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Barnett, Nicholas

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## **'No Protection against the H-bomb': Press and Popular Reactions to the Coventry Civil Defence Controversy, 1954**

*This article examines British popular and media reactions to America's Bravo test shot in April 1954 and Coventry City Council's subsequent decision to abandon Civil Defence. The article finds three key motifs emerged which relate to Britain's broader sense of national identity in the 1950s. First, the controversy formed part of a cultural battle for national identity between a conservative and potentially militaristic culture, and one which was more progressive and opposed war and nuclear armaments. Second, opponents labelled the councillors as Moscow stooges and this revealed underlying anti-communism. Third, reactions engaged with a secular strain of Cold War apocalypticism.*

America's Castle series of thermonuclear tests, which began with the Bravo shot on 1 March 1954, profoundly affected the British population. Both the USA and USSR had previously conducted hydrogen bomb experiments, but this test exacerbated public anxiety over the survivability of nuclear war. Richard Crossman noted the importance of the press in raising public awareness of the potential destructiveness of thermonuclear weapons claiming that, alongside sporadic newspaper reports, he 'had written about it often enough but people refused to take it seriously'.<sup>1</sup> This indifference vanished following the *Daily Herald's* report on the *Lucky Dragon*, a Japanese fishing vessel outside the exclusion zone whose crew became sick from radiation poisoning, which revealed the enormity of the test and, Crossman claimed, caused 'this country [to] become H-bomb-conscious'.<sup>2</sup> Soon, Coventry City Council refused to implement their requirement to organise and train a local Civil Defence corps because they believed that thermonuclear weapons made all defence pointless. The ensuing controversy became a worldwide media story and revealed the uneasy relationship between the British people and nuclear weapons and prompted members of the public to write to local or national newspapers or the councillors themselves.<sup>3</sup> Their letters, opinion polls and broader press coverage reveal how the Cold War and nuclear anxieties were linked to

contested forms of British identity and that apocalyptic narratives emerged during nuclear controversies.

The atom bomb had existed in the British public consciousness since 1945 and Winston Churchill had credited it with hastening Japan's surrender.<sup>4</sup> Clement Attlee, whilst recognising that deterrence might not necessarily prevent a future war, and therefore advocating international control of atomic weapons, attempted to maintain Britain's international stature by pursuing independent nuclear weapons.<sup>5</sup> British vulnerability to a nuclear attack in the near future became obvious in 1949 following the Soviet Union's first atomic test and heightened Cold War tensions, which peaked with the start of the Korean War in 1950.<sup>6</sup> Visible civil defence was central to the Churchill government's defence strategy and required increasing funding to maintain effectiveness.<sup>7</sup> In April 1954, around 100 Labour MPs, led by Fenner Brockway and Anthony Wedgewood-Benn, launched the Hydrogen Bomb National Campaign. Their petition collected over a million signatures by the year's end.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Coventry City Council's stance deepened the public awareness and anxieties over nuclear destructiveness. As Richard Taylor notes, from the mid-1950s there was increasing co-operation between diverse groups from Christian pacifists to mainstream Labour politicians, culminating in the 1958 launch of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.<sup>9</sup> Peter Hennessy suggests that 1954 was the 'pivotal year' for British official decisions about pursuing thermonuclear capabilities, with Churchill's government accepting that Britain must pursue a hydrogen bomb in order to maintain world influence and deter any potential European war.<sup>10</sup> Yet 1954 was also pivotal in the formation of a popular anti-nuclear movement in Britain.

This article analyses the media and public reaction to the test and Coventry City Council's subsequent decision to abandon their civil defence requirement. I suggest that the incident revealed concerns over Britain's evolving national identity and contributed towards a Cold War version of the apocalypse myth. During the post-war period British identity was remade, no less than in any other era, and the moment revealed the contested nature of this cultural construct. Often the common

linguistic referents in the debate were overwhelmingly English.<sup>11</sup> Previous scholars have examined nuclear cultures within the context of British identities and I apply the concept to the early thermonuclear era.<sup>12</sup> I argue that the controversy was situated within a battle for memory of the wartime Blitz, which became contested between traditionalists and modernisers who situated national characteristics either within a stoical or warrior spirit or questioned how far militarism should symbolise Britain when a single weapon could instantly destroy any city. Hugh Berrington argues that during the 1950s British public opinion was largely supportive of possession of a nuclear deterrent, whilst Gerard De Groot suggests that patriotism and a desire to maintain international prestige drove this support.<sup>13</sup> I suggest, however, that public opinion was more nuanced than Berrington allows and that widespread fears over the existence of nuclear weapons stimulated better organised anti-nuclear opposition. Furthermore, the recent experience of war meant that in addition to those whose patriotism meant that they supported British manufacture of nuclear weapons, many used this contested concept to oppose nuclear weaponry. In their examinations of 1950s society Dominic Sandbrook and David Kynaston both suggest that nuclear weapons rarely affected the British public's daily lives.<sup>14</sup> I argue that the psychological shock of the Bravo test and subsequent controversy caused many British people to consider how survivable a future war would be.

Matthew Grant contends that the majority of the press condemned Coventry Council's decision; whilst this is largely the case, I argue that the issue divided opinion and gave a sizable portion of the population, who opposed all forms of nuclear weaponry, a visible presence.<sup>15</sup> Popular newspapers contributed towards nuclear anxieties and also suggested that communism challenged British values such as democracy and freedom. Newspapers reinforced liberal-democratic hegemony as part of a 'state-private network'.<sup>16</sup> This network acted informally and formally to reinforce this hegemony, often utilising national rhetoric over memories of the Blitz to further British objectives such as maintaining civil defence and countering communism. The state also intervened in the seemingly independent press. It conducted Civil Defence recruitment campaigns and managed the

release of information about nuclear weapons.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the government exerted pressure on the BBC to refrain from broadcasting potentially alarming programmes about nuclear weapons.<sup>18</sup> The article begins by examining how the initial coverage of the Bravo test reignited public debates over nuclear weapons. The second section explores national and local press reactions to Coventry City Council's vote to disband their Civil Defence Committee on 5 April 1954 and subsequent letters to the council's Labour leader Sidney Stringer (1889-1969).<sup>19</sup> Often the response to this incident engaged with Coventry's recent wartime history, bringing patriotic sentiment to the fore. Finally I examine reactions to the Civil Defence exercise held in Coventry on 30 May and how this exacerbated questions around thermonuclear war's survivability.

