

## Living (again) in an Age of Nuclear Fear. New Avenues for Studying Cold War Civil Defense

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Transnational Civil Defense Working Group

On January 25<sup>th</sup> 2018, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* released its annual [Doomsday Clock calibration](#). It struck 23:58, a time not seen since 1953, when the Soviets matched the Americans in developing thermonuclear weapons. The Doomsday Clock is an imperfect and hypothetical measure of the relative likelihood of man-made catastrophe, of course. Today, the Science and Security Board of the *Bulletin* considers broad threats that include climate change and cybersecurity alongside nuclearization. And it is worth noting that critics have long accused the *Bulletin* of [alarmism](#). When the dial was pushed forward thirty seconds this year, however, few were surprised. 2017 witnessed its share of alarming trends and tense moments. Indeed, the perception of the nuclear threat has moved beyond the realm of Twitter saber-rattling. Last year, nations across the globe reinstated bomb drills, revamped disaster plans and talked about building up cooperative civil defense schemes (see, for example, [Nordic cooperation](#), [Japanese air raid drills](#), [revived US civil defense plans](#), [Germany's concept for civil defense](#)). Things don't seem to be improving in 2018, either. On January 13, when an [imminent ballistic missile attack warning](#) was sent to millions of people in Hawaii, few assumed it was a drill. Some panicked, some desperately sought shelter and others made phone calls to say goodbye to loved ones. Thankfully, the message was a false alarm.



Clearly, we are once again living in an age of nuclear fear. And many of us are wondering, what would civil defense look like in 2018? In order to address questions around fear, safety and civil defense in our own time, we need to deepen our historical understanding of this specific and complex phenomenon. Over the past twenty years, scholars from across the disciplines have explored the history of nuclear civil defense, from its earliest inception immediately after World War II through the end of the Cold War. Although this growing body of literature continues to expand to include new perspectives – for example from science and technology studies, sociology, media studies and cultural history – the study of public defense against nuclear attack remains bounded by national and temporal bias, and does not often cross the boundaries between disciplines.

We established the *Transnational Civil Defense Working Group* to address several gaps: to move the field away from the particularism of histories constrained by nation, time, and discipline, and to consider civil defense as a truly transnational, global phenomenon. Last year, Cold War scholars from seven countries convened in Zurich for the group's inaugural meeting. The exploratory workshop, ["Global Perspectives on Civil Defense from the Cold War Era to the Present Day"](#), held on March 9-11, 2017, brought together historians, anthropologists, political scientists, media scholars as well as sociologists, all of whom have examined civil defense in some capacity in their past research. Together, we spent two days pooling our knowledge of resources and information, and exploring thematic considerations that could draw us closer to thinking about civil defense across borders and disciplines. For example, we considered civil defense as a transnational flow of technical and



organizational knowledge and personnel, as a product reflective of shared cultural values and defense traditions and as a technique of soft diplomacy.

Over the course of the meeting, our conversations coalesced around several salient points that will guide the Working Group's agenda over the coming years. First, it became clear that the Cold War exchanges and collaboration between national civil defense organizations has not been adequately studied. Civil defense representatives often visited partner countries and closely observed and sometimes adopted foreign civil defense concepts and programs. At times, as is the case with Switzerland and Sweden, these collaborations became formalized and cooperative. Moreover, as of yet little work has been done exploring the history of international civil defense conferences, hosted by organizations like the [International Civil Defense Organization \(ICDO\)](#), founded in Geneva in 1966. Relatedly, the Working Group uncovered important connections between the history of nuclear civil defense and the global histories of humanitarian and professional organizations. Because civil defense planning often dovetailed with emergency planning, international relief organizations such as the Red Cross may prove to be an important site for understanding civil defense as a supranational project. Finally, the Working Group identified similarities in civil defense ephemera circulating in various countries. With members researching in countries across Europe, North America and Asia, the Working Group is well positioned to systematically examine informational materials (pamphlets, films and brochures), organizational manuals and technical guides in order to trace continuities and connections between national civil defense programs.



Indeed, for many members of the Working Group, it is the physical remains of civil defense that make the topic most resonant. At the conclusion of the workshop, the participants toured the [Sonnenberg Shelter](#) in Lucerne. At the time of its completion in 1976, it was the largest nuclear bunker of its kind in the world, with room enough for 20,000 civilians. Today, the partially decommissioned bunker is open for guided tours, with many of its rooms still furnished to Cold War specifications. It is hard to visit such a derelict space without being reminded that the business of nuclear survival was always a delicate balance between technical and practical considerations on one hand, and psychological and emotional ones on the other. For many of us, the visit to the Sonnenberg bunker served as a tangible reminder of the highly potent affective and material legacies connected to the history of nuclear public safety, something that is as useful to consider in a historical context as it is in today's world.

The Transnational Civil Defense Working Group will continue its work over the coming years. A second conference geared toward developing a collaborative research project will be held in November 2018 in Lund, Sweden.



To find out more about the Working Group, please get in touch with its organizers:

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