

Greenham: no failure like success

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The Greenham Common peace-camp was set up in September 1981 outside the United States military base there in Berkshire, western England. The camp started with a march to the base - which I and three other women kick-started [1] from southwest Wales - to oppose the installation of ninety-six nuclear-armed cruise missiles. It was the height of the "second cold war". Ronald Reagan was in power in Washington, Leonid Brezhnev in Moscow, and Margaret Thatcher in London. It was a time of fear.

The twenty-fifth anniversary of the beginning of the camp has given the event a brief twirl around the world of the media soundbite. Reaction to the very words "Greenham Common [2]" seems to be a mixture of distaste and awe, a wary impulse that prompts a brief knee-bending towards "one of the largest movements of the late 20th century" before moving swiftly on, mentioning that it had little discernible effect since, in the eyes of most analysts, the arms race would anyway have ended without catastrophe, in just the way it did.

The implication: it never mattered very much, and all that's left is nostalgia.

Predictable questions are designed to elicit predictable answers:

"Why did you organise a march to Greenham Common?" "Because we thought there was going to be a nuclear war".

"Did you ever imagine, when there were just the four of you sitting round your kitchen table, that two years later there would be 50,000 women demonstrating?" (This is the invariable "jam-jar" moment, when we are stuffed into the "just ordinary housewives and mums, with our little protest" container, and the lid sealed). "We knew we had to succeed - we didn't know how exactly that would happen, no". (Would they ever believe that we actually knew what we were doing, and where we had to reach, politically?)

"How long did you stay (at the peace-camp)?" "Oh, a few weeks, maybe a couple of months if you added it all up, over a few years..."

"Oh..." (Puzzlement is registered, for this is the "wrong" answer. What I was meant to say was: "I stayed there the next ten years, forsaking my family, my job, for this cause. It empowered me. My life changed utterly." To do so would of course also feed the iconic, "dedicated-but-dotty fanatic" media stereotype meant to fit us all.)

What made the movement tick? Why did we want this to be an action defined by *women*, when in truth, we had little sympathy for the direction taken by feminism in the 1970s?

Genuine movements begin with genuine feelings which give people the courage to take risks [3] and to disrupt their lives. In the early 1980s, feelings of profound apprehension ran very deep,

and very powerfully, through women and especially through mothers. A friend of mine, a perfectly sane, sensible person, can recall working out, in detail, how she would kill her own children, if war seemed imminent. Men too were worried, but often seemed to think the situation was hopeless. Were we experiencing a collective psychosis, or were our feelings telling us that we really were in mortal danger?

This, essentially, was our message: one of urgency, of a wake-up call, a demand for new thinking on the part of our political leaders. What distinguished the thinking of the "cold warriors" from that of the "peaceniks" was that the former didn't think the situation was alarming, and the latter did. History makes it pretty clear that the peaceniks were right in their analysis. The hardliners of both east and west were, ultimately, prepared to bluff each other out even if that meant actually starting a nuclear war. They didn't think through the consequences, beyond providing for their own safety, as they thought, by constructing hardened shelters for themselves.

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(10 October 2001)

From communication to activism

Our beginnings were characterised by a spirit of cooperation, trust and tolerance towards each other. We trod a delicate, precarious path of solidarity with women who shared our conviction that, impossible though it may seem, the arms race was going to have to end. We were poised between the sentimentality of earth-mother, peace-dove squidginess, identifying women with peace and all things nice, and the hardline attitudes of those feminists who had no vision for change, short of the downfall of something called "patriarchy".

We struggled with the constraints of partners, children, jobs. This - the varied nature of our lives - was not a weakness but a strength, for it meant that we had much in common with the public we sought to influence. In the early days of the peace-camp, communication (whether with the Newbury public, the police, or the construction workers on the base) was a priority, and often successful. The culmination of this passionately communicative phase was the demonstration in [December 1982](#) [7] by 35,000 women which took the world by surprise: under the slogan ["embrace the base](#) [8]".

As the [peace-camp](#) [9] developed into a society with long-term residents and a distinct culture, activism came to eclipse communication in importance. The public continued to be inspired by amazing images of defiance, such as the women dancing at dawn upon the silos built to house the missiles, and the peace-camp became a focus for the hopes and fears of the entire peace

movement. The authorities finally took the protest seriously, and conditions became tougher as evictions began. Attitudes were hardening on both sides.

Women began to choose to live at Greenham because there they could be at the cutting edge of protest, and lead a life apart from men. As they did so, a culture of lesbian "separatism" became dominant.

Greenham's single great strength was its unpredictable, anarchic, quality. It was the "Monty Python" of protest. The crazy, zany lesbianism was all part of this roller-coaster. Once the camp succumbed to stereotype, it lost this quality. It seems clear it should have ended in 1987, when the intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) treaty was signed [10]. But by then it had become a home.

That most of the women were lesbian [11] didn't matter to those of us who weren't. It was the intolerant attitudes of some towards men that made those of us who lived with them feel uneasy. Such attitudes helped create a forbidding stereotype that persists to this day.

This was the paradox: the more bold and "militant" the women, the more they became either idolised as heroines, or reviled as filthy irresponsible hags. The wider public became distanced - either admiring or disapproving, but less and less inspired to become involved. It was easy to blame this process upon the rightwing press, who were indeed eager to trivialise and vilify. But when women began to be turned away if accompanied by male children, when male supporters were shouted at, who needs media manipulation to create an image of bigoted hostility to men, per se?

It seems clear to me now that it was the imagination, bravery and generous spirit of the many thousands who took part in protests at Greenham [12], whether militant lesbian or Women's Institute stalwart, that made a uniquely female movement [13] which could not be ignored. But as soon as the peace-camp became a permanent way of life for some, a process of progressive alienation from the public began.

The peace-camp, as a constant vigil, was the unique and vital focus for millions demanding an end to the arms race. Its very strength would in the end [14] become a weakness. By then, however, the spirit of belief in change was causing the "iron curtain" to succumb to rust. Because people, including Greenham women, supported independent peace and democracy groups behind the iron curtain, it made far more difference to the end of the cold war than most people realise.

Women gained confidence from Greenham simply by being a part, however small, of that movement. With that energy [15], they went on in the world to make "peace" more than just pretty pictures: to work in conflict resolution, to study international relations, to monitor human rights, to follow the tortuous decisions leading us into a new era of nuclear proliferation [16].

The feminist theories of the 1970s had looked inwards, at our problems as women, narrowly defined. Greenham seemed to unlock our female energy: we were looking out at the world, and realising how much it needed us - the "gentle, angry women" of our song, the thinking women who helped each other to avert catastrophe when we thought we might have to kill our own kids, who judged politicians not each other, asking only, as we still do, that they show a bit of common sense about nuclear weapons.

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