

North Korea and the Threat of Nuclear Extermination

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Against Nuclear Apocalypse

The crisis over North Korea has only reminded us of the worldwide danger of nuclear war. Anarchists must oppose all development of nuclear bombs, by the US but also by an oppressed nation (such as North Korea) and even by a Federation of Anarchist Communes.

The Stalinist kingdom of North Korea has recently had an underground nuclear bomb test. This has been condemned by what is called “the international community,” most vociferously by the United States’ government. They pressure the North Korean dictatorship by, among other means, withholding food, starving its powerless people. The United States rulers are also leading the effort to stop the Iranian state from building nuclear bombs (which the Iranians deny they are doing). There is evidence that the Bush administration is at least considering making a military attack on Iran, using, as a pretext, these nuclear bombs which do not yet exist and may never exist. As is well known, the main excuse of the U.S. and British governments for attacking Iraq was that Saddam Hussein was building nuclear bombs and chemical and biological “Weapons of Mass Destruction” — which it turned out was not true, although it may once have been true. Meanwhile the U.S. state has dropped its one-time complaints about India and Pakistan developing nuclear devices; the U.S. has ended its previous sanctions against these countries due to their bomb-building. Of course, the U.S. has never criticized the state of Israel for its nuclear missiles.

The first thing which must be pointed out (but not the last) is the massive hypocrisy of the U.S. state. Armed to the eyebrows with nuclear bombs, the U.S. turns to smaller, weaker, nations and tells them, “YOU must not have nuclear bombs! If you do, it will threaten the peace of the world!” And the same hypocrisy is true of other members of the nuclear club, such as the imperialist states of Britain and France, as well as the wannabe imperialist Chinese regime.

The Non-Proliferation Treaty was supposed to stop non-nuclear powers from getting atomic armaments. But also, the nuclear-armed powers were supposed to negotiate away their terrible bombs, toward a worldwide condition of nuclear (at least) disarmament. Of course, this has never happened. Following the implosion of the Soviet Union, a number of liberals argued that now was the golden moment for the U.S. to lead a global movement for nuclear disarmament. After all, the U.S. no longer needed to defend itself from a nuclear-armed superpower. This antinuclear crusade did not happen either.

This has led some on the left to support the North Korean regime in building nuclear missiles. See for example, the article published by the Party for Socialism and Liberation, “North Korea has the right to test and possess nuclear weapons.” (Sloan 2006) Some of these supporters regard North Korea as “socialist” or (many Trotskyists) as a “deformed workers’ state.” Supposedly the working class is the ruling class in North Korea, because its economy is government-owned. Meanwhile the workers and peasants undergo mass regimentation, mass repression, and mass starvation. These leftists similarly regard China, Vietnam, Kampuchea/Cambodia, Laos, and Cuba as various types of “workers’ states,” deserving of nuclear bombs if they want them. Other leftists may reject the notion that North Korea, a prison of the working class, is a workers’ state. But these still support its right to national self-determination, which includes self-defense from imperialist forces, and therefore — they draw the conclusion — the right to nuclear bombs.

I do not regard North Korea as socialist, a “workers’ state,” or even slightly progressive. The very idea is disgusting. I do regard it as an oppressed nation, with the right to defend itself from imperialist armed forces. But — this is where I part company from these leftists — I do not think that anyone should have, or threaten to use, or use, nuclear bombs. This would even be for the

goal of revolutionary anarchists, a hypothetical Korean Commune of Workers' and Peasants' Councils. Even such a nonstate association should never have nuclear weapons, I believe, even if threatened by nuclear-armed counter-revolutionary armed forces. If it took power in a land which had previously had nuclear bombs — say a North American Federation of Workers' and Popular Assemblies — it should unilaterally disarm, that is, dismantle the atomic bombs. (When the African National Congress took power in South Africa, it dismantled the South African nuclear bombs.) I want to argue this here.

Nuclear Bombs are Unique

Nuclear bombs are not like other armaments, and should not be regarded as “weapons” at all. By their very nature, they are anti-civilian, society-destroying, instruments of human extermination. The destructive force of the original, black, gunpowder was approximately doubled by TNT. By the time World War II was over, they had created explosives 60 % as powerful as TNT. But the nuclear bombs used on Japan were 12,000 times as powerful as the best improvement on TNT. (Macdonald, 1970, p. 169) And hydrogen (fusion) bombs are many times more destructive than the first atomic (fission) bombs. “A more or less typical strategic warhead has a yield of two megatons, the explosive equivalent of two million tons of TNT. But two million tons of TNT is about the same as all the bombs exploded in World War II — a single bomb with the explosive power of the entire Second World War but compressed into a few seconds of time and an area 30 or 40 miles across.” (Carl Sagan, 1983, p. 4)

The immense power of their blast, as well as the radioactivity they spew out, makes them devices for destroying cities, industries, and food-growing areas. Unlike all previous weapons, there is no defense against nuclear bombs. They are pure devices of mass annihilation.

