

An alternative history of peacemaking: a century of disarmament efforts

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Wars may be started for trivial or mistaken reasons, as happened in 1914, but they are fuelled by arms industries. It's time to look at the alternative history of efforts to prohibit the weapons that feed wars, causing widespread humanitarian suffering.

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Writing in *the Guardian*, [Adam Hochschild](#) called World War One the 'War of Unintended Consequences'. He's right to do so. The most heavily armed nations are most likely to resort to war. Yet most, if not all wars result in upheaval and serious negative consequences for the societies and leaders that rely on military force, whether or not they are officially deemed to have won or lost. Think of recent wars from Vietnam to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, from the US/NATO war in Afghanistan to Iraq, and Israel's devastating and ill-judged war on the Palestinians in Gaza.

Hochschild also hailed peacemakers, such as Jane Addams, founder of the [Women's International League for Peace and Freedom \(WILPF\)](#). As well as commemorating the peacemakers, the 100th anniversary of that War of Unintended Consequences is a good time to look at the last century's humanitarian efforts to prohibit and eliminate some of the most inhumane types of weapons. Diplomatic and legal initiatives to resist some of the worst technological innovations that arms manufacturers offered to gung ho leaders have proved generally successful, and form an important context for today's [campaigns to achieve a nuclear ban treaty](#).

In order to prevent wars as well as make peace, we have to continually work on disarmament and address the causes of conflict. Those who keep investing in armaments and prioritising the making and selling of weapons generally get rewarded with more wars. And quite often the inhumane weapons developed for their own use spread to others, fuelling

unanticipated conflicts that come back to haunt their makers.

From the 1914-18 'Great War of Unintended Consequences' to the 1939-45 Second World War, and beyond into the US-Soviet Cold War with its proxy wars, arms sales lead to proliferation and war. From low tech 'small arms' to high tech weapons of mass destruction – biological and chemical as well as nuclear weapons - weapons beget wars. What the arms industry markets as defensive weapons, such as the 'air defence' rockets that destroyed the MH17 passenger plane, or the US and Israeli 'missile defence' systems, never work as intended.

On the contrary, they just lead to an “offence-defence spiral” whereby more sophisticated weapons are developed to get past the so-called defences, which are themselves often weapons systems, like rockets and ballistic missiles... so on ad infinitum, if we let the destructive game continue. The only winners in offence-defence spirals are the arms manufacturers who keep governments tied into their hugely expensive dependence on each new type of military illusion, marketed as the next necessity in a never-ending computer game. No-one is now protected as a civilian or non-combatant. The profits go to multinational warmongers, while short sighted and corrupt leaders whip up nationalist fervour and silence dissent.

It is instructive to read the similarities between Imperial Britain's defence of inhumane weapons in the past, and the arguments in favour of replacing the Trident nuclear weapons system now. For most of history it was assumed that the greater the barbarity, the more effective the weapon. But something new happened in the 1860s. In 1863 the [International Committee of the Red Cross \(ICRC\)](#) was founded in Switzerland to provide humanitarian support and protection for soldiers (and subsequently all victims) in armed conflicts. In 1864, while the American Civil War still raged, President Lincoln put forward the [Lieber Code](#), which was the first known attempt to codify the laws of war. The 1868 St Petersburg Declaration then introduced the concept of [humanitarian limits on weaponry](#), stating that the “use of arms, projectiles, and material of a nature to cause unnecessary suffering is prohibited”.

In 1899 and 1907, the [Hague Conventions](#) went further, and outlawed dum dum bullets. More importantly, they enshrined some basic humanitarian principles for war, referring to 'unacceptable' weapons and practices. Nowadays many of us might question the concept of 'acceptable' weapons

and practices in war, but for that time and place the Hague Conventions marked a significant development. They did not prevent the 'Great War of Unintended Consequences', however.

Following the appalling suffering caused by chlorine and mustard gas to the young men in the trenches, the [1925 Geneva 'Gas' Protocol](#) prohibited the use of chemical and biological weapons, at least in war. Its preamble stated: “the use in war of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases, and of all analogous liquids, materials or devices, has been justly condemned by the general opinion of the civilised world.” While leaders in the Second World War by and large eschewed the use of such weapons against combatants, so keeping to the “in war” letter of the Geneva Protocol, chemical agents were used by the Nazis to murder millions of Jewish, homosexual, Roma and other civilians in the gas chambers. And Japanese military authorities also experimented with chemical and biological substances on civilian populations in China and Manchuria during the 1930s and 1940s. And, of course, 1945 saw the testing and use of a new kind of weapon – the atomic bomb – immeasurably more devastating in its chemical, biological and incendiary effects than the toxic and asphyxiating agents envisaged by the 1925 Gas Protocol.

