficult to grasp. Yet, to date, only few studies have paid attention to the strong presence of uncertainty inherent in any attempt to imagine the likely effects of nuclear war. Without foregrounding the role of uncertainty, Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi has referred to atomic warfare as 'a *tabula rasa*', dependent on 'a variety of simulations' such as nuclear weapons tests or war game exercises (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2000, 163). Similarly, Mary Kaldor has broadly conceptualized the Cold War as an 'imaginary war' – almost like a continuation of the Second World War but without the horrendous casualty numbers (Kaldor, 1990). But neither Kaldor nor cultural and social historians who drew inspiration from her work have so far adequately addressed the centrality of the uncertainty surrounding the nuclear threat within this 'imaginary war' (Bernhard and Nehring, 2013; Eugster and Marti, 2015; Grant and Ziemann, 2016). Uncertainty itself has thus remained a lacuna in this historiography of the Cold War.

What is equally surprising is a similar disregard for uncertainty by historians of emotions and scholars in cognate disciplines, especially anthropology, who engage in the

study of nuclear fear; for they have not yet offered a more comprehensive problematization of the uncertainty about the projected consequences of nuclear war as a major driver or trigger of emotions (Weart, 1988 and 2012; Boyer, 1994; Winkler, 1999; Biess, 2009; Masco, 2008; on fear as a 'political idea', see Robin, 2004). In a rare instance where uncertainty is addressed, Joanna Bourke observes in fairly vague and general terms that 'confusion and uncertainty about the nature and intensity of the [nuclear] threat was particularly distressing' and that '[f]ear of the unknown contributed greatly to panic states' (Bourke, 2005, 277). But Bourke does not elaborate on this decisive point.

In the absence of social and cultural historians, political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists have so far dominated the study of uncertainty more generally – often within the context of risk. Rooted, by and large, in international relations or political science, a number of studies has recently explored the part that uncertainty plays in political decision-making and addressed this politics of the unknown largely as a top-down phenomenon (Aradau & van Munster, 2012; Trenta, 2016; Klimke, Kreis & Ostermann, 2016; for a notable exception, see Greiner, 2009, 17-18, and some contributions in Greiner, Müller, & Walter, 2009). To explore the social and cultural dimensions of the politics of the unknown about the expected effects of nuclear war, this international relations and political science literature could be brought into conversation with work on the cultural history of 'the political' (Mergel, 2002; Landwehr, 2003; Frevert & Haupt, 2005), security (Conze, 2005; Conze, 2009; Daase, 2012; Nehring, 2013; Graf, Ressel, & Zwierlein, 2010; Zwierlein, 2012) and insecurity (e.g. Weldes et al. 1999).

Furthermore, such an investigation could usefully draw on the rich sociological and anthropological literature on uncertainty and risk (e.g. Bauman, 2007; Beck, 1992; Bonß, 1995; Callon, Lascoumes, & Barthe, 2009; Giddens, 1990). While social historians have started to examine 'risk as a category of analysis', to borrow Peter Itzen's and Simone M. Müller's recent proposal, they are still lagging behind sociologists and anthropologists when it comes to an explicit engagement with uncertainty (Itzen & Müller, 2016, 14; for another exception, see Moses & Rosenhaft, 2015). What makes the works by sociologists and anthropologists so useful, apart from their definition of key terminology, is the convincing case that they have made for uncertainty to be taken as a socially and culturally constructed entity (Bonß, 1997; Douglas, 1999; Bonß, 2013). The latter observation is particularly important, as it entails that uncertainty is ultimately subjective (Blau, 2011).

Alongside its subjective nature, uncertainty, or what Sebastian Jobs also classes as 'uncertain knowledge', should be viewed as a fluid concept, 'oscillating between affirmation and doubt to capture the productivity of uncertainty for innovation and change' (Jobs, 2014, 3). This is in the sense that such definitional fluidity recognizes the fact that uncertainty does not necessarily have to have exclusively negative connotations but might herald tremendous opportunities (Bonß, 2013, 23). And this fluidity, together with its subjectivity, is characteristic of the ways in which different players sought to use uncertainty in the politics of the unknown around the nuclear threat to achieve their aims and objectives, often – at least ostensibly – suggesting that they felt certain about the likely consequences of a hypothetical nuclear war.