### **The Emergence of the H-bomb in British Media**

When the Bravo explosion and the *Lucky Dragon's* contamination grabbed news headlines in March 1954 it prompted suggestions that the test was 'out of control'.<sup>20</sup> Press coverage reignited debates over morality and destructiveness which had first emerged over the atom bomb in publications such as George Orwell's 1945 *Tribune* article and the radio broadcast of John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1946).<sup>21</sup> When the American government announced its intention to release footage of the Mike thermonuclear test from November 1952 the conservative *Daily Express* engaged with nuclear concerns by serialising Elleston Trevor's 'The Doomsday Story'.<sup>22</sup> The story concerns a journalist who tries to prevent the testing of a super hydrogen bomb, which scientists had suggested might destroy the world. As the protagonist awaits the bomb he observed the streets of London: 'But there had been other streets in Berlin, Stalingrad, Coventry, Hiroshima. And people had looked at them and thought that they could never change. And they had changed. Overnight, into dust.'<sup>23</sup> Prior to Coventry's councillors' stand on civil defence, therefore, Trevor situated the city as part of

an arc of worldwide destruction that should warn humankind about future wars. The following day all newspapers printed America's official images, thereby exacerbating concerns over nuclear weapons. The ostensibly Labour supporting *Daily Mirror* likened the blast to 'a crouching obscene beast [. . .] with nightmare powers'.<sup>24</sup> The metaphor suggested that the device was unimaginably destructive. As Adrian Bingham suggests, the editorial situated the bomb almost 'outside the realm of human understanding'.<sup>25</sup> Images and reports of nuclear destructiveness raised anxieties and suggested that humankind's existence was threatened.

In a parliamentary debate on 5 April Clement Attlee highlighted the risks of ever more destructive weapons and questioned the certainty of nuclear deterrence.<sup>26</sup> His widely publicised speech employed apocalyptic rhetoric by comparing modern society to 'the great civilisations of the past' such as Rome, Macedonia and Greece which had collapsed. He situated nuclear warfare within a line of changing and ever more destructive weaponry. The former Prime Minister urged Churchill to prioritise attempts to persuade America and the USSR to undertake a testing moratorium and stated: 'More than once Britain's courage and British initiative have saved Europe. British initiative may well save world civilisation.' Attlee's patriotic speech stressed British moral leadership and questioned the logic of a worldwide arms race. His performance was regarded as masterly by Richard Crossman, MP for Coventry East, one of three Coventry constituencies which all returned comfortable Labour majorities at the 1951 general election.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the speech raised awareness of nuclear destructiveness.

Several newspapers also expressed near apocalyptic fears for the future of civilisation. The *Daily Mirror's* William Connor, under his pen-name Cassandra, was a staunch critic of nuclear weapons. He described the weapon in contradictory terms as a 'Dreadful and beautiful bomb'. Alongside this ambivalence he engaged with a secularised apocalypse myth using vivid descriptions which frequently employed religious phraseology such as 'The angel of death is also the angel of peace.' Connor accepted that many believed that the H-bomb could save humankind, a point which

was emphasised by a number of politicians including Churchill, whose statement that the H-bomb would stop future wars was widely reported, especially in the conservative press.<sup>28</sup> Connor's apocalypticism was echoed by the liberal *Manchester Guardian* on 17 April which stated, 'The early Christians believed their world to end soon. But they expected the end to come through the wisdom of God not the folly of man.'<sup>29</sup> However, the newspaper went beyond total pessimism and stressed that 'fear or wisdom or sheer moral scruple may hold back the men in power'. It urged readers to 'pray that our world is not reduced to atomic ashes' and to 'live the best lives we can'. As Richard Weight argues, during the 1950s British national identity remained defined by its relationship with religion.<sup>30</sup> The thermonuclear scare prompted several newspapers to draw on this aspect of British identity whilst expressing a fear that a form of loosely defined civilisation, which emerged from Christianity, was under threat. The manufacture of hydrogen weapons caused apocalypse narratives to evolve by drawing on the horrific destructive potential of modern weapons.

Many of these narratives would have been familiar to readers because of the expanding science-fiction genre. John Wyndham's post-apocalyptic *Day of the Triffids* (1951) raised questions of survivability following a disaster and the Boulting brothers near nuclear disaster movie *Seven Days to Noon* (1951) made post-war apocalypse narratives appear more secularised.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the serialisation of science-fiction in newspapers invited comparisons between news and fiction and allowed readers to fear that apocalyptic narratives might be realised. Throughout the early nuclear period apocalyptic language expressed the horror of the bomb, but newspapers also suggested that calmness in the face of danger was characteristically British. The press stressed both the apocalyptic and more reserved forms of national characteristics throughout the crisis, and politicians and members of the public reacted to each as coverage of the tests influenced their visions of the thermonuclear era.

The Conservative-supporting *Daily Mail* utilised apocalyptic rhetoric by referring to the test and its 'manmade fires of hell'. However, they insisted it was Russia that threatened humankind and

that stopping production of British nuclear weapons would be irresponsible.<sup>32</sup> The newspaper appeared stuck between pragmatically supporting the weapon and criticising 'science' for threatening the world. A feature by the novelist Charles Morgan titled 'The H-Bomb and You', mimicked Orwell's article at the outset of the Atomic Era.<sup>33</sup> Morgan attributed the dangers to humankind's pursuit of knowledge, through which people accumulated 'more and more power instead of greater and greater wisdom'. Morgan warned: 'Because everything that we value in Western Civilisation, including Christianity, is threatened from the East, we cannot abandon the use of the atomic bomb for the purpose of defence.' The *Mail* placed the nation and its constituent institutions, including Christianity, above renewed nuclear anxieties and, when reporting on Attlee's request that Churchill convene a summit with Malenkov and Eisenhower on nuclear production, praised him for being 'more statesman-like than some of the recent Left-wing comment'.<sup>34</sup> The newspaper also printed the views of some readers who disagreed with its editorial line and expressed apocalyptic concerns that hydrogen bombs could bring about 'the destruction of the earth'.<sup>35</sup> Norah Shone of Chelsea suggested that anti-nuclear campaigns were needed because their paucity 'has allowed this thing to start, to continue and to assume its current proportions'.<sup>36</sup> The *Mail's* readership did not always follow its narrative of the weapon as a necessary evil but its editors accepted that nuclear anxieties existed amongst the public and were not necessarily irrational. Ultimately, the H-bomb's potential destructiveness formed part of the *Mail's* argument for deterrence.

