

# The Jervis Forum

## H-Diplo | Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum

### Review 172

Ronald C. Kramer, *Apocalyptic Crimes: Why Nuclear Weapons are Illegal and Must Be Abolished*. Rutgers University Press, 2025. ISBN: 9781978839335.

Matthew Evangelista, Cornell University

5 March 2026 | PDF: <https://issforum.org/to/R-172> | Website: [rjissf.org](http://rjissf.org)

X: @HDiplo | BlueSky: @h-diplo.bsky.social | Mastodon: @HDiplo | YouTube: @JervisForum

Editor: Diane Labrosse

Commissioning Editor: Diane Labrosse

Production Editor: Christopher Ball

Pre-Production Copy Editor: Mia Tellmann

Nuclear weapons have been around for over 80 years. Is there anything new to be written about them? In particular, would *H-Diplo* readers knowledgeable about the topic find it worth their while to read a new book on the legality of nuclear weapons? In the case of Ronald C. Kramer's *Apocalyptic Crimes: Why Nuclear Weapons are Illegal and Must Be Abolished*, the answer is yes. A number of recent books have made important contributions to nuclear history by examining cases of nuclear-armed or nuclear-capable states that renounced nuclear weapons in favor of nuclear disarmament.<sup>1</sup> Others have uncovered new archival sources to recount the development of nuclear weapons, strategies, and arms control policies of the two main nuclear adversaries of the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States.<sup>2</sup> Studies of antinuclear movements have produced valuable new information after examination of a wide range of archives, combined with interviews and press reports, among other sources.<sup>3</sup> Finally, a long-neglected topic, that of

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jonter, *The Key to Nuclear Restraint: The Swedish Plans to Acquire Nuclear Weapons During the Cold War* (Palgrave/Macmillan, 2016); Togzhan Kassenova, *Atomic Steppe: How Kazakhstan Gave Up the Bomb* (Stanford University Press, 2022); Mariana Budjeryn, *Inheriting the Bomb: The Collapse of the USSR and the Nuclear Disarmament of Ukraine* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022); Robin E. Möser, *Disarming Apartheid: The End of South Africa's Nuclear Weapons Programme and Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, 1968–1991* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Fred Kaplan, *The Bomb: Presidents, Generals, and the Secret History of Nuclear War* (Simon and Schuster, 2020); Susan J. Koch, *Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991–1992* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2012); Sergey Radchenko, *To Run the World: The Kremlin's Cold War Bid for Global Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2024); and the publications and document collections compiled by Svetlana Savranskaya at the National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/about/staff/dr-svetlana-savranskaya>.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Colbourn, *Euromissiles: The Nuclear Weapons That Nearly Destroyed NATO* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022); Vincent J. Intondi, *African Americans Against the Bomb: Nuclear Weapons, Colonialism, and the Black Freedom Movement* (Stanford University Press, 2016); Vincent J. Intondi, *Saving the World from Nuclear War: The June 12, 1982, Disarmament Rally and Beyond* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023); Henry Richard Maar III, *Freeze! The Grassroots Movement to Halt the Arms Race and End the Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 2022);

the human consequences of the nuclear-production process, from mining uranium, to constructing weapons, to testing them in the atmosphere and underground, has received attention with a focus on the devastating humanitarian legacy of weapons that have only been used twice in war.<sup>4</sup>

Kramer's book is none of these. Even its focus is not new. The legality of nuclear weapons has received considerable attention from the time of the 1996 International Court of Justice (ICJ) decision, *Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons*, to more recent studies.<sup>5</sup> Some scholars have sought to explain how the use of nuclear weapons could be made compliant with the laws of war (known as International Humanitarian Law or the Law of Armed Conflict) or why they should not be subject to those laws.<sup>6</sup> Kramer's position is clear from his book's title. The very possession of nuclear weapons is illegal; their use in war would be a crime of apocalyptic proportions; therefore, they must be abolished. What is distinctive about his book is the author's own background and his intended audience. He is a sociologist and criminologist, professor of sociology at Western Michigan University and the director of its Criminal Justice Program from 1992 to 2017. He specialized in criminology and law when he pursued his PhD at the Ohio State University.