The public debate over civil defence in the early 1980s illustrates this 'uncertain

certainty' particularly well. It centred on the government's *Protect and Survive* pamphlet, which formed part of a wider public information campaign of the same name that the government secretly devised in the mid-1970s. After the content of *Protect and Survive* had been leaked to the media, the Thatcher Government, in 1980, decided to make the booklet publicly available (Central Office for Information, 1980; Stafford, 2012; Arnold, 2014; Preston, 2015; Diebel, 2017, 187-272). *Protect and Survive* attempted to convince readers that relatively simple civil defence measure such as the construction of an 'inner refuge' within private homes, using doors and sand bags, would increase their chances of surviving a nuclear attack on their country considerably (Central Office for Information, 1980). By contrast, critics of British nuclear policy attacked *Protect and Survive* for its propagation of simplistic and seemingly ineffectual precautions to survive a nuclear war and its aftermath in the belief that such measures would indeed prove ineffectual. Perhaps the best-known response – or counter-narrative – to the government's civil defence proposals appeared in the form of a polemical essay by the CND activist and social historian E.P. Thompson under the title 'Protest and Survive'. In it, Thompson argued, with seeming certainty, that '[p]rotest is the only realistic form of civil defence' in light of the devastating consequences of a nuclear conflict that would render the government's proposed civil defence measures ineffectual (Thompson, 1980, 30; for a similar critique, see also Bolsover, 1982).

While these two subjective and diametrically opposed positions rightly suggest a polarization of British opinion on the nuclear weapons issue in the early 1980s, an investigation into the politics of the unknown around the nuclear threat should move beyond such a binary 'Protect/Protest' opposition (Cordle, 2012, 656-59). In this, a

differentiation of official and unofficial nuclear narratives, as recently proposed by Dick van Lente, could be usefully deployed to probe deeper into this politics of the unknown (van Lente, 2012; for a first broader survey of such narratives in the British context, see Hogg, 2016). Here, empirical research in archival documents of relevant historical actors, especially CND or the government departments in charge of nuclear-weapons-related issues at the time (in particular the Cabinet and Prime Minister's Offices, the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Home Office) could provide crucial insights into such unofficial narratives, thus contributing towards painting a more nuanced picture of the different sides in this politics of the unknown.

A comparative analysis of official (public) and unofficial (internal) assessments of the uncertainty over the likely effects of a nuclear attack on Britain would be particularly insightful for the government side whose decision-making processes on nuclear weapons and civil defence were commonly clouded by a 'culture of secrecy' (Vincent, 1998). Taking into account the long-standing two inter-related underlying pillars of British nuclear weapons policy – nuclear deterrence and civil defence – (Smith, 2009, 62; Grant, 2008), such a study could test the degree to which civil defence remained a '"façade"' aimed at allying public fears that might otherwise jeopardize the very existence of Britain's independent deterrent, as Matthew Grant has suggested for the 1950s and 1960s (Grant, 2010, 7). This might also involve consideration of the ways in which the government's knowledge of the anticipated effects of a nuclear attack on Britain had evolved since the secret 1955 'Strath Report', which argued that an attack on Britain with as few as ten hydrogen bombs was likely to destroy the British state (Smith, 2009; Hughes, 2003; Hennessy, 2010, 163-77).

If a closer examination of the government's internal dealings with the many unknowns around the expected consequences of a nuclear war could help penetrate this secrecy and retrospectively shed light on internal views held by government officials, then the impact of this 'culture of secrecy' on the public discourse over the nuclear threat requires critical attention, too. Did this 'culture of secrecy' leave room for speculation? Conceptionally, an answer to this question could draw on Sebastian Job's classification of gossip and rumour as 'narratives of hearsay' that constitute another form of 'uncertain knowledge' (Jobs, 2014, 2). Moreover, such an endeavour could explore the extent to which this nuclear secrecy prompted critics of official nuclear policies to create an alternative 'nuclear public sphere' to disseminate information on the nuclear threat, as Joseph Masco has observed within the context of the United States (Masco, 2005). Here, articles and books by journalists such as Duncan Campbell or television productions by Britain's public broadcaster, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), on the imagined effects of nuclear war like *Threads* (BBC 2 TV, UK, 1984) or *On the Eighth Day* (BBC 2 TV, UK, 1984) are likely to offer valuable insight into a 1980s British 'nuclear public sphere' (Campbell, 1982; Cordle, 2013).