Some newspapers extended their versions of British stereotypes and placed the weapon within an ongoing battle for Britishness. The Liberal supporting *News Chronicle* printed an interview with the outspoken critic of nuclear weapons Bertrand Russell.<sup>37</sup> In 1954 Russell twice broadcast his opposition and in July 1955, launched his anti-nuclear manifesto with Albert Einstein.<sup>38</sup> Alongside, a cartoon by George Sprod lampooned the characteristically reserved British attitude to danger. It featured a middle-aged couple walking tartan-attired terriers. The moustachioed man attempts to calm his wife's supposed irrational fear about the hydrogen bomb: 'Oh, relax, Edna! – First of all we

won't be told; secondly, we'll just be quietly vaporised. So what on earth are you worrying about?' The cartoon exposes British society's gendered structure and engages with supposed national characteristics such as emotional restraint, courage and humour, which were reinforced and projected through popular culture.<sup>39</sup> Whilst the man implies that his wife was acting irrationally, the ironic tone suggests that middle Britain has much to worry about and that those who flippantly dismissed the possibility of sudden destruction were being foolish. The use of humour suggests that nuclear destruction, whilst a concern, might not have been overwhelmingly frightening because, as Sandbrook implies, it usually remained beyond the immediate imagination and, therefore, allowed everyday life to continue.<sup>40</sup> However, the cartoon, and broader coverage of thermonuclear tests, brought the issue of nuclear weapons and their potential into everyday life, which Sandbrook argues was uncommon.

Fig. 1. Sprod, *News Chronicle* 1<sup>st</sup> April 1954

Awareness of the test was widespread. A Gallup opinion poll in March found that 88 per cent of respondents had heard about the Bravo explosion.<sup>41</sup> Arms control was overwhelmingly popular with 74 per cent favouring an 'agreement to ban the atom bomb'. Nevertheless, this desire for multilateral disarmament was believed by 57 per cent to be unlikely in the next year or two. Polling data, however, can be misleading and Berrington notes how differing political contexts caused respondents to give contradictory answers.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, use of letters alongside surveys explores the range of public discourse on the issue. One *Daily Mirror* reader expressed her fear of nuclear destruction: 'Your articles on the H-bomb fill me with terror. We mothers should refuse to bring children into a world run by fanatics.'<sup>43</sup> Nuclear anxieties were visible across the generations. Pauline Dawson of East Fenton, Staffordshire wrote to the *Daily Herald*:

I have read in the paper about the horror bomb. I am 12 years old and I have three brothers and two sisters younger than me, and I love the children of the world.

I have seen on the television about the people who are suffering from the bomb. Please don't let us have war.<sup>44</sup>

Dawson's letter conveys her anguish simply and innocently. Both newspapers' emphasis on youth made the nuclear issue the type of human interest story which the popular press commonly used to make the bomb more understandable to readers.<sup>45</sup> Dawson suggested that adults were irrational and threatened the world. This simple plea for peace reveals fear for the next generation which, as Jonathan Hogg argues, became a commonly expressed form of nuclear anxiety.<sup>46</sup> The popular press frequently repeated worries about the effects of radiation and contributed towards fears of a future apocalypse.

### **The Coventry Civil Defence Scandal**

The anxiety that Dawson expressed was also visible in the actions of Coventry's Labour council. The council, who were on the party's Bevanite wing, were led by Sydney Stringer and had dominated local elections since 1938, holding a strong majority of seats in 1954.<sup>47</sup> They caused sensation when they took measures to disband their Civil Defence committee, which was part of the legal requirement on local councils to organise a Civil Defence Corps as part of the 1948 Civil Defence Act and subsequent regulations in 1949.<sup>48</sup> As Grant shows, Coventry was the closest of all local authorities in Britain to fulfilling its recruitment targets.<sup>49</sup> However, thermonuclear anxiety challenged local confidence in the survivability of an H-bomb attack. The council justified their actions on 5 April stating that there was 'no protection against the H-bomb'.<sup>50</sup> The refusal

accentuated political debates about Britain's civil defence plan, which was intended to facilitate national survival. It involved mobile columns providing targeted rescue assistance to the Civil Defence volunteers whilst central government provided higher priority measures such as evacuation, emergency feeding and ensured the operation of Britain's essential industries and maintenance of import capacity, whose cost had led to cuts in the provisioning of the corps.<sup>51</sup>

Coventry's conventional bombing damage had been manipulated by politicians during the previous decade and the council's stand evoked wartime memories causing many to question changes in the nature of warfare.<sup>52</sup> Opinion was polarised, with Coventry's supporters agreeing that Civil Defence was pointless when the new generation of bombs could completely destroy any city. Opponents, however, stressed the need for continuity and pointed out the possibility of conventional bombing. Moreover, they took the opportunity to depict the council as betraying the stoical national spirit associated with the Blitz and as aiding Moscow. A *Daily Mail* editorial suggested that Stringer's actions betrayed Coventry's 'great spirit' demonstrated during wartime.<sup>53</sup> The *Mail* evoked wartime memories by printing opposition to the council from 'Blitz Hero' Leslie Bonham, whom they labelled 'the hero of Coventry's "Hellfire Corner"'.<sup>54</sup> The newspaper suggested that Coventry was symbolic of British wartime suffering and recovery and that 'this is no more a local affair than is the rebuilding of Coventry Cathedral'. Coventry's decision fed into public fears about total destruction which, as Grant argues, rose from this point.<sup>55</sup> His examination of civil defence from the perspective of Government and the Civil Service explains that the onset of the thermonuclear age led to a change in its provision, with the government recognising that it was unlikely to save lives in the event of an H-bomb attack. As the crisis progressed, it was suggested at a cabinet discussion that 'no structural precautions could provide protection against a direct hit' and that Civil Defence would only be useful outside the blast area.<sup>56</sup> Despite this realisation, the government attempted to calm public anxiety throughout the civil defence controversy and restated its importance.