Much of Kramer's scholarly research has focused on issues not typically considered to fall within the ambit of conventional criminology, as Raymond J. Michalowski, coeditor of the Rutgers Critical Issues in Crime and Society series in which the book appears, explains in his valuable foreword. Kramer recognized "the intellectual limitations of focusing criminological inquiry only on acts designated as crimes by law" (xi) and challenged the view that "only behaviors prohibited by *criminal* law and subject to *criminal* sanctions could analytically be considered crimes, and therefore as appropriate topics for criminological inquiry" (xi-xii, original emphasis). He pioneered work on corporate crime and "state crime," including work on states' responsibility for environmental damage and climate change, topics he links to nuclear weapons at several

---

Stephanie L. Freeman, *Dreams for a Decade: International Nuclear Abolitionism and the End of the Cold War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Gabrielle Hecht, *Being Nuclear: Africans and the Global Uranium Trade* (MIT Press, 2012); Sarah Alisabeth Fox, *Downwind: A People's History of the Nuclear West* (University of Nebraska Press, 2014); Sébastien Philippe and Tomas Stadius, *Toxique: Enquête sur les essais nucléaires français en Polynésie* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2021); Frank N. von Hippel, "The Long-Term Global Health Burden from Nuclear Weapon Test Explosions in the Atmosphere: Revisiting Andrei Sakharov's 1958 Estimates," *Science & Global Security* 30:2 (2022), 54-61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08929882.2022.2119716>; Ruoyu Li, "Testing as the Blindspot of Nuclear Nonuse," *Security Studies* 33:3 (2024), 348-371, doi:10.1080/09636412.2024.2353240.

<sup>5</sup> International Court of Justice, Reports of Judgments, Advisory Opinions and Orders, *Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons*, Advisory Opinion of 8 July 1996, p. 226; John Burroughs, *The Legality of Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons: A Guide to the Historic Opinion of the International Court of Justice* (Lit Verlag, 1998); William H. Boothby and Wolff Heintschel von Heinegg, *Nuclear Weapons Law: Where Are We Now?* (Cambridge University Press, 2021); Charles J. Moxley, *Nuclear Weapons and International Law: Existential Risks of Nuclear War and Deterrence Through a Legal Lens*, 2 vols. (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Scott D. Sagan and Allen S. Weiner, "The Rule of Law and the Role of Strategy in US Nuclear Doctrine," *International Security* 45:4 (Spring 2021), 126-166; Janina Dill and Scott D. Sagan, "Creeds and Contestation: How US Nuclear and Legal Doctrine Influence Each Other," *Security Studies*, 18 December 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2025.2594013>.

points in this volume, referring to the “apocalyptic twins” of nuclear weapons and climate disruption.<sup>7</sup> Along with Sam Marullo and David S. Meyer, Kramer is among the few sociologists who have devoted sustained attention to nuclear weapons.<sup>8</sup> For Michalowski, Kramer’s book, which is an updating and synthesis of his earlier work and other studies, along with additional material, helps make up for “criminology’s relative inattention to the profound threat nuclear-armed states pose to life on planet earth” (x-xi).