With the focus mainly on official versus unofficial narratives of uncertainty so far, the final point that this section seeks to make concerns the conscious acknowledgement by historical actors of unknowns in imagined scenarios of nuclear war. The British reception of nuclear winter provides particularly fertile ground for such an investigation. This American theorem predicted major climatological changes, especially a cooling and darkening of the Earth's atmosphere, in the wake of a nuclear war. Given its highly abstract nature, nuclear winter demonstrates, once again, the subjectivity of

uncertainty: proponents and sceptics of this hypothesis alike commonly framed their arguments around the many unknowns surrounding this theory. And, what is more, the nuclear winter theory subsequently evolved further. The fact that a group of scientists sought to rebrand it as 'nuclear autumn' in a less dramatic form shows both a conscious awareness of the uncertainties surrounding the hypothesis and the introduction of gradations of uncertainty on the part of some actors in this politics of the unknown (Oreskes and Conway, 2010, 51).

Besides its conceptual merit, there is great epistemological value in examining the British reception of nuclear winter: since this theory emerged from a group of American astrophysicists and atmospheric scientists around Carl Sagan and was later refined with input from Soviet scientists, historians have so far analysed it, by and large, within the context of the two superpowers, especially the United States (Badash, 2009, 141; Rubinson, 2014; Mausbach, 2017; Knoblauch, 2017a, 34-59). Its British reception, by contrast, has not yet been appropriately explored. Here, an investigation could draw on recent work on British 'transnational professional activism' and examine the reactions by anti-nuclear weapons expert groups such as Scientists Against Nuclear Arms (SANA) or the Medical Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons (MCANW) to nuclear winter (Laucht, 2018).

Uncertainty and the Nuclear Threat within a Wider Economy of

Social, Economic and Political Concerns

If nuclear winter marks a strong example of the uncertainty surrounding the nuclear threat, it was by far not the only serious issue that Britons faced during the late 1970s and early 1980s. And a consideration of the nuclear threat within a wider economy of

contemporary, non-nuclear-weapons-related socio-political concerns thus marks the second main proposal that this essay puts forth. These include such issues as unemployment or falling living standards, de-industrialization, cuts to social services or global economic trends. These proposals build on Stephen Brooke's observation that multiple and often contradictory 'trajectories' were characteristic of 1980s Britain (Brooke, 2014, 22). Andy McSmith has thus also applied the oxymoronic label 'The Decade of Greed and Live Aid' to that decade (McSmith, 2011, 1-10).

Conceptually, such a broader, synchronic contextualization of the perceived uncertainty about the nuclear threat draws inspiration from an emerging strand of Cold War historiography that explores the limits of that conflict as an analytical framework for postwar history (Connelly, 2000; Iriye, 2013; Nehring, 2012). After all, the 1980s witnessed some dramatic social, economic and political upheaval, especially the 1984-85 miners' strike (Francis, 2009; Shaw, 2012; Leeworthy, 2012), the Brixton and Toxteth riots (Marren, 2016, 110-43; Frost and Phillips, 2011; Ebke, 2016; Jackson, 2015) or a high rate of unemployment (Jackson and Saunders, 2012b, 5-6). While locating the politics of the unknown over the nuclear threat within these burning socio-political and economic issues would enable historians to paint a more balanced picture of the subject matter, it could also demonstrate how concepts such as 'the enemy from within', that were often applied to anti-nuclear-weapons protesters, could also be used for trade unions, striking workers and miners (Steber, 2018, 67-68).

