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Michael Bess, Realism, utopia,...

by Brian Martin

Michael Bess, Realism, utopia, and the mushroom cloud: four activist intellectuals and their strategies for peace, 1945-1989: Louise Weiss (France), Leo Szilard (USA), E. P. Thompson (England), Danilo Dolci (Italy) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 321 pages.

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The title of this book describes well what it is about. The author chose four “activist intellectuals” and analysed their lives and strategies for human survival in the nuclear age. Each of the four is prominent in context, but none of them has been so famous as an Einstein or Gandhi.

Louise Weiss (1893-1983) was an energetic journalist who in the 1920s and early 1930s was a champion of internationalism and feminism. Chastened by the collapse of internationalist ideals, after World War II she became a supporter of a united Europe as a world superpower, retaining its civilising mission in the ruthless game of power politics. She presided over the opening session of the first elected European Parliament in 1979.

Leo Szilard (1898-1964) was a scintillating Hungarian physicist who first conceived of the nuclear chain reaction. He wrote the famous 1939 letter (also signed by Einstein) to US President Franklin Roosevelt suggesting the importance of nuclear weapons. But after working on the Manhattan Project, he became a dynamo for arms control through cooperation of the leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union.

E. P. Thompson (born 1924) is a British historian and social activist. Most famous for his book *The Making of the English Working Class*, he was active in the Communist Party and then, breaking from the orthodoxy in the 1950s, as an independent socialist. He was the most prominent figure associated with the 1980s British movement against nuclear weapons, channelling his energy especially into the initiative called European Nuclear Disarmament.

Danilo Dolci (born 1924) at age 28 dropped out of his bourgeois life and moved to a poor village in Sicily. He helped local people develop projects to improve their conditions. He became famous through a series of books which documented the life of Italians oppressed by poverty and the Mafia. His approach, which systematically uses techniques of nonviolent action, inspired numerous people to join his projects.

These are four interesting characters. Bess does an excellent job in telling their stories, judiciously mixing information about their activities with analysis of their strategies. These are small-size biographies. An enormous amount of work went into each story, undoubtedly more than many a full-scale biography.

The four figures span a range of approaches to peace and security. Weiss became a subscriber of what is called *realpolitik*, a reliance on powerful states to maintain world order. Szilard sought greater international cooperation, mainly by relying on action from government leaders. Thompson looked first and foremost to action by people to challenge the superpowers. Dolci sought to develop methods for people to take control over their own lives, as a foundation for a peaceful world. The four approaches can be called, briefly, peace through strength, peace through cooperative diplomacy, peace as grassroots internationalism and peace through social transformation, to quote the titles of Bess's four main chapters.

Interestingly, Bess has chosen a woman as representative of the most typically "masculine" position of the four, and men as representatives of the more cooperative and people-oriented approaches where women are more commonly found as activists.

The stories are fascinating whether or not one agrees with the strategies of the different figures, and this is enough to make the book worthwhile. But what does it all mean? Bess concludes the book with a comparison of the positions of the four figures on three issues: global governance, the capacity of humans to change, and ideas about power. Unfortunately, this comparison doesn't lead to much that wasn't already covered in the chapters on each individual. The three issues are much wider than the careers of the four figures, but Bess doesn't have the opportunity to bring a wide range of new material to bear. Nor is it obvious why these issues are especially well addressed via the ideas of these figures. Perhaps, though, there is an advantage in presenting strategies for peace via the lives of activists: the author does not have to preach. Rather, it is up to the reader to judge the strategies.

Personally, I would have been interested in an analysis of how these and other intellectuals have been effective or ineffective as social activists. For example, what is the role of personality, intellectual orientation, hard work, and historical circumstance in their careers? Are there lessons to be learned about what makes an effective activist? The author does not address such issues

explicitly. I'm quite aware that reviewers should review the book that was written, not the book they think should have been written. But even if Bess does not address these issues, the reader can do so. Most members of Scientists for Global Responsibility are activist intellectuals at some level, and there are some who might aspire to be as committed, energetic and influential as Weiss, Szilard, Thompson and Dolci. For all in this situation, it is useful to reflect on the different paths taken by these four activist intellectuals.

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