One of the more vocal critics of Coventry Council's decision was the *News Chronicle* columnist, Percy Cudlipp, who stated 'I think they have behaved with an irresponsibility that borders on idiocy'.<sup>57</sup> He asked 'What does the H stand for – hydrogen or hysteria?' Ironically he was accusing the council of reacting to the kind of emotion exaggerated by his own newspaper and by the *Daily Mirror*, run by his brother Hugh. The hysteria, expressed by some of the popular press, was aided by the government's secrecy about the effects of nuclear weapons because they feared the public would side with disarmers were the destructive capabilities fully known.<sup>58</sup> The *Chronicle* carried the condemnatory opinions of four Civil Defence volunteers. Captain Stanley Rowe of Southampton declared 'It's Sabotage.' He expressed concern for the burden on other councils: 'Neighbours would have to look after Coventry if war came ... Do you just leave them to die?'<sup>59</sup> Rowe's statement emphasised the sense of duty present in much Civil Defence publicity but suggests divisions over how 'duty' was expressed.<sup>60</sup>

Having contributed to the mood in which Stringer and his colleagues disobeyed the government, the *Daily Mirror* opposed their stand. Cassandra supported Coventry Council and accused the press and government of creating 'a thin optimistic piping about the bomb'. However, the newspaper issued a counter argument, warning, 'Cassandra is talking nonsense about Civil Defence.'<sup>61</sup> These seemingly contradictory positions often existed within individual newspapers; Cassandra, who was the most widely read columnist in the country, was what Bingham describes as a 'valued critic' against the newspaper's more ambivalent nuclear line.<sup>62</sup> The leader concluded that, 'It is an essential service and our Civil Defence volunteers are doing a fine job.' Such diversity of opinion, even within a single newspaper, demonstrates that the thermonuclear tests and Coventry's actions had stimulated a popular debate about the new weapons and the effectiveness of civil defence. Even those who supported deterrence agreed that potential destruction was terrifying, but disagreed concerning the abandonment of the devices and Civil Defence.

The *Daily Herald* was initially more supportive. It demanded a full enquiry into the effectiveness of Civil Defence: 'Blitzed Coventry adopts shock tactics to draw attention to the inadequacy of Civil Defence in the light of the H-bomb [. . .] Coventry is right to shock, let's not delude people that they have protection.'<sup>63</sup> The newspaper evoked memories of the Blitz to suggest that Coventry's wartime experience logically fused into this pacifist stance. Such memories, although usually focussed on London, became a national unifying factor which, as Weight argues, contributed towards reinforcing national identity for the next half-century.<sup>64</sup> Coventry Council's symbolic position ensured that this patriotism became a focal point in the remaking of post-war national identity: opponents suggested the council's apparent pacifism was defeatist and un-British, whilst supporters recalled the horror of the last war and suggested that modern warfare was unimaginably worse. Instead of condoning Coventry Council the *Herald* reflected its Labour supporting stance by emphasising the need for more effective civil defence. As the controversy progressed, the newspaper criticised the Home Secretary Sir David Maxwell Fyfe's approach to civil defence but stressed that 'the more people who trained the better'.<sup>65</sup>

Evocation of the previous war contributed towards the emergence of Coventry's self-depiction as a city for peace and the theme featured in several of the 212 supportive letters sent to Stringer. Arthur Edmonds of Fitzroy Road, London wrote, 'Coventry has a special place in the hearts of Englishmen for historic reasons.' This letter, which emphasises Coventry as central to a collective national experience, combined the wartime memory with patriotism and suggested the possibility of an anti-Cold War national identity.<sup>66</sup> John Becker, Bernie and Guy Yates of London engaged with Coventry's emerging depiction as a city of peace, urging Stringer to 'please become an example to every other city and town bombed by the Nazis'.<sup>67</sup> That these and many other letters came from outside Coventry contributed towards the city's depiction as a symbol of recovery and peace, which represented Britain's collective wartime memory, and was now adapted for the Cold War. Coventry's image as a city of reconciliation was reinforced by winning the Council of Europe's European Prize in 1955. The City's application stressed that Coventry 'has taken the leading part in the development of

friendly relations and understanding with their counterparts in other European countries'.<sup>68</sup>

Moreover, Coventry became a rallying point for peace campaigners throughout the world: a telegram from the GDR invited Stringer to attend a conference of delegates 'from all place of the fashistic [*sic*] terror [. . .] as a symbol of the feelings that that should never happen again'.<sup>69</sup> This letter and the councillors' subsequent visit to Stalingrad meant that the local political controversy became an encounter between West and East during which members of the council sought to create understanding between the populations of the two blocs.

Even before the Council's announcement Coventry's local press had reported the new weapon. The *Coventry Evening Telegraph* quoted the provost of Coventry Cathedral, Richard Howard. The newspaper used Howard as a local figurehead who tied Anglicanism to both nation and locality. The headline 'Provost Condemns Use of H-bomb' suggested a general denunciation of nuclear war. Howard, however, went much further arguing that nuclear annihilation was preferable to living under communism:

We dare not commit ourselves to a position where communism could dominate the free world at will. To be brought into subjection to soul-destroying Godlessness would be a much worse evil than all the physical devastation of hydrogen bombs.<sup>70</sup>

Howard's potentially apocalyptic statement, which fully endorsed the Cold War, contradicts Jeanne Kaczka-Valliere and Andrew Rigby's perception of him as the creator of Coventry's presentation as a peace symbol.<sup>71</sup> Religious organisations, however, were divided over thermonuclear weapons and several groups condemned the Anglican leadership for their failure to criticise the tests.<sup>72</sup>

Some clergy sympathised with Stringer. J.J Ambrose of St. Andrew's Church, Manchester, wrote to him: 'We know the facts and for anyone to think that any sort of Civil Defence [. . .] can deter the use of the H-bomb is surely a form of brain softening.'<sup>73</sup> Further support for the council's stance came from branches of the Quaker pacifist organisation Peace Pledge Union and the