At the same time, a broader framing of this politics of the unknown could usefully build on Joel Isaac and Duncan Bell's observation that '"the Cold War" was an actors' category […] entangled in the very history that the label is designed to identify' (Isaac

and Bell, 2012, 6). Recent research on 1980s West German anti-nuclear weapons activism suggests that many of those protesters regarded the bi-polarity of the Cold War at that stage as an outmoded model (Hansen, 2016). Did CND and other British anti-nuclear weapons campaigners reject the Cold War in a similar fashion by the early 1980s? In answering this question, an examination of this politics of the unknown would go beyond a dominant thread in the existing historiography (e.g. Willis, 1995; Winkler, 1999; Seed, 2006; Hogg, 2012; Weart, 2012), contributing instead to a growing body of literature that presents a more multifaceted picture of the nuclear threat and its impacts on society and culture (e.g. Burkett, 2010; Cordle, 2013; Overpeck, 2012; Hughes, 2015; Hogg, 2016).

On a methodological level, this investigation should take onboard recent calls by contemporary historians to engage with social science research (Graf & Priemel, 2011; Pleinen & Raphael, 2014). Hence, this essay calls for a rehabilitation of contemporary studies by psychologists (e.g. Schatz & Fiske, 1992), political scientists (e.g. Sabin, 1986) and scholars from other disciplines that have by and large been omitted from the existing historiography of nuclear fear in Britain. A consideration of these 'non-traditional' historical sources would be helpful for situating the uncertainty about the nuclear threat within a broader context of other pressing social and political issues. The main caveat with such an approach lies in the need for the researcher to demonstrate sufficient critical awareness of sociological source material like opinion polls though (Ziemann, 2012; Field, 2014; Lawrence, 2013).

Alongside the use of quantitative source material, an investigation into the uncertainty over the nuclear threat within its wider synchronic contexts could draw on

such examples as protests by local government against both civil defence and broader policies by the central government or the women's peace camp at RAF Greenham Common to demonstrate the multifaceted nature of anti-nuclear weapons protests. On a basic level, measures taken by local councils such as issuing alternative (critical) civil defence pamphlets or declaring themselves nuclear-free zones can be read as forms of local protest against national and international nuclear policies or an escalation of the nuclear arms race (Hogg 2015; Schregel, 2015). But, if these protests were simultaneously explored within the context of the strained relations between the central and local governments at the time, a more complex picture might emerge. Here, an examination of the role of local government in this politics of the unknown should also consider a range of non-nuclear-weapons-related issues. Since local authorities found their powers curtailed and their finances placed under central government control in the wake of the Thatcher Government's local government reform, it comes clear that civil defence and nuclear weapons also provided local authorities with prime opportunities to protest against central government policies more broadly (Chandler, 2007, 243-59). And, what is more, recent research also reveals that local councils often based their opposition to nuclear weapons (and civilian nuclear energy) on their constituents' social demographic and the structure of the local economy. Or, as Daily Payling has observed for the broader anti-nuclear politics of South Yorkshire County and Sheffield City Councils: 'Pro-nuclear was seen as anti-coal, and Sheffielders worked in coal pits not power stations.' (Payling, 2014, 615).

The women's peace camp at RAF Greenham Common offers another illustrative example that reveals the merits of locating anti-nuclear-weapons protests within wider

synchronic dimensions. In response to plans to deploy United States Air Force cruise missiles to that military installation under the NATO 'double-track' decision, a group called Women for Life on Earth organized a march from Cardiff to Greenham Common in 1981 that subsequently led to the establishment of the peace camp at the base. So far, historiographical attention has primarily focused on the gender dimensions of the women's peace camp. A dominant strand in the historiography of the Greenham Common women has examined the peace camp through a feminist lens (Liddington, 1989; Roseneil, 1995 and 2000; Laware, 2004). Yet, autobiographical accounts by key members of the camp have cast the dynamics at work at that peace camp in a different light, revealing both the complex undercurrents between feminists and non-feminists over the exclusion of men from the site in general and the difficult relationship between proponents of different strands of feminist ideology at Greenham in particular (Pettitt, 2006; Titcombe, 2013).

