

Promoting the Nuclear Ban Treaty in Germany

Obstacles and Opportunities

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The current political situation in Germany

Germany is a unique case when it comes to nuclear weapons. On the one hand, polls show that the population is overwhelmingly opposed to nuclear arms and the concept of nuclear deterrence, and politicians from all major parties argue strongly for nuclear disarmament. On the other hand, Germany is an important NATO partner, a staunch US ally and continues to host tactical US nuclear weapons under NATO's nuclear sharing agreement – despite all democratic parties in parliament having voiced support for the withdrawal of these weapons until quite recently. So while most ordinary Germans and probably even many politicians would be appalled to know that German air-force pilots are regularly trained in nuclear bombing in a European battlefield scenario,^{1, 2, 3} there is surprisingly little public awareness of this fact and frustratingly little public discourse on the subject of nuclear weapons as a whole.

In major international conferences and in the run-up to the negotiations on the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), the German government supported efforts by the nuclear weapon states to block all support for a ban on nuclear weapons, despite their professed support for the humanitarian framing of the nuclear debate. There have even been isolated voices, mainly from within Angela Merkel's conservative Christian-Democratic Union (CDU), that broke with a decades-old taboo by suggesting the creation of a German nuclear weapons force or, alternatively, a new European nuclear sharing agreement.^{4, 5} Luckily, these voices appear to be fringe outliers, but the general backdrop for real nuclear disarmament has nonetheless turned less favorable in recent years.

Most observers cite the increased tensions with Russia over the situation in Ukraine as the most important single factor obstructing meaningful progress on disarmament. There are still venues in which Germany is trying to promote dialogue, trade and diplomacy with Russia: the construction of a large Baltic gas pipeline being one of the most prominent joint ventures, but relations between Germany and Russia have largely turned sour since the annexation of Crimea. This has made it increasingly difficult to promote confidence-building measures such as a unilateral withdrawal of US tactical weapons from German soil. At the same time, Germans have become wary of their formerly strong alliance with the US. While anti-American sentiment has traditionally been present within German society, vocal criticism of US policy has now extended deep into all major parties and even into the Chancellery since the election of Donald Trump. Adding to this is the rise of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) - a right-wing, nationalist, anti-foreigner populist party in Germany - causing political upheaval and a substantial shift to the right of the entire political spectrum. Former heavyweights such as the Social-Democratic Party (SPD) and the CDU, who have shared political power in a so-called grand coalition under the leadership of CDU Chancellor Merkel for years, have seen their share of votes tumble drastically in the national elections in 2017 and in federal state elections ever since, causing power shifts in both parties, further fragmentation of parliament and a general instability of the political system, inconducive to progressive political change.

It is against the background of these broader developments that IPPNW Germany has tried to promote the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) and the TPNW. The campaign has basically focused on three aspects: Raising public awareness for the nuclear ban, establishing a broad common base for activity and actively advocating for the TPNW on all political levels: European, national, federal state and local.

Raising public awareness of the topic

Using the various networks of the German peace and disarmament movements as well as our connections in media and politics, IPPNW Germany has tried to infuse talking points and arguments developed by ICAN into the public discourse. The Nobel Peace Prize has greatly helped in this endeavor, firmly placing IPPNW/ICAN spokespeople on the radar of major news outlets and offering our campaign many previously unattainable opportunities to publicly explain our position. Through IPPNW networks, we are present on a regional level all over the country and through our student movement at most major universities. The Nobel Peace Prize for ICAN was widely covered in local, regional and national media, frequently giving local IPPNW/ICAN activists a chance to reach a wider audience. From newspaper op-eds to radio interviews and appearances in major news networks and talk shows, IPPNW and ICAN became go-to addresses for statements on nuclear abolition and nuclear weapons, aside from political parties and think-tanks. Beside the Nobel Prize itself, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) crisis, the financing of nuclear weapons through German banks and rising/falling tensions between the US and North Korea drew the greatest interest among German media outlets.