Kramer describes himself as a scholar-activist, who was inspired in the 1980s by the Nuclear Freeze movement launched by Randall Forsberg and others, and he and his family attended the massive antinuclear rally in New York City on 12 June 1982 (110, 130-131, 178-179). Since that era of heightened anxiety about the danger of nuclear war, knowledge and concern about the topic have declined. A recent poll showed that a bare majority (51 percent) of Americans aged 18 to 24 agree that nuclear weapons are “making the world a more dangerous place,” the lowest proportion of any age cohort surveyed (for Kramer’s cohort it is 72 percent).<sup>9</sup> A 2023 study found low levels of self-reported knowledge on nuclear weapons, but 60 percent of US respondents were “at least somewhat interested” in learning more. Only about 20 percent of the respondents expressed a desire to become more involved in influencing US nuclear policy (6 percent wanted to be *less* involved), a number that presumably might rise as people became more knowledgeable, and more worried.<sup>10</sup> In any event, with sociology representing the nineteenth or twentieth most popular college major in the United States by some rankings, and criminology programs graduating more than 10,000 students a year, *Apocalyptic Crimes* could find a ready student readership.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Ronald C. Kramer, “Corporate Criminality: The Development of an Idea,” in *Corporations as Criminal*, ed. Ellen Hochstedler (Sage, 1984); Ronald C. Kramer, *Carbon Criminals, Climate Crimes* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> David S. Meyer, *A Winter of Discontent: The Nuclear Freeze and American Politics* (Praeger, 1990); Thomas R. Rochon and David S. Meyer, eds., *Coalitions and Political Movements: The Lessons of the Nuclear Freeze* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997); Sam Marullo, “The Warfare-Welfare Tradeoff: Consequences of Continuing the Nuclear Arms Race and Some Policy Alternatives,” *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* 15:2 (1988), <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.1847>; Ronald C. Kramer and Sam Marullo, “Toward a Sociology of Nuclear Weapons,” *Sociological Quarterly* 26:3 (1985): 277-292; David Kauzlarich, Ronald C. Kramer, and Brian Smith, “Toward the Study of Governmental Crime: Nuclear Weapons, Foreign Intervention, and International Law,” *Humanity and Society* 16:4 (1992): 543-563; David Kauzlarich and Ronald C. Kramer, *Crimes of the American Nuclear State: At Home and Abroad* (Northeastern University Press, 1998); David Kauzlarich and Ronald C. Kramer, “State-Corporate Crime in the US Nuclear Weapons Production Complex,” *Journal of Human Justice* 5 (1993): 4-28; David Kauzlarich and Ronald C. Kramer, “The Nuclear Terrorist State,” *Peace Review* 7 (1995): 333-337.

<sup>9</sup> Milan Dinic, *The YouGov Big Survey on NATO and war: Nuclear weapons and nuclear war*, 10 June 2024, <https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/49675-yougov-big-survey-nato-war-nuclear-weapons-nuclear-war>.

<sup>10</sup> Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs, *Majority in the U.S. Interested in Boosting Their Nuclear Knowledge* (July 2023), <https://www.carnegie.org/publications/majority-us-interested-boosting-their-nuclear-knowledge/>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.collegefactual.com/majors/social-sciences/sociology/rankings/top-ranked/bachelors-degrees/> <https://datausa.io/profile/cip/criminology>. Some sources put Criminal Justice, a related field, at number nine

What would students and other readers find of interest? Chapter 1, “It Is 90 Seconds to Midnight: Nuclear Weapons, Apocalyptic Harms, and State Crime,” sets the stage by arguing that “given the continued existence of nuclear weapons—estimated at 12,500 warheads by the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) in 2023—we live life on the brink of destruction” (4-5). Russian president Vladimir Putin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 heightened the danger, as did his nuclear saber-rattling, which is “also illegal under international law” (4) as a violation of the United Nations Charter’s Article 2 (4).<sup>12</sup> This chapter sets out the book’s main purpose in putting forward “a criminology of nuclear weapons”:

I argue that there are four sets of political actions and/or omissions that can be labeled and analyzed as apocalyptic nuclear state crimes: (1) the actual use of atomic bombs in 1945 by the United States against Japan; (2) the threat to use these destructive weapons implied in the doctrine of nuclear deterrence; (3) specific state threats to use nuclear weapons in various conflict situations throughout the post-World War II era (including U.S. threats during the wars in Korea and Vietnam and the most recent threats by Vladimir Putin during the war in Ukraine); and (4) the continued possession of these dangerous devices (the failure to disarm when obligated by law to do so) by the United States, Russia, and the other nuclear-armed countries (6-7).

Chapter 2, “Nuclear Warfare Is Illegal: International Law and Nuclear Weapons,” makes the case for the illegality of nuclear weapons by reviewing the origins of International Humanitarian Law (IHL); the development and violation of norms governing aerial bombardment; the International Military Tribunals at Nuremberg and Tokyo; and some lesser-known jurisprudence, such as the 1963 Shimoda case in Japan, where we see an important application of IHL to nuclear weapons (29-32). He reviews the 1996 ICJ decision, the possible application of International Human Rights Law to nuclear weapons, and the humanitarian initiative that resulted in the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons that came into force on 22 January 2021.<sup>13</sup> The author concludes the chapter with a “paradox of international law”:

While the existence of the public international laws described in this chapter is an impressive achievement, allowing us to conceptualize the use, threat to use, and continued possession of nuclear weapons as crimes and examine the victimization they cause, the historical record demonstrates that this juridical system has failed to prevent these geopolitical crimes from occurring or to hold the guilty parties accountable (50).