While these gender dynamics in themselves expose a set of issues, especially opposition to a patriarchal order and the politics of different feminist ideologies at work in the early 1980s, an analysis of the women's peace camp within the framework of an 'alternative milieu' could prove to be a fruitful endeavour, exposing the multi-layered nature of these protests. This is in the sense that the early 1980s marked the halcyon days of such left-wing alternative milieus in Britain and other European nations where they thrived in particular in peace, women's and environmentalist movements (Reichardt and Siegfried, 2010, 15-16). What makes these alternative milieus so valuable for an investigation into the wider socio-political and economic politics of anti-nuclear weapons activism, uncertainty and the nuclear threat in the 1980s is the fact that they also

represent expressions of a fundamental re-evaluation of values that occurred in Britain and other Western European nations from the 1960s (Schildt and Siegfried, 2006, 18). In a similar fashion, an examination of the synchronic dimensions of this politics of unknown could also engage with work on British youth cultures, class, rebellion and punk music (Simonelli, 2002; Worley, 2012, 2013 and 2017).

Finally, the example of the Greenham Common women's peace camp sheds light on another, often overlooked aspect of 1980s anti-nuclear weapons protests: right-wing anti-anti-nuclear weapons activism. In the case of the women's peace camp, these right-wing protests were directed against the Greenham Common women, their politics and their 'alternative milieu'. And this aspect merits further consideration because the cultural and social history of the 1980s was not exclusively the history of left-wing protest. While right-wing non-government groups like Peace Through NATO, Women and Families for Defence or the Coalition for Peace Through Security advocated a pro-government line on nuclear deterrence and civil defence, opposing unilateral nuclear disarmament, the local grass-roots group Rate Payers Against Greenham Encampments (RAGE) coupled such views with pronouncedly homophobic and misogynistic attacks against members of the peace camp and their alternative lifestyles (Moores, 2014). Consequently, RAGE not only marked an example of an anti-anti-nuclear weapons movement that formed in response to the growing protests against the nuclear threat, but it reveals the extent to which such groups formed part of a counter movement against an 'alternative milieu' with its distinct gender and class politics in the early 1980s. In this, a consideration of a right-wing counter movement against anti-nuclear weapons activism then brings to light the existence of a perpetuating dynamic at play within this politics of the unknown

between action – reaction – counter reaction and so on.

Britain's Long Nuclear 1980s

While the 'alternative milieu' of the women's peace camp at RAF Greenham Common and its reception by members of the surrounding local community illustrate a variety of synchronic social and political uncertainties and concerns, it also demonstrates the need to place these alternative lifestyles within wider diachronic dimensions; for this 'alternative milieu' formed part of a process of value change since the 1960s. Similarly, some feminist scholars have examined the women's peace camp at Greenham Common within long-standing traditions of feminist activism from the days of the suffragette movement (Eglin, 1987; Liddington, 1989). And these two examples clearly show that a simultaneous examination of key facets of this politics of the unknown within relevant synchronic and diachronic contexts adds further depth to a study of the ways in which different actors sought to use the uncertainty over the anticipated consequences of a nuclear war for their individual goals.

To achieve a diachronic contextualization, this essay proposes the adoption of the periodization of 'Britain's long nuclear 1980s'. Unlike the concept of the 'nuclear 1980s', which Daniel Cordle has formulated in his study of British and American fiction and which quite literally refers to the decade of the 1980s (Cordle, 2017, 3-9), the proposed concept of 'Britain's long nuclear 1980s' goes much further back in time. In this, it extends the idea of the '"nuclear crisis",' which Christoph Becker-Schaum and others have introduced within the context of anti-nuclear weapons protests in 1980s West Germany. 'During the nuclear crisis, people in West Germany, like those in many other Western societies, sought to come to terms with their own past, present, and future,'

argue Becker-Schaum and others, emphasizing that 1980s anti-nuclear weapons activism 'was an expression of rapid sociocultural changes that started in the 1960s and continued with the economic transformations in the 1970s' (Becker-Schaum et al., 2016a, 2; for a similar approach, see also Gassert, 2011).