Fellowship of Reconciliation, a group of non-denominational Christians opposed to all war preparations.<sup>74</sup> The Peace Pledge Union, and their broadly aligned newspaper *Peace News*, had a long-term national campaign against Civil Defence and nuclear armaments as part of their pacifist mission. Lawrence Wittner suggests this peaked in 1950 with the printing of 100,000 anti-civil defence leaflets before experiencing a steady decline.<sup>75</sup> However, the Coventry incident caused a resurgence of activity and on 28 May they used the unfolding controversy to urge their readership to be proactive and 'End the Futility of Civil Defence', by asking recruitment officers awkward questions including 'Have you any instructions as to what action the Civil Defence forces are to take if an H-bomb drops in this area?'<sup>76</sup> Sometimes the newspaper's message appealed to national sentiment. On 23 April it stated: 'If the British Government wants to give a moral lead to the world on the issue of the H-Bomb then it must have nothing to do with policies which use the bomb either as a threat or a weapon and it must take steps to disarm unilaterally if necessary.'<sup>77</sup> This support suggests that some religious elements argued against the Cold War and pressurised governments to denounce a war which might bring an apocalypse.

The *Coventry Telegraph* attacked Labour over the issue stating that it was 'intended by the Labour group to act as a reminder to the government that, in Labour's view, they are taking a "non-sensical attitude" towards Civil Defence and hydrogen and atomic bombs'.<sup>78</sup> By suggesting that the council represented the national Labour Party, the newspaper pursued its conservative political line and exploited Civil Defence's national prominence. The following day they claimed that failure to fulfil Civil Defence commitments would increase the burden on rate payers, because the government would be forced to take over Coventry's Civil Defence force, and castigated the decision as an abandonment of duty.<sup>79</sup> The leader column increased its vitriol against the council by accusing them of 'wallowing in the depths of pessimism' and lacking 'any sort of rational argument'.<sup>80</sup> The newspaper defended its view of national identity and its attitude reveals the kind of tension in perceptions of national characteristics which, as Peter Mandler argues, emerged with the turn

towards social-democracy in the post-war years.<sup>81</sup> The council was an affront to this definition and they were presented as acting hysterically against the newspaper's depiction of stoical Britishness.

The council's decision prompted a mixture of supporting and opposing letters to the local newspaper. On 8 April a regular correspondent, Chris Keegan, repeated points from the newspaper's editorials. He labelled the council 'disloyal nationally' and accused them of making a 'contribution to Communism'.<sup>82</sup> The letter echoed broader political arguments against the council that they betrayed a British tradition of fighting against adversity. Anti-Labour viewpoints were expressed by several correspondents over the coming weeks, not least W. A. Coker who wrote, 'I see our Socialist Council Dictators have been at it again. This time with reference to Civil Defence.'<sup>83</sup> Coker displays a frantic reaction to the party, which Nick Tiratsoo suggests the local Conservatives were quick to capitalise upon by associating Labour with communism in their election material.<sup>84</sup> The association of all socialists with communism depicts Labour as part of an homogenous entity called 'the left' whose implied association with communism meant it threatened the British way of life.

Not all *Coventry Telegraph* correspondents, however, condemned the council; the majority of letters printed on 10 April were supportive. E. McLuskey congratulated the council on 'exposing the fact that there is no adequate defence against nuclear weapons other than their complete abolition'.<sup>85</sup> McLuskey's letter repeated the council's argument, that there was no protection against the H-bomb. Lack of public information about the effects of nuclear weapons encouraged proliferation of rumours about their disastrous consequences. John Spencer framed his support in more poetic terms. He wrote, 'I regard their action as a further sign that the moral conscience is at last being aroused.' His language framed the debate within the historical nature of pacifism based on conscience. He continued by quoting Tennyson:

"Their's [sic] not to reason why,

Their's [sic] just to do or die,"

Was perhaps suitable for the Crimean war but when mankind stands juggling with the means of their own destruction it is time someone "reasoned why."

Tennyson featured in John Betjeman's 1943 list of defining features of Britishness, which was heavily focussed on England.<sup>86</sup> However, now the poem's militaristic association with patriotism was changed to highlight ever more destructive warfare and therefore echoed Attlee's earlier speech. Spencer questioned the glory of a charge into certain death. Moreover, the connection with Betjeman's list and modern warfare situates the letter within contested notions of national identity and the memory of the Blitz. Spencer's use of Tennyson exposes the battle for British national culture between traditionalists and modernisers which sat uneasily within British cultural politics of the Cold War.

Many direct correspondences with Stringer suggest divisions in national identity and patriotism. W. A. Scott wrote, 'Congratulations for ensuring there will always be an England'.<sup>87</sup> The telegram refers to the wartime film *The Battle of Britain* (1943), which memorialised Coventry's blitz with the song 'There Will Always Be An England'.<sup>88</sup> Its usage reveals an anti-war British national identity which utilised memory of the Blitz to oppose the parochial and more jingoistic version which predominated throughout much of the Cold War.<sup>89</sup> Frank Stuart of Gloucester echoed this stance and tied pacifistic patriotism to the Blitz: 'Coventry knows more about being bombed than any city in England, and respect for Coventry is growing everywhere [. . .] as a loyal Englishman wanting England's happiness, I would like to thank you and your Council for your courage and sincerity'.<sup>90</sup> This type of viewpoint was common amongst Stringer's supporters from across Britain who regularly expressed their patriotism alongside the memory of the Blitz to suggest, as Civil Defence researchers found, that people had 'had enough in the last war'.<sup>91</sup>

In April Gallup found there was general support for Civil Defence with 25 per cent saying they would approve if their council disbanded their Civil Defence corps and 62 per cent disapproving.<sup>92</sup> The poll found that 52 per cent believed the new weapon made war less likely. Therefore, it would appear that there was narrow support for the existence of a nuclear deterrent, although 25 per cent believed war was now more likely and 22 per cent expressed no opinion. Whilst the coverage of the weapon caused many to become staunch opponents of nuclear armaments the poll suggests that for around half of the population the shock soon dissipated. These results reflect the lack of newspaper or political support for the council, but the 25 per cent support for Coventry suggests that their message had convinced a sizable minority despite overwhelming criticism in public discourse. On 28 May the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* anticipated a forthcoming Civil Defence exercise in dramatic form: 'A raider hard-pressed in his approach to drop a hydrogen bomb on Birmingham, releases it prematurely. Seconds later the blast strikes Coventry, ripping off roofs, smashing windows, in fact damaging all buildings to a varying degree.'<sup>93</sup> The quotation from a Civil Defence department press conference, warned readers that the government believed a thermonuclear attack was possible.