---

among majors, with nearly 64,000 degrees granted each year: <https://www.niche.com/blog/the-most-popular-college-majors/>.

<sup>12</sup> “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.” [https://legal.un.org/repertory/art2/english/rep\\_supp7\\_volt\\_art2\\_4.pdf](https://legal.un.org/repertory/art2/english/rep_supp7_volt_art2_4.pdf). For a veiled Russian critique of the heightened nuclear risk that followed the invasion, see Aleksei G. Arbatov, “Ukrainskii krizis i strategicheskaia stabil’nost’”, *Polis: Politicheskie issledovaniia* 4 (2022): 10-31.

<sup>13</sup> *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons*, United Nations, Office for Disarmament Affairs, <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/tpnw/>.

Having completed his case for the illegality of nuclear weapons by the end of the second chapter, Kramer devotes the rest of the book to a well-documented and clearly written overview of the role of nuclear weapons and the successes and failures of nuclear arms control from the atomic bombings of Japan in 1945, through the Cold War arms race and threats of nuclear coercion, to the unfulfilled promise of the end of the Cold War and President Barack Obama's vision of a nuclear-free world. Any moves toward nuclear disarmament were hindered by what the author calls "nuclear nonproliferation by force," which is the preoccupation with nuclear weapons in the hands of terrorists or "rogue states" such as Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, and the sometimes-violent efforts (e.g., the invasion of Iraq in March 2003) to contain them. Obama's vow that "as long as these [nuclear] weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies" (142), combined with his commitment "to spend more than a trillion dollars [later raised to \$1.5 trillion] over thirty years to 'modernize' and then expand the nuclear weapons arsenal" (169), guaranteed that the vision of nuclear disarmament would recede further and further into the indefinite future.<sup>14</sup>

In his preface, Ronald Kramer writes that "in analyzing the nuclear danger, I have stood on the shoulders of giants such as Jonathan Schell, Daniel Ellsberg, Robert Jay Lifton, and Richard Falk" (xxii). Those familiar with these authors' work and that of others, such as Fred Kaplan and Michael Klare, upon whom the author draws, will recognize much of the history depicted in this volume. For a younger generation, especially one which is worried about climate change, but complacent or ignorant about the threat of nuclear war, the book is chock-full of valuable information and insights. Its concluding chapter links climate disruption to nuclear war by suggesting a causal relationship that could go in both directions: climate-related conflicts escalating to nuclear war and nuclear war producing devastating climate effects, such as "nuclear winter." The author puts forward a number of steps toward nuclear abolition, including the reform of the United Nations, but founders on the "paradox of international law" that he introduced earlier and the recognition that "these changes can happen only if the United States, shorn of imperial ambitions, exercises a strong leadership role in the democratization of the UN" (204-206). Another prerequisite, that of a "powerful political movement to challenge empire and abolish nuclear weapons" (209), particularly a movement that recognizes the twin apocalyptic threats of nuclear war and climate disaster, will not be easy to achieve. This book could, as the author hopes, contribute to "a public criminology of nuclear weapons [that] can help create political or 'deliberative frames' that can orient debate and/or produce progressive political action on the nuclear danger we face" (212). Perhaps so, if it reaches a large audience of young readers who are motivated to act.

**Matthew Evangelista** is President White Professor of History and Political Science Emeritus at Cornell University. His work on nuclear weapons includes *Innovation and the Arms Race: How the United States and the Soviet Union Develop New Military Technologies* (Cornell University Press, 1988), recently reissued, and *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 1999). With Neta

---

<sup>14</sup> On this point see also Matthew Evangelista, "Nuclear Abolition or Nuclear Umbrella: Choices and Contradictions in US Proposals," in *Getting to Zero The Path to Nuclear Disarmament*, Catherine McArdle Kelleher and Judith Reppy, eds. (Stanford University Press, 2011).

Crawford he wrote an introduction to and edited Randall Forsberg's posthumously published *Toward a Theory of Peace: The Role of Moral Beliefs* (Cornell University Press, 2019).