Like the '"nuclear crisis",' a long British nuclear 1980s needs to consider the socio-economic shifts that occurred in 1960s Britain (e.g. Marwick, 1998; Donnelly, 2013; Harrison, 2009; Hoefferle, 2013; Thomas, 2002 and 2008; Moores, 2017). Similarly, it must pay attention to the 1970s as the decade both preceding and shaping many of the social, political and cultural issues prevailing in Britain and elsewhere between 1979 and 1985 (Hilton, Moores, and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 2017b, 150; Black, Pemberton and Thane, 2013). What makes the 1970s so crucial for the politics of uncertainty in the early 1980s is the fact that that decade gave rise to a range of uncertainties in the wake of the oil and energy crises, influencing many developments such as the major structural changes in the British economy during the 1980s (Robinson et al., 2017; Borstelmann, 2012; Ferguson et al., 2011; Doering-Manteuffel & Raphael, 2012; Geyer, 2010; Graf, 2014; Hilton, Moores, & Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 2017; Jarausch, 2008; Villaume, Mariager, & Porsdam, 2016). At the same time, these growing socio-political and economic uncertainties accentuated an ongoing tendency towards Britain's decline (Tomlinson, 2000 and 2009).

Above and beyond incorporating elements of the '"nuclear crisis",' the concept of 'Britain's long nuclear 1980s' needs to extend further back in time to the Second World War. After all, the British government started to look into feasibility studies of creating atomic arms by 1940, with far-reaching implications for subsequent nuclear decision-

making (Gowing, 1964; Laucht, 2012, 41; Baylis and Stoddart, 2015, 11-13). Through the cooperation with the United States on nuclear weapons in the Manhattan Project later on in the war, these wartime operations also gave rise to another important feature that persisted into the early 1980s and beyond – the so-called Anglo-American special relationship (Baylis, 1984; Clark, 1994; Jones, 1996; Mumford, 2017). Moreover, the Second World War, in particular the aerial bombardment suffered by many British cities and towns as well as the first uses of atomic arms against Hiroshima and Nagasaki, became major reference points for various actors in the politics of the unknown over the nuclear threat in the Second Cold War in their attempts to grasp the highly uncertain and abstract effects of a nuclear attack on Britain (on the global significance of Hiroshima in particular, see Hogan, 1996; Rotter, 2008). In spite of its extension into the 1940s, the notion of 'Britain's long nuclear 1980s' is preferable over that of a long British nuclear 1940s for two reasons: not only does a 'Britain's long nuclear 1940s' focus attention away from the primary focus of an investigation of the nuclear threat in the Second Cold War, but it can be seen as an invitation to historians to engage in an ahistorical, teleological reading backwards of 1980s nuclear history – something Jeff Hughes has observed for science-fiction literature pre 1945 (Hughes, 2012, 502).

Alongside the Second World War and socio-economic developments of the 1960s and 1970s, the proposed long British nuclear 1980s needs to take into account a range of international and genuinely British factors relevant to the politics of the uncertainty over the nuclear threat between 1979 and 1985. These include, above all, the far-reaching decisions by the Attlee Government in 1947 to acquire an independent nuclear deterrent and the Churchill Government in 1955 to pursue the development of British

thermonuclear weapons (Gowing, 1974, vol. 1, 184; Baylis, 1995; Arnold, 2001; Baylis and Stoddart, 2015, 16-41, 60-73; Laucht, 2012, 7-8). After all, Britain's possession of (thermo)nuclear arms meant that this politics of the unknown developed dynamics that differed from Western European non-nuclear powers such as West Germany or Denmark.

In line with such a more comprehensive periodization, other relevant points that should find acknowledgement within a long British nuclear 1980s include the nuclear test ban debate and the first cycle of anti-nuclear weapons protests of the 1950s and early 1960s. The former episode in nuclear history is of great relevance because it made people in Britain and elsewhere acutely aware of the effects of nuclear arms (Jones, 1986; Oliver, 1998; Arnold and Smith, 2006; Moore, 2010; Walker, 2010; Laucht, 2016). Consequently, its inclusion in the proposed periodization would allow for a more nuanced examination of the awareness of nuclear weapons effects against the background of the evolution of that knowledge from the 1950s/60s as through comparisons with studies such as the aforementioned 'Strath Report', for example.