### **The Coventry Civil Defence Exercise**

Coventry's Councillors opposed the display on 30 May with counter-protests. The ensuing physical confrontation brought anti-nuclear campaigners, some of whom were elected representatives of Coventry, into direct conflict with the state and its defence forces. Nuclear anxieties and anti-communism formed a fierce encounter, which directed attention to the government-ordained performance, designed to convince Britons that Civil Defence was effective. Many areas of the press reinforced pro-liberal and anti-communist hegemony by depicting the councillors and their supporters as a kind of internal enemy who wittingly or unwittingly supported Moscow. Following

the exercise, patriotic sentiment in supportive comments was less common. Instead the congratulatory telegrams and letters that Stringer now received praised his stand for peace. As with initial reaction to Coventry Council's refusal, support came from branches and members of the Peace Pledge Union, the local trades council, or groups such as one letter from an organisation calling itself Wallasey Fighters for Peace and Proletarianism, who wrote 'Congratulations on your heroic fight against the evil capitalist – hyena – class enemy – warmongers'.<sup>94</sup> Other letters came from individuals. A. J. Keen, a shopkeeper in Edinburgh, who described himself as 'an ex tank man of the last war' praised Stringer, stating 'I am happy to say that I am yet to hear your action condemned'.<sup>95</sup> Stringer's protest prompted support from groups who were pre-disposed to support peace or the Labour movement but also from individuals who supported their challenge to proliferation of nuclear weapons.

The Liberal-supporting *News Chronicle* emphasised its anti-communism by suggesting the councillors were Moscow puppets:

Loud Speakers proclaimed that there is no defence against the H-bombs, and called upon Coventry to lead the world in a "Workers' Peace".

As a theme song from Moscow this line is familiar enough. But it has not hitherto been plugged in this country in such a cold-blooded fashion at the expense of a service which is intended to save people from injury and death.<sup>96</sup>

The editorial recast the councillors, who were previously regarded as local heroes for their rebuilding work following the Second World War, as traitors, who were in league with the Cold War enemy. Furthermore, it suggested all peace campaigners, or those who questioned the utility of a weapon

with immeasurable power, were enemy agents. Britain's pre-existing anti-communism was used by the press to suggest the councillors' actions were un-British and to depict them as outsiders.

However, the *Daily Herald* attacked the government's civil defence policy and commissioned Dudley Barker to report on Sweden's deep shelter policy.<sup>97</sup> Some of their readership continued to utilise the Blitz as their key way of viewing modern warfare. Mrs C Weaver of Hampstead wrote, 'It is illuminating that the people who have shown a sense of realism about the H-bomb are the members of the City Council of Coventry, one of the greatest sufferers from bombing. There would be no mobile columns if an H-bomb fell.'<sup>98</sup> Weaver's letter emphasised Coventry's wartime spirit but suggested modern warfare would not deliver such stoicism. She took the common position that Civil Defence was unchanged since the last war and therefore unsuited to the nuclear era.<sup>99</sup> The destructive threat of thermonuclear weapons, therefore, prompted suggestions that the Blitz spirit was anachronistic. Whilst her letter forms part of the battle for the cultural memory of the Blitz, other voices on the left, notably Crossman, argued that unless precautions were improved with more investment, 'civil defence shall remain a façade'. In the Commons, Crossman summarised his case:

I say [...] and I think I speak also for the Coventry City Council – that my form of civil defence would be either a declaration that Britain would not manufacture H-bombers or bombs at all; or a declaration that Britain pledges herself not to use these weapons unless they are used against us.<sup>100</sup>

Whilst he also argued for more effective civil defence, funded by reductions in conventional arms, Crossman's qualified support for Coventry Council suggests that some Labour politicians used the controversy to attack the Conservatives or, like the parliamentary signatories of the Hydrogen Bomb National Campaign, to agitate for arms control.

Maurice Edelman, Labour MP for Coventry North, mentioned the exercise in parliament, making the city representative of the national defence position. He railed against the perceived insufficiency of Civil Defence accusing the government of engaging in a 'public political controversy' and being 'provocative and foolish'.<sup>101</sup> *Peace News* used the confrontation to further their opposition to Civil Defence. On 4 June they published a four page leaflet, which their activist readers were asked to distribute to the public.<sup>102</sup> The supplement featured photographs of the confrontation alongside images of Hiroshima to argue that Civil Defence was useless. During this early H-bomb period the pacifist newspaper claimed that its circulation had grown to 12,300 from previous claims of around 10,000 made throughout the early 1950s.<sup>103</sup> This increase suggests that continued coverage of the Hydrogen Bomb, which was partially facilitated by Coventry City Council, encouraged some to take an interest in the broader campaign to prevent escalation of the Cold War.

Whilst the *Daily Mirror* dedicated little space to the exercise Cassandra continued to be a 'valued critic'. In opposition to the newspaper's editorials he labelled the exercise 'a derisive farce rather like playing ring-a-ring of roses in a graveyard.'<sup>104</sup> Cassandra was joined by the *Mirror's* newly appointed cartoonist, Vicky, who later became a founding member of CND (fig. 2). Both employees' support for Coventry City Council supports Bingham's argument that journalists were not solely reliant on official sources over the nuclear issue and sometimes highlighted the bomb's destructiveness.<sup>105</sup> Vicky agitated against nuclear weapons and mocked the government's stance on Civil Defence. He used irony and his characteristic heavily-shaded style to parody the governments' newspaper advertisements for the Auxiliary Fire Service and Civil Defence Corps.<sup>106</sup> Juxtapositions of the stirrup pump and thermonuclear explosion encouraged questions over the effectiveness of current civil defence procedures. Vicky's representation of thermonuclear explosions relied on readers' familiarity with America's heavily reprinted photographs. Whereas the American government used this to demonstrate its technical superiority, Vicky's stark image aimed to frighten, and raised a sense of impending nuclear apocalypse

Fig 2 Vicky 'Now Aren't You Sorry That you Haven't Learned How to Handle a Stirrup-Pump' Vicky,  
*Daily Mirror*, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1954

Tiratsoo suggests that during the post-war period Coventry's Labour Party enjoyed a form of hegemony, which the Conservative-supporting local press rarely challenged.<sup>107</sup> Yet, throughout this Cold War episode, the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* attacked Labour. Following the protest their leader stated: 'All who care for the good name of Coventry must be dismayed by the unseemly conduct of Labour members.'<sup>108</sup> The column continued with a vitriolic attack on the council:

To hold a rival demonstration, to shout down the commentary by means of loud speakers, to act in a manner which might have caused a breach of the peace, and this on a Sunday afternoon in the neighbourhood of the Cathedral is surely deplorable conduct on the part of public men.