In 1949, as the Cold War took root, [the Geneva Conventions](#) wrote into international humanitarian law the principle that the right of parties to a conflict to choose methods or means of warfare “is not unlimited”. This was said as a growing number of countries began pursuing nuclear weapons programmes, but before the full horrors of all out nuclear war and ‘mutually assured destruction’ were recognised. Even so, the first resolution in the UN General Assembly, which was held in London in 1946, was all about how to deal with the “problems raised by the discovery of atomic energy”.

Fifteen years later, [UN General Assembly resolution 1653 \(1961\)](#) declared that the use of nuclear weapons “would exceed even the scope of war and cause indiscriminate suffering and destruction to mankind”. The [1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty \(PTBT\)](#) didn't manage to curb the US-Soviet nuclear arms race or ban all nuclear testing, but its preamble continued with the humanitarian theme, “desiring to put an end to the contamination of man's environment by radioactive substances”.

With disarmament seeming to be impossible in the Cold War, the best that

could be achieved was the [Non-Proliferation Treaty \(NPT\)](#) in 1968, which aimed to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons beyond the five that had by that time already become 'nuclear-weapon states'. Though US-Russian rivalry made it impossible to have more than a very weakly worded disarmament obligation, humanitarian concerns were clearly highlighted in the preamble: "Considering the devastation that would be visited upon all mankind by a nuclear war and the consequent need to make every effort to avert the danger of such a war and to take measures to safeguard the security of peoples..."

In addressing only the spread of nuclear weapons, rather than prohibiting their use and deployment for everyone, the NPT ran contrary to treaty-making developments.

By contrast, two important treaties banned biological and chemical weapons, in 1972 and 1993 respectively, going beyond the 1925 Geneva protocol which had prohibited only the *use* of biological and chemical weapons *in war*. These two disarmament treaties clearly prohibited the use, production and stockpiling of biological and chemical weapons, and required their total elimination. Cold war politics prevented implementation and verification requirements being incorporated formally into the [1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention](#), whereas the [1993 Chemical Weapons Convention](#) had verification provisions and timelines for current arsenals to be dismantled and eliminated.

Two post cold war treaties reinvigorated and added to International Humanitarian Law. Both the [1997 treaty](#) that banned anti-personnel landmines, and the [2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions](#) were achieved by worldwide coalitions of governments and civil society. Both are regarded as successful examples of humanitarian-based disarmament. The weapons they prohibited had many more military uses and justifications than nuclear or other WMD, but they needed to be banned because of their inhumane, indiscriminate and unacceptably harmful effects on civilians, with disproportionate consequences for women and children.

Though the multilateral negotiating processes went outside traditional UN forums – which were then, and continue to be, paralyzed by vetoes and blocking tactics wielded by one or more states with large weapons industries – both treaties were overwhelmingly adopted by the UN General

Assembly, and have entered into force, with more governments signing up every year since. Importantly, among the small number of countries that have remained outside those humanitarian disarmament treaties, almost all – including the United States – are constrained to fit in with most if not all their provisions. The UK government opposed both treaties when they were proposed, but for political reasons felt the need to join the negotiations, and then rushed to be among the first to sign and ratify them.

The point about these treaties - and the [Nuclear Ban Treaty](#) that is advocated by a growing number of governments, as well as the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), with over 390 partners in 93 countries - is that they recognise that the elimination of weapons takes place after they are banned, not the other way around. For legal and technical reasons, the physical dismantlement and elimination of national arsenals must generally be undertaken by the countries that have them. Banning weapons is a diplomatic, political and security right of all nations. International treaties that prohibit inhumane weapons may not get all the weapons possessors on board early on, but they are crucially important in creating incentives as well as legal and political conditions to promote and accelerate disarmament.

Today's humanitarian initiatives are proving quicker and more effective than the cold war arms control approaches because they ride the wave of history in which human needs and security are becoming more important than past considerations such as national status and military-industrial interests. Humanitarian disarmament advocates acknowledge that the producers and countries that make, deploy and use these weapons believe they have economic, political or military interests at stake. But they refuse to privilege these industrial and nationalist interests above the needs and security interests of civilians and nations that do not make, deploy, or use the most inhumane weapons.

So as we commemorate the hideous mistakes and carnage of the Great War of Unintended Consequences that began a hundred years ago today, let's learn the salient lessons, and listen with far greater attention to promoters of disarmament, nonviolent resolution of conflict and makers of peace.