There have been plans developed for using nuclear bombs “only” against military targets, such as other nations' nuclear missile sites. Supposedly this would save civilian life. But the sheer destructiveness of nuclear bombs would still affect civilian society. In any case, such a plan only makes sense if “our” bombs are used first — in an act of aggression. There would be no point in bombing the (empty) missile sites of the “other” side if the other side had already attacked! So an attempt to make the nuclear bomb less of a city-smasher would increase the risk of war — and the smashing of cities.

Besides its blast, nuclear bombs are spreaders of radioactivity. Each bomb would launch into the air tons of radioactive substances, to spread throughout the globe. We know from atomic bomb tests that they spread radioactive poison throughout the international food chain, into fish far out to sea, and, closer to home, in mothers' breast milk. So even if one nation used such “weapons” against another, the attacker's people would still feel the effects.

A nuclear war between two or more national states would be mutual suicide, as each “defended” itself by exterminating the other. Nuclear missiles have been compared to a pistol with two barrels, one pointed at the enemy and one pointed at the holder of the gun. To shoot it is to simultaneously commit murder and suicide. Even a one-sided nuclear attack against a non-nuclear nation would result in suicide.

The effect of a nuclear war would be to throw up so much debris and smoke from fires as to blot out the sun throughout the world. This would cause the dying out of plants, and of the animals which depend on them (including homo sapiens). The effect would be similar to that of

the asteroid which once hit the earth and wiped out the dinosaurs or to the volcano eruptions which may have caused other natural extinctions. How such a “nuclear winter” would interact with global warming has not been studied, as far as I know, but the effect on the balance of nature could not be good.

With the end of the Cold War, we are faced with the possibility of “small” nuclear wars. Even these could be disastrous. Carl Sagan concluded, “Perhaps the greatest surprise in our work was that even small nuclear wars can have devastating climatic effects. We considered a war in which a mere 100 megatons were exploded, [a few hundred strategic weapons] less than one percent of the world arsenals, and only in low-yield airbursts over cities. This scenario, we found, would ignite thousands of fires, and the smoke from these fires alone would be enough to generate an epoch of cold and dark almost as severe as in the 5000-megaton case. The threshold for...The Nuclear Winter is very low.” (1983, p. 7)

Alternatives to Nuclear Bombs

I am not an absolute pacifist. I believe that there are just wars, namely the wars of the oppressed against the oppressor, specifically a revolutionary war of the working class and all oppressed against capitalist forces. But I do not think that nuclear bombs can be justified as useable by a workers’ revolution, or a nonstate federation of communes, or an oppressed nation (such as North Korea) against imperialist aggression. I take the position of “nuclear pacifism,” the absolute rejection of such means of mass extermination, no matter the cause. Their use is both immoral and deadly to the user. The use of nukes threatens the existence of those who use them, by radioactive fallout, by retaliation from the nuclear-armed imperialists, and by a possible nuclear winter. Just having nuclear weapons tempts a first-strike nuclear blow at the possessor by an enemy, for fear of its using them. The use of nuclear bombs means to threaten to exterminate the very workers and poor people of the other country who are our class brothers and sisters, the people we should be trying to win over to our side.

Paul Nitze, the chief arms control negotiator for the Reagan administration (and therefore no anarchist) declared that the U.S. should “unilaterally get rid of our nuclear weapons” (1999, p. A31). Aside from being dangerous, expensive, and immoral, he argues, they are unnecessary. The accuracy of our conventional weapons is now so great (within three feet, he says) that the U.S. government could destroy any target it chose with nonnuclear means. Therefore, he concludes, the nuclear arsenal is unneeded for either deterrence or attack.

Historically the socialist and anarchist movements proposed to replace regular, standing, armies with an armed people, the workers’ militia. This is part of the program for replacing the state. It is hard to see how a popular militia would be able to use nuclear missiles.

In the late ‘seventies and early ‘eighties, some European peace activists began to raise the question whether it would be possible to defend Western Europe from the Soviet Union without nuclear weapons or U.S. forces. It was obvious that even a “limited” nuclear war fought over Europe would destroy the subcontinent. Even a conventional, nonnuclear, regular war would leave a smoking ruin. They consulted with military experts, reviewed the history of guerrilla wars, and examined the defense plans of Yugoslavia, Switzerland, and Sweden. They came up with several proposals relevant to my topic (Alternate Defense Commission, 1983; Barnaby & Boeker, 1982; Mackay & Fernbach, 1983; Roberts, 1976; Smith, 1982).