Similarly, the first cycle of anti-nuclear weapons mass protests from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s, including the iconic Aldermaston marches, CND and its precursor organizations like the National Council for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons Tests or the Direct Action Committee against Nuclear War, must be recognized as part of a long British nuclear 1980s (Nehring, 2013, 196-98; Taylor, 1988; Phythian, 2001). At least two reasons justify the application of this diachronic perspective. First, in combination with a 'four nations approach' to British history (Lloyd-Jones and Scull, 2018), it could contribute to a growing body of literature on the different roots of anti-nuclear weapons activism in relation to nationalism in the different British nations (Hill,

2016; Laucht & Johnes, forthcoming; Eschle, 2016a, 2016b and 2017). Second, the protests of the 1950s and 1960s provide a crucial reference point for examining shifts in the ideological and rhetorical uses of uncertainty over the effects of nuclear war by opponents of nuclear weapons between the first and second cycles of anti-nuclear weapons activism. Consequently, a study of the politics of the unknown around the nuclear threat in the Second Cold War could test the applicability of Nina Tannenwald's general observation that anti-nuclear attitudes changed from opposition to national nuclear policies in the 1950s and 1960s to a complete rejection of the doctrine of nuclear deterrence by the early 1980s to the British context (Tannenwald, 2005, 20-22, 32). Especially the decision by the Thatcher Government to acquire Trident makes for an excellent case study to explore this evolution of anti-nuclear beliefs (on the acquisition of Trident, see Doyle, 2017).

Conclusions

This essay has sought to demonstrate the tremendous potential that a comprehensive micro-historical study of the politics of the unknown around the nuclear threat in Britain during the Second Cold War holds. Not only would such an investigation contribute to the historiography of the Second Cold War but to the burgeoning field of the social and cultural history of 1980s Britain. This exploratory study has thus made proposals in three chief areas. Alongside making a case for a thorough conceptualization of 'uncertainty' in relation to the nuclear threat, it has called for locating this politics of the unknown within a wider economy of contemporary socio-economic and political concerns. Finally, this study has introduced the notion of a long British nuclear 1980s to increase the depth of an investigation into this politics of the unknown further.

'Uncertainty', this essay argues, is a subjective social and cultural construct that can serve as both trigger and driver of emotions such as fear of nuclear war. At the same time, 'uncertainty' represents a fluid concept that does not necessarily have to have exclusively negative connotations but that might also hold opportunities for historical actors. The public debate over civil defence during the early 1980s illustrates these three key feature of uncertainty at work in this politics of the unknown particularly well; for the Thatcher Government and CND both relied on a kind of 'uncertain certainty' in their diametrically opposing claims about the (in)efficiency of protection against a nuclear attack in their propaganda materials, *Protect and Survive* and *Protest and Survive* respectively. While these positions on civil defence ostensibly suggest a binary '"Protect/Protest"' dichotomy, the present essay has proposed to take onboard a further differentiation between 'official' and 'unofficial' discourses over nuclear weapons effects by comparing and contrasting internal and external communications of government departments or anti-nuclear weapons groups. Given the prevalence of a 'culture of secrecy' around governmental nuclear policies, such an examination should also entail consideration of an alternative 'nuclear public sphere' as in newspapers or investigative television programmes where relevant, available information on nuclear weapons was disseminated. Finally, an exploration of the British reception of the nuclear winter hypothesis, especially by transnational professional activist organizations such as SANA or MCANW, would allow for both a contemporary scientific problematization of the many unknowns surrounding nuclear weapons effects and the introduction of gradations of uncertainty beyond a binary '"Protect/Protest"' *chiaroscuro*.