The editorial contrasted with the *Daily Herald*, which suggested that attacks on the councillors by the Civil Defence volunteers were just as likely to cause a breach of the peace.<sup>109</sup> During wartime the *Telegraph* had presented Civil Defence as vital for good citizenship.<sup>110</sup> Its post-war support for the activity suggests that this conception of nationhood continued. It echoed government messages by situating Civil Defence within these concepts of patriotic duty.<sup>111</sup> The column also situated the argument within the central metonym of Coventry's Blitz by attempting to accuse the councillors of some sort of desecration of the Cathedral, a site which was established as a sacred symbol of wartime destruction and hopes of a future recovery. Therefore, they promoted a more traditionalist

form of national identity, with Christianity at its centre, and depicted the councillors as harming the rebuilding efforts.

The next day the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* printed a number of critical letters, which generally echoed the newspaper's condemnatory editorial stance. Pat Turner roundly condemned the council:

Most of central and Eastern Europe has disappeared behind the Iron Curtain since the war without a bow and arrow being shot, let alone a hydrogen bomb being dropped. While responsible representatives continue to spread gloom and despondency such as we witnessed last weekend in Coventry, the Kremlin have no need to further extend their cause.

Had the people of Britain been led by such as the present Coventry Socialists in 1940 none of us would be here to witness this interesting but sickening exhibition on the part of the chosen representatives of the gallant city.<sup>112</sup>

Turner echoed the public discourse which blamed the Soviets alone for the Cold War.<sup>113</sup> Fear of communist expansion was common and in *The Communist Conspiracy* (1953), Stephen King-Hall had stressed the need for British people to accept that "We are at war" with the Communists.<sup>114</sup> Turner furthered this Cold War narrative and accused Coventry Council of helping the Soviets by arguing against nuclear weapons. The letter recycled the myth of the Blitz, and was one of a number of correspondences which suggested that Stringer and his colleagues' were betraying the wartime spirit by being defeatist.

On 3 June a letter by D. Furnival-Adams built on the often repeated suggestion that the council were inadvertently doing the Soviet's bidding and accused the councillors of being communist sympathisers:

The disgusting exhibition by Coventry Socialists should not surprise anyone. These raucous outbursts and demonstrations are all part and parcel of Socialism. In fact, I venture to suggest it couldn't work without them. [. . .]

I would suggest to Alderman Stringer and the fellow-travellers in his party that they book single tickets to Russia and preach their gospel there, because, after all, it is Russian H-bombs we should be afraid of, not our own.<sup>115</sup>

Furnival-Adams' letter displayed the indignation typical of politicised rhetoric which generalised about both socialism and Labour. His statement repeated the shouts of 'Go back to Russia' which had been directed towards the councillors by Civil Defence supporters at the protest.<sup>116</sup> This attitude was echoed in an anonymous card sent to Stringer, one of eight pieces of correspondence opposing his stance. It simply said, "'Yellow Belly' Why don't You go and live in Russia."<sup>117</sup> As the fall-out from the incident subsided, Stringer and his colleagues did 'preach their gospel' in the USSR, although they used return tickets. Their visit to Stalingrad, Coventry's twin city since wartime, aimed to promote peace and rekindled the wartime allied memory. The visit reveals that for these councillors the previous memory of alliance was more important than Cold War enmity. The *Coventry Evening Telegraph* reported the council's request that Stalingrad follow Coventry's lead, with bemusement.<sup>118</sup> The visit contributed towards promoting Coventry as a city of peace, a discourse with which councillors happily engaged. However, the presence of armaments factories around the city, which Crossman suggested made Coventry a target and should be dispersed more, was at odds with the emerging peace symbolism.<sup>119</sup> Tiratsoo reveals that the local Conservative and Liberal parties were quick to portray the Labour council as crypto-communists and, in the anti-communist atmosphere of the early 1950s, attributes the 1955 loss of several council seats to this approach.<sup>120</sup>

Therefore, the peace message was disputed and it might be that underlying fears of communism outweighed appeals to the Blitz memory.

However, the *Coventry Telegraph* also printed supportive letters, suggesting that, as with many other newspapers, their correspondence page facilitated democratic public discourse.<sup>121</sup> V. J. Briggs described the destruction of Hiroshima before reiterating the council's argument that 'There is no adequate defence against the hydrogen bomb.'<sup>122</sup> Readers frequently expressed their disagreement with the newspaper. Over the next week several such letters were printed each day, although such views were usually fewer and less prominent. Their selection reinforced the newspaper's implicit claims to representativeness and objectivity. For the *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, this extended to being a voice for the City, which channelled opinion despite its opposition to the council. Readers' viewpoints often bore some resemblance to the broader political debate. Whilst these letters were not wholly representative of British public opinion on nuclear weapons or the Cold War- it was perhaps the more educated and politically-engaged citizens who wrote to newspapers – they reveal that arguments for and against nuclear weapons drew on specific versions of national characteristics.<sup>123</sup> Many of the letters on Civil Defence followed the arguments set out by politicians, especially Churchill and Attlee, but which were not necessarily entrenched party positions. Support emerged from writers such as Conservative voter Sybil Matthews of Buckinghamshire who praised Stringer's stance against the 'futility of the present home office's way of thinking'.<sup>124</sup> Whilst the debate raged in letter pages and opinion columns, the population of Coventry had more cause to think about the nuclear issue and worry than many other British cities because of conflict between its council and government and press.

