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BOOK REVIEW

# Banning the Bomb: The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

## By Jean Krasno and Elisabeth Szeli. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2021. 189 pp. $89.95 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-1626379244

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In July 2017, meeting at United Nations headquarters in New York, 122 countries voted in favor of a legally binding treaty to ban nuclear weapons. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) entered into force in January 2021, after the first 50 signatories had ratified it. The nuclear powers refused to join, and the nuclear-armed members of NATO went one step further: In a joint press statement on 7 July 2017, the United States, United Kingdom and France vowed never "to sign, ratify or ever become party to" the treaty. What reasons did they offer to oppose the majority of the world's countries that considered their security better served by abolishing nuclear weapons than possessing them? "This initiative clearly disregards the realities of the international security environment," they declared. "Accession to the ban treaty is incompatible with the policy of nuclear deterrence, which has been essential to keeping the peace in Europe and North Asia for over 70 years." (See US Mission to the UN, "Joint Press Statement..." at https://usun.usmission.gov/joint-press-statement-from-the-permanent-representatives-to-the-united-nations-of-the-united-states-united-kingdom-and-france-following-the-adoption/).

They were echoing the sentiments of Russian leader Vladimir Putin who had claimed in October 2016 that "nuclear weapons constitute a factor of deterrence and a factor guaranteeing peace and security throughout the whole world." (Cited in Evangelista, "A 'Nuclear Umbrella' for Ukraine?" *International Security* 48:3 [Winter 2024].) In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it seems evident that the mere existence of nuclear weapons was insufficient to prevent the most destructive war in Europe since World War II. Russia's possession of nuclear weapons may even have emboldened Putin to launch the invasion, confident that deterrence would prevent direct US intervention.

*Banning the Bomb: The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons* came out in early 2021, more than a year before the Russian invasion. The authors Jean Krasno and Elisabeth Szeli were, however, prescient in their assessment that "the use, threat of use, and even the possession of nuclear weapons may present a more serious danger today than during the Cold War years" (15). Their valuable book describes how states and civil society sought to address that danger by drafting and promoting the TPNW. Krasno, a US political science professor and expert on Brazil, and Szeli, an Austrian diplomat, are well-placed to undertake this study, with years of experience in the United Nations system. Having attended UN meetings, conferences, and discussions, and drawing upon multiple interviews with participants, they offer an insider account of the negotiations that produced the treaty.

To provide the context and explain the motivation for the TPNW, the authors begin by reviewing the history of nuclear accidents and near misses, from the inadvertent dropping of US nuclear bombs (that, fortunately, failed to detonate) on North Carolina, New Mexico, and off the coast of Spain to more recent Russian mishaps, such as the explosion of nuclear material near Severodvinsk on the White Sea in 2019 and a fire on a nuclear submarine the same year. They then discuss the weakening of the so-called taboo on the use of nuclear weapons represented by the increasing efforts of the nuclear-armed states to "modernize" their arsenals and create lower-yield nuclear weapons

whose use is deemed more credible—therefore, more likely to be used. The authors offer a critique of the Cold War logic of nuclear deterrence and describe the financial stakes of producers of nuclear arms and related weaponry.

A major impetus for the push for a treaty to ban nuclear weapons came with the disappointment of states and citizens with the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty of 1970. Its Article 6 commits the nuclear-armed states (as of 1967)—the United States, United Kingdom, France, China, and Soviet Union—"to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control." In 1995, the 191 States which were party to the treaty agreed to extend it indefinitely in return for commitments to implement the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and a fissile-materials cut-off treaty and to promote zones free of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East. When these promises went unfulfilled, advocates of nuclear disarmament mobilized to pursue a treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons.

The heart of the book lies in the discussion of the humanitarian origins of the TPNW. The authors find them in the aftermath of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, when medical professionals were overwhelmed by the impossibility of treating their victims. Organizations such as Physicians for Social Responsibility and the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War had always emphasized the prevention of nuclear war, since there is no cure. A particularly important set of precedents came in the popular campaign to ban anti-personnel land mines because of the harm they inflicted on civilians long after conflicts had ended. The Ottawa Mine Ban Treaty (1997) and the Convention on Cluster Munitions (2008) served as models for the TPNW not only in humanitarian emphasis but also in the process by which they came about—collaboration between like-minded states, international organizations, and civil society. The authors trace the path by which the treaty language was developed in collaboration between the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), a coalition of some 468 nongovernmental organizations from 100 countries, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and three countries that hosted negotiating sessions: Norway in March 2013, Mexico in February 2014, and Austria in December 2014. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) played a key role, as did individual women: Beatrice Fihn of ICAN and Elayne Whyte Gómez, a Costa Rican diplomat who served as president of the UN conference that negotiated the final treaty draft. Their influence, bolstered by support from the Swedish delegation, shaped the treaty's focus on women as particularly vulnerable to damage from radiation and other effects of nuclear weapons (88–91, 105–106).

*Banning the Bomb* stresses the crucial decision to draft the treaty under the auspices of the UN General Assembly (GA), where decisions are taken by majority vote, rather than the Conference on Disarmament (CD), which operates on the basis of consensus. The nuclear powers (and some other states) favored the CD and boycotted the Open-Ended Working Group, established by a GA resolution. The trade-off of losing the nuclear states' participation but gaining broad international support from the rest of the world seems to have paid off. The format of the sessions themselves, especially in discussing the details of the treaty drafts, was remarkably inclusive, with comments alternating from state representatives to civil-society participants, and unusually efficient in producing the result. The authors heard the view expressed from numerous interviews that "due to a basic consensus among the participating states on the desired outcome, the negotiations for the TPNW were uncharacteristically harmonious in comparison to other disarmament negotiations" (100).

The broad involvement of countries and groups from outside Europe and North America also meant that concerns of victims of the nuclear complex—remediation for ordinary people harmed by activities from mining of uranium to testing of nuclear bombs and for damage to the environment itself—would receive attention in the treaty language. Since the book was published, the General Assembly passed a resolution (on 22 December 2023) "Addressing the legacy of nuclear weapons: providing victim assistance and environmental remediation to Member States affected by the use or testing of nuclear weapons." It noted in particular "the humanitarian provisions on victim assistance, environmental remediation, international cooperation and assistance" of the TPNW. Thus, we see the beneficial influence of the treaty despite the nuclear states' rejection of its primary goal of prohibition.

Although the current climate does not seem hospitable, the TPNW provides a model for further progress on nuclear disarmament. As the authors put it, "our realistic assessment of the future prospects of the treaty takes into consideration that, although its long-term aim is to eliminate nuclear weapons, in the short term its supporters hope to create a normative shift and raise the political and reputational cost for nuclear-armed states by stigmatizing and delegitimizing nuclear weapons" (9). That indeed seems the appropriate response to Vladimir Putin's nuclear saber-rattling and the over-eager reactions of the other nuclear powers to bolster their arsenals and flex their nuclear muscles. The majority of the world's states have rejected these weapons as abhorrent and as a threat to humanity and the environment. *Banning the Bomb* offers a concise and authoritative account of how they came to express those views in the form of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

**Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

**Data Availability Statement**

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.