IPPNW and ICAN have been relatively successful in promoting the concept of “Don't bank on the bomb” through appearances in popular talk shows and gaining news coverage of the annual publication of their report on this issue. This seems to be a subject that many people feel strongly about in Germany and a public demonstration IPPNW organised in front of the headquarters of the German Commerzbank in Frankfurt in October of 2015 was well received (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5JenNL1qpnc>), as was the spectacular German ICAN action of unfurling a massive banner on top of the BNP Paribas building in Berlin in September 2018. (https://www.flickr.com/photos/ican_de/albums/72157701501172314)

International developments such as the renewed nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula offered IPPNW Germany the chance to gain media attention with our messaging. In November 2017, we organized a human chain between the US and North Korean embassies in Berlin, bringing together a large array of peace organizations and anti-nuclear activists in an intergenerational public event. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLNYw0d5Jmc>)

We also published whole-page advertisements in national newspapers two years running - reaching a broader audience: one in the liberal newspaper Frankfurter Rundschau in June 2017, signed by 750 people (https://www.icanw.de/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/merkel_anzeige.pdf), calling for Germany to support the process towards a treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons; and a second one in October 2018, in the Conservative newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, signed by more than 1,600 people. (www.ippnw.de/commonFiles/bilder/Anzeigen/FAZ_Anzeige19102918), calling for Germany to sign the TPNW. Both ads reached a large audience well outside of our usual circles, promoted our message and arguments and even brought in funding for further activities, as the money donated by the signatories exceeded the costs of placing the ads.

Establishing a broad common base for activity

Ever since the Cold War, there has been a strong and vocal anti-nuclear and peace movement in Germany. Largely born out of protests against the deployment of intermediate range Pershing missiles in West Germany in the 1980's, this "old" peace movement has focused mainly on the remaining US nuclear bombs stored in Germany. After the withdrawal of most of these missiles following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and German reunification, activities have largely centered around the Büchel airbase, situated in an isolated region in the far West of the country. It is here that around 20 B-61 bombs remain deployed, and German air-force pilots regularly train how to drop them on targets. Activities such as anti-nuclear bike-rides, civil disobedience events, blockades, peace camps, sit-ins and concerts have largely taken place within the framework of the campaign "atomwaffenfrei.jetzt" ("nuclear weapons free now"), which IPPNW is a part of and which is an ICAN partner organisation.

At the same time, the founding of ICAN Germany has led to the creation of a number of young, mostly student-based local groups and an active core group based in Berlin, with little or no connections to the "old" peace movement. In this case also, the German IPPNW office was from the beginning closely involved in these activities, with IPPNW students and staff playing prominent roles within the new, young movement.

While the old peace movement consists mainly of elderly activists with many years of experience and an interest in hands-on activities, the young ICAN movement is mostly made up of young urban digital natives, interested in online campaigning and the kind of political lobbying similar to that undertaken by ICAN during the international conferences in Oslo, Nayarit and Vienna and on a UN level. It has been IPPNW Germany's intention to connect these two distinct movements, but merging them or even trying to get them to cooperate on certain subjects and events has proved challenging. In the past year we have successfully cooperated on a joint petition and the ad campaign. Now we are planning to join together for a large event on the second birthday of the TPNW, July 7th 2019 at the Büchel nuclear base.

To bring the two movements together IPPNW Germany focused mainly on creating synergies and promoting knowledge about the the principles and methods of the different actors. It has taken time to convince each group that the approach of the other was simply an alternative but complementary way towards the same goal. As a result, the old peace movement embraces young ICAN activists with their spirit, fervor and new ideas, while ICAN values the experience, wisdom and connections of the old peace movement. There is a sense of mutual respect and a general acknowledgment of shared goals. Most importantly, each group uses their own particular skills: ICAN Germany works with online campaigning and social media, while atomwaffenfrei.jetzt is particularly strong at mobilising local groups to talk to passers-by and collect offline signatures for the cause. Students from ICAN Germany are going into schools and talking to young students in their own language. Older activists continue to speak to elderly audiences and can inspire them with information about what the younger generation is adding to the common cause.

Through our campaign "ICAN Campus+" and by organizing so-called "Nukipedia" workshops, we convey knowledge and concrete campaigning tools to young activists, broadening our base and setting up local groups at different universities. We are now slowly extending our focus to include high-schools. All in all, the joint ICAN platform has proven very beneficial in breaching the medical bubble that IPPNW Germany activities were frequently confined to, encompassing professionals from the fields of political science, humanities, law and peace studies as well as non-academic activists.

Lobbying for the TPNW on all political levels

The national Bundestag elections in 2017 provided us with a unique opportunity to confront contenders for political office with questions on nuclear weapons. IPPNW Germany used their networks to reach out to hundreds of parliamentary candidates, asking them about their opinions on nuclear sharing, nuclear deterrence and nuclear prohibition. The database created by this decentralized research proved to be valuable in identifying potential allies in most political parties, even the ones whose official positions are far from supportive of nuclear abolition. We have also been able to forge closer local connections to individual politicians keen on promoting the concepts enshrined in the TPNW. The Nobel Peace Prize turned out to be an additional door opener, providing us greater access to Bundestag delegates and political parties.

In addition, we have conducted a continuous and constructive dialogue with the German Foreign Office, in particular with the department responsible for nuclear disarmament, which is closely linked to the Chancellery. While this has not translated into a more favorable stance towards the TPNW within the German government, we feel that we have at least been able to sow seeds of doubt regarding the current “step-by-step” nuclear disarmament concept and to make a case for the compatibility of the TPNW with the NPT.

A prominent event with the German Foreign Minister was cancelled at the last minute by the Foreign Office and we still do not feel that we have the ear of the relevant players in government. The Nobel Peace Prize, however, has increased our visible media presence and the growing unease about the possibility of a new nuclear arms race in Europe is giving us opportunities to gather traction with our message of stigmatizing, prohibiting and ultimately abolishing nuclear weapons.

Outlook

With the German political spectrum rapidly changing and Merkel's chancellorship in its final stages, it is difficult to say in which direction the country is headed. There are those who believe there will be a further shift to the right, since at least two of the contenders for Merkel's position as leader of the CDU at the time of writing are visibly positioning themselves to the right of the current CDU mainstream. Also, the nationalist right-wing AfD could rise to become Germany's second biggest party if their electoral success continues as it has for the past three years. On the other hand, the ecological Green party, which itself grew out of anti-nuclear protests in the 1980s, has also greatly profited from frustration with the two major centrist parties, as well as a renewed interest in green policies with climate change at the top of the political agenda, equally vying for the post of second-strongest party in national polls. It is therefore highly likely that the Green party will be a part of the next governing coalition following elections in 2021. We are therefore very pleased that our advocacy efforts have resulted in this party writing its support for the TPNW into its party programme.

Regardless of what the political landscape will look like in the future, we will continue to promote the TPNW as the only meaningful, responsible and sane response to the continued threat that nuclear weapons pose to our world and we firmly believe that we are getting closer and closer to reaching the critical mass needed for broad public and political support for our positions.

- ¹ Kristensen HM et al. "Building a Safe, Secure, and Credible NATO Nuclear Posture." NTI, 2011. p. 36
https://www.nti.org/media/documents/NTI_NATO_RPT_Web.pdf

- ² Nassauer, O. "Germany's Tornado Nuclear Weapons Carrier". BITS, 2013. https://bits.de/public/unv_a/original-tornado_eng.htm

- ³ Pöhler, S. "The last nukes in Germany". Deutsche Welle, 2015. <https://www.dw.com/en/the-last-nukes-in-germany/a-18630943>

- ⁴ Faiola A. "In the era of Donald Trump, Germans debate a military buildup". Washington Post, March 2017.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/in-the-era-of-trump-germans-debate-a-military-buildup/2017/03/05/d7fc2ef6-fd16-11e6-a51a-e16b4bcc6644_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.7a4799190243

- ⁵ "Germans are debating getting their own nuclear weapon". The Economist, March 2017.
<https://www.economist.com/europe/2017/03/04/germans-are-debating-getting-their-own-nuclear-weapon>