Coventry's Civil Defence controversy fed into broader political anxieties which remained a concern throughout the 1950s as thermonuclear testing continued. In May 1954 Gallup found that 61 per cent believed a nuclear war would destroy civilisation, which suggests that Coventry's argument convinced many about the usefulness of Civil Defence, even if most people objected to

the council's decision. Support for nuclear weapons had fluctuated since April but now only 25 per cent agreed that nuclear deterrence was the only way to stop aggressors, with 24 per cent believing nuclear weapons should not be used in any circumstances and 42 per cent saying they should only be used in retaliation.<sup>125</sup> Notwithstanding differences which emerged from the wording of questions, this suggests that the thermonuclear shock extended beyond the Coventry councillors and that arguments against nuclear arms received a sizable hearing. The controversy continued until July when the government appointed new commissioners at the council's expense.<sup>126</sup> The onset of the thermonuclear era weakened confidence in Civil Defence and whilst government and the press insisted on its importance a large proportion of the population no longer supported the institution. The Strath report of 1955, which predicted that half the population would die, with the remainder struggling to survive, might have vindicated Coventry's councillors had it been made public before 2002.<sup>127</sup> Instead media opposition condemned the council for being defeatist, whilst the government confronted the dissenters with a choreographed imagination of a future apocalyptic scenario. The councillors were therefore depicted as outsiders who were at best naïve and at worst in league with the enemy.

## **Conclusion**

The thermonuclear era caused a re-emergence of anxieties which had first surfaced in the early atomic years. Newspaper coverage exacerbated British perceptions of impending destruction of civilisation and led to a particularly vicious moment in which Coventry acted as a microcosm for the Cold War, and caused a polarisation in British popular attitudes towards thermonuclear weapons. Having contributed to nuclear anxieties, most newspapers condemned the council's decision or turned their attention to the broader debate around Civil Defence. Newspapers, however, did not act as homogeneous entities and often facilitated debate around key nuclear questions by taking seriously some of the concerns of their opposition. Thermonuclear weapons shocked the British

government who realised that their current civil defence measures were ineffective. However, this recognition came too late because confidence in governmental institutions' ability to protect and recover during a nuclear war was already being questioned. News of the test invigorated opposition to nuclear weapons and over the next three years several disparate groups became more organised and exploited nuclear anxieties before forming CND.

The Civil Defence debate recycled many arguments: that there was no protection against nuclear weapons had been frequently repeated throughout the previous decade, but the increased destructive power intensified this claim. The press emphasised supposed features of British national character such as stoicism, bravery and composure; this acted to present an image of calmness in spite of perceived impending destruction and prevented the thermonuclear scare from challenging the British social fabric. When Coventry's councillors dropped Civil Defence following the explosions, they were condemned as being communist sympathisers and therefore un-British. The press depicted them as a Cold War antagonist who, alongside other socialists, were the enemy within. British coverage of the Coventry incident fed on long-term traditions of democracy and anti-communism. Supporters and opponents alike situated their argument within the memories of wartime bombing, which evolved throughout the post-war period making Coventry symbolic of the Blitz spirit. Yet many of the council's supporters used patriotic language and turned the legacy of wartime destruction into an argument for disarmament. When the council physically confronted the service, which had aided recovery from the Blitz, patriotism was less forthcoming from their supporters, with many choosing instead to emphasise their desire for peace. The Civil Defence controversy revealed on-going tensions in the British sense of national identity and patriotic duty.

The thermonuclear shock and subsequent Civil Defence controversy reveal how British civil society and public culture often willingly adhered to the predominant Cold War ideologies and supported state structures and assertions. Much of the press agreed with the government during the controversy and opposed the council. Their arguments engaged with the pre-existing

perceptions of Civil Defence as a vital patriotic service. It is not surprising that most people opposed the council's stance. However, backing for the council emerged from a diverse range of the population, which suggests that political and media support for Civil Defence did not convince all. Moreover, the initial shock of the images and reports of thermonuclear devices prompted people to question civic institutions like Civil Defence and ultimately the survivability of a thermonuclear war. At times the shock encouraged a secular version of apocalyptic narratives which press and much of the public used to make sense of increased Cold War tensions. It was fitting that opposition to Civil Defence emerged from Coventry. The council and their supporters often utilised the very wartime memory that consecutive governments had rekindled in promoting Civil Defence. Coventry was in the process of becoming a national symbol of the Blitz and the controversy and ensuing protest at the site of its Cathedral ensured that patriotism and religiosity were combined by either side in their argument over nuclear weapons.

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- <sup>18</sup> Brian Harrison, *Seeking A Role: The United Kingdom 1951-1970* (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 2009), 98.
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- <sup>115</sup> *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 3 June 1954, 2.
- <sup>116</sup> *News Chronicle*, 31 May 1954, 1.
- <sup>117</sup> MRC MSS.24/3/2/17, Anon. to 'Yellow Belly' Undated.
- <sup>118</sup> *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 27 Oct. 1954, 13.
- <sup>119</sup> *Parliamentary Debates* (Commons), 529, 5 July 1954, 1858-1859; Kaczka-Valliere & Rigby, 'Coventry', 582-583.
- <sup>120</sup> Tiratsoo, *Coventry 1945-60*, 93.
- <sup>121</sup> Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, *Journalists and the Public: Newsroom Culture, Letters to the Editor and Democracy* (Cresskill, Hampton Press: 2007), 65.
- <sup>122</sup> *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 3 June 1954, 12.
- <sup>123</sup> Wahl-Jorgenson, *Newsroom Culture*, 47-48.

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<sup>124</sup> MRC MSS.24/3/1/155 Mrs Sybil Mathews to The Chairman, Civil Defence Committee, Coventry. 1 June 1954.

<sup>125</sup> Gallup, *Opinion Polls*, 325.

<sup>126</sup> See TNA HO 322/136 'Civil Defence: City of Coventry' Order by the Home Secretary, 24 July 1954;

<sup>127</sup> TNA CAB 134/940 HDC (55) 3 'The Defence implications of Fall-Out from a Hydrogen Bomb. Report by a Group of Officials' 8 March 1955.