What they proposed, in general, was a non-nuclear defense program for Western Europe. It would have a military structure and armaments program which emphasized defense rather than offensive capacity, in order to be clearly non-threatening to other countries. They proposed limiting regular armed forces to the role of protecting borders, so that any invader would be forced to pay a price and militias would have time to mobilize. The population would be organized in a militia, with widespread military training, repeated over the years, and with local weapons depots and bunkers scattered throughout the countryside. Weapons could include not just pistols and rifles but also Stingers and similar precision-guided missiles. One or two soldiers can carry and use them against tanks and airplanes. Either a defense in depth or guerrilla tactics could be planned for, depending on various conditions, such as the terrain. Urban guerrilla tactics are also mentioned, including assassination and sabotage. Also methods of unarmed civilian resistance would be taken from proposals for nonviolent defense (King-Hall, 1960; Roberts et al, 1964). These include strikes, go-slows, and other forms of noncooperation, and peaceful demonstrations and propaganda directed at the invader's troops. For an anarchist version of these ideas, see *Towards a Citizens' Militia: Anarchist Alternatives to NATO and the Warsaw Pact*. (IRSM, 1980)

Such approaches could not prevent an enemy from dropping nuclear bombs. Neither could having nuclear bombs prevent it, since there is no defense against nuclear attack. But such non-nuclear defense would make it less likely. It would deny an aggressor any advantage from nuclear or non-nuclear war (and a nuclear attack would still damage the attacker, serving as its own deterrence).

The major defense of a free society would not be in bombs or in military organization but in politics, in its appeal to the populations of other lands. Were a revolutionary society to dismantle its nuclear weapons, this would be a powerful political message, as we say to the people of the world, "We are destroying the hell bombs that were built by the capitalist state. We are abandoning our ability to exterminate you. We are creating a new society. Do not let your rulers use you to attack us! Disarm them! Overthrow their states! Join us in a free world!" A revolution — especially in the U.S., the center of world imperialism — would have a tremendous political impact throughout the world. Foreign soldiers sent to destroy U.S. workers would become "infected" by the revolution. Foreign governments would fear to send their forces against a free North America, lest they be destroyed by guerrilla war, defense-in-depth, sabotage, nonviolent resistance, and by revolutionary propaganda. This would be our "deterrence." Freedom would be our best defense.

Nuclear Proliferation

Despite the hypocrisy of the U.S. and other great powers, there is a real danger of nuclear proliferation. The wider the spread of nuclear armaments, the greater the danger of nuclear war. The world avoided nuclear war throughout the Cold War, when nuclear bombs were essentially controlled by two centers of international power. The end of the Cold War has produced more instability, not less.

About 40 national states have the technical skill to build nuclear bombs, and many have the required material. We are facing a second nuclear age, in which more governments are likely to abandon previous restraints against building nuclear arsenals. Many countries have accumulated everything they need for nuclear bombs, without — yet — putting them together. This is directly

related to the spread of atomic power. To make nuclear bombs, the most important ingredient is the explosive material. Either they enrich uranium fuel, from its usual level of 5 percent to 90 percent – which only takes longer processing in centrifuges. Or they take spent reactor fuel and mine it for plutonium. Either way provides fuel for the bombs.

For decades, Western governments have spread atomic energy internationally as an alternate to nuclear bombs, called the “Atoms for Peace” program. North Korea, Iran, and Pakistan have all “benefited” from this program. Rather than spread peacefulness, it has paved the way for human extermination. Now there are new proposals for centralizing nuclear enrichment internationally or finding other ways to spread nuclear power without nuclear bombs. As Greenpeace recently declared in a public statement, “Nuclear power is inextricably linked with nuclear proliferation. None of the schemes being promoted will solve this problem. In fact, they will make it worse.” (quoted in Broad & Sanger 2006, p. 12)

The threat of nuclear self-extermination is not a problem of North Korea nor even of the United States. It is a problem of the capitalist system of war-making national states. It is a problem of the international capitalist economic system. It is a problem of way capitalist industrialism and the state have developed technology, including their disastrous energy technologies. All these are bound together. The nuclear bombs exist. Sooner or later they will be used. We cannot rely on the national governments to disarm. They must be disarmed. The workers and oppressed people of the world must take them apart, including their nuclear arsenals.

In August 1945, shortly after the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, the anarchist Dwight Macdonald wrote about it in his magazine, *Politics*. He concluded that the lesson of the atomic bomb was “We must ‘get’ the national state before it ‘gets’ us.” (1970, p. 170) This remains true.

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