Alongside an analysis of political uses of uncertainty in relation to specific

nuclear-weapons-related issues such as nuclear winter, this essay has made a case for locating this politics of the unknown within a wider non-nuclear set of synchronic socio-economic and political concerns such as unemployment, de-industrialization or Britain's economic decline. Not only does this proposal dovetail with a recent historiographical strand that explores the limits of the Could War framework for postwar history, but it would contribute to a growing literature on Britain in the nuclear age that seeks to paint a more balanced picture of the place of the nuclear threat in relation to other socio-economic issues. Besides quantitative data analysis of contemporary public opinion polls and other sociological surveys, such a broader study could involve an exploration of the nuclear-free zone movement within the context of local government reform in Britain. Similarly, the women's peace camp at RAF Greenham Common could be studied within the framework of an 'alternative milieu'. This also opens up the possibility of analysing right-wing reactions to it, thereby presenting a corrective to popular perceptions of the 1980s as a decade exclusively characterized by left-wing activism.

If the proposed framing of this politics of the unknown within larger synchronic dimensions added depth to the analysis, this could be deepened even further through a simultaneous consideration of relevant diachronic aspects. The essay thus introduces the notion of 'Britain's long nuclear 1980s' that extends back as far as the early Second World War when Britain initiated a first atomic weapons development project and the Anglo-American 'special relationship'. Other key components include the nuclear test ban debate and the first cycle of anti-nuclear weapons activism of the 1950s and 1960s as well as non-nuclear-weapons-related social, economic and political developments of the 1960s and 1970s. The concept of a long British nuclear 1980s could be applied to specify

the roots of anti-nuclear weapons activism in the four British nations or to understand ideological and rhetorical changes in these protests. But these are only some of the exciting possibilities that a micro historical study of the politics of the uncertainty over nuclear threat in Britain during the Second Cold War holds.

Endnotes

[1] While some historians have mentioned Able Archer in connection with the Cuban missile crisis as one of the most dangerous moments of the Cold War (Prados, 2005, 439), others have assigned a far greater level of danger to it (Fischer, 1997; Adamsky, 2013). Especially the presence of a higher degree of uncertainty in each of the opposing sides' assessments of their opponent's intentions in the case of Able Archer than in the Cuban missile crisis massively contributed, in the eyes of Georg Schildt, to making 1983 'the most dangerous year of the Cold War' (Schildt, 2013). Yet, other historians have denied the NATO exercise any particular escalatory potential (Kramer, 2013; Mastny, 2008). Note that the primary source base available to researchers is still fairly thin due to a strict classification regime still in effect (Jones, 2016). And this lack of sources led some historians to base their arguments on anecdotal evidence and factual errors (Voß, 2014, 73-76).

[2] While there has been a fair number of publications on the period of the so-called Second Cold War and the final phase of the Cold War generally (e.g. Conze, Klimke, & Varon, 2017; Njølstad, 2004; Nuti, 2015), this historiography has often marginalized Britain, focusing instead on the two superpowers, especially the United States (Rossinow, 2015; Knoblauch, 2017a; Martin, 2011; Rubinson, 2014; Shaw, 2007, 267-300; Shaw & Youngblood, 2010, 189-214), Europe (Bange & Villaume, 2016; Nuti, 2009; Villaume &

Westad, 2010) or Germany (Hansen, 2016; Becker-Schaum et al., 2016b; Gassert, Geiger, & Wentker, 2011b). Even where some of these publications address Britain, they are largely concerned with either political history (e.g. Baylis & Stoddart, 2015, 151-84; Eames, 2017; Stoddart, 2015; Stoddart, 2014; Dorman, 2001; Hampshire, 2015) or fairly specific social and cultural aspects of 1980s British Cold War history (Cordle, 2017; Hogg, 2016, 133-58; Knoblauch, 2017b; Shaw, 2005).

[3] In an article in *History Compass*, Stephen Brooke commented on the burgeoning field of 1980s British social and cultural history (Brooke, 2014). To date, the more comprehensive analyses of this crucial period in British history have largely taken the form of popular histories (Beckett, 2016; McSmith, 2011; Stewart, 2013; Turner, 2010; for a notable exception, see the contributions in Hilton, Moores, & Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 2017a) or have often focused on Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the supposed centrality of Thatcherism to this period (e.g. Jackson & Saunders, 2012a; Moore, 2013-; Vinen, 2009; Filby, 2015).

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