



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Women form peace camp to protest housing of cruise missiles at Greenham Common, 1981-1993

Time period notes: *Although a few women remained in the camp after 1993, the campaign to remove the missiles from Greenham Common is considered to have ended in 1993 when these missiles were removed.*

August

1981

to:

1993

Country: England

Location Description: *The Greenham Common military base*

Goals:

The Greenham women's goal was to remove U.S. nuclear missiles from British soil. The camp also had the larger goal of empowering women and encouraging feminism.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 021. Delivering symbolic objects
- 026. Paint as protest
- 035. Humorous skits and pranks
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 043. Political mourning › women used the act of keening, the traditional lament used as part of funeral rites for expressions of grief, as a means of protest
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 134. Nonobedience in absence of direct supervision
- 137. Refusal of an assemblage or meeting to disperse
- 170. Nonviolent invasion
- 171. Nonviolent interjection
- 195. Seeking imprisonment

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 021. Delivering symbolic objects