

‘N-A-T-O? What’s that stand for?’

Cynthia Cockburn

Our message boiled down to SAY-NO-TO-NATO. One letter per T-shirt, boldly stencilled, plus the gaps between words, that called for fourteen women. We’d have liked to put ‘WOMEN’ in front of ‘SAY’, but twenty would be too many T-shirts to print (that acrylic paint all over the kitchen), and too long a line of women to manoeuvre in a busy public space. And we reckoned if the passers-by couldn’t see much of our shapes under the XXXL-sized T-shirts, they would probably guess we were female from their tasteful orchid colour and our general demeanour.

We did attract a lot of attention as we displayed our bold lettering around Southbank, Covent Garden and Leicester Square on Saturday 20 November.¹ More than a thousand people reached out and took a leaflet from us in the course of three hours. What surprised us, though, was how many of them looked puzzled and asked ‘What’s NATO?’ It seems that, except for the few - and perhaps they are mostly in the peace movement - who positively search the international pages of the newspapers to follow military planning, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is an abstract and distant phenomenon, if not totally invisible. Yet NATO is a very significant factor in the UK’s foreign and military policy. Its requirements shape our armed forces. It is as NATO troops that more than 9000 British soldiers are fighting a war in Afghanistan. Whether or not we can persuade the government to scrap (not modernize) the Trident nuclear missile system hangs on decisions made in NATO.

Our T-shirt demonstration in London was timed to draw attention to a NATO Summit taking place that weekend (November 19-21) in Lisbon, Portugal. The assembled Heads of State, as expected, agreed and published a new ‘Strategic Concept’ confirming NATO as an ever-expanding, nuclear-armed and aggressive machinery ready for combat way outside its designated area of concern – the North Atlantic region.² Russian President Dmitry Medvedev came to Lisbon as a guest. His current rapprochement with the Western states was warmly hailed.³ Unfortunately the bonding involves Russia signing up to NATO’s Active Layered Theatre Ballistic Missile Defence (ALTBMD – will you remember that?). This is the latest version of the Star Wars project. Now Russia is to be on ‘our’ side of the space shield, erected against some other states promoted to the status of ‘enemy’. Iran? China? North Korea? However, all this costs money, and there were clear signs that member states are worried about military budgets in a time of austerity. NATO therefore also promised reforms that will provide for ‘a leaner and more agile command structure’. The Secretary General echoed the sporting machismo with a promise that NATO will be ‘cutting fat and investing in muscle’.

The T-shirt performance in central London marking this Summit was organized by four networks, Women in Black against War, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, Aldermaston Women’s Peace Camp and Trident Ploughshares. As feminist antimilitarists we had found ourselves particularly puzzled and vexed by NATO’s recent enthusiastic espousal of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on *Women, Peace and Security*.⁴ This resolution calls on governments, international and other institutions engaged in peace-making, peace-keeping and peace-building to take account of women’s needs and strengths in these contexts. And sure enough, in the long statement that issued from the

Lisbon Summit, implementing 1325 was paragraph 7, way up front in a long document of 54 numbered paragraphs.⁵ Of course, it is important that NATO have very careful regard to Afghan women in whatever exit strategy it devises to close down ISAF and send its international troops home. Women have suffered terribly in this war. They were oppressed under the Taliban regime that preceded it. Although everyone wants the war to end, there is a real danger of NATO selling out to fundamentalists, whether Taliban or Northern warlords, who will lock women into the dark ages. It is essential that women be represented in peace negotiations - and it is good if NATO is now recognizing that. Yet there is a deep contradiction in Resolution 1325. NATO is not a peace-keeping but a war-fighting institution. How can we cheer NATO for promising equality for women in an institution we deplore?

European antiwar movements, including the French *Mouvement de la Paix*, Germany's *Die Linke* party, the UK's Stop the War Coalition and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, have formed an alliance called 'No-To-NATO'.⁶ They have begun to protest at NATO Summit meetings, organizing a mass demonstration and counter-conference. At the Summit counter-conference in Strasbourg in 2009 and again last weekend in Lisbon, women have offered a workshop, developing a feminist case against NATO.⁷ Women are saying that military expenditure squanders money needed for the education, health and housing services badly needed by women, who carry the main burden of domestic life not only in NATO countries but elsewhere in the world. Women suffer displacement, rape, loss, injury and increased burdens due to war. Afghanistan is a case in point. Italian women are particularly disturbed by the way NATO's military bases in their neighbourhoods are sources of social stress, toxic pollution, sexual exploitation and violence. We are all saying: 'military security' is an oxymoron. Women ascribe a totally different meaning to the word security. We mean a decent livelihood, well-being and an end to violence in war and peace, and freedom from threat whether it comes from a bomb, a gun or a fist.

Our London SAY-NO-TO-NATO T-shirt action was part of this Europe-wide movement of women opposing NATO. Women in eleven Italian cities were planning protests simultaneous with our own last Saturday. Women in Sheffield too. In London we were women of four networks, Women in Black against War, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Aldermaston Women's Peace Camp and an affinity group of Trident Ploughshares. All of us are well-practised at campaigning for 'less military spending', 'No Trident', 'no to the arms trade' and 'troops out' of here and there. Now we are trying to frame our resistance to home-grown British militarism within a closer monitoring of trends in NATO and their implications for women's 'real security', rights and freedoms.

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¹ See photos at <www.flickr.com/photos/wiblondon> and video clips at <www.youtube.com/wiblondon>

² See <www.nato.int/strategic-concept/index.html>

³ See <http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_68871.htm>

⁴ http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_56984.htm?selectedLocale=en

⁵ See <http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_68828.htm>

⁶ See <www.no-to-nato.org>.

⁷ Materials from the Women against NATO e-network can be seen at <www.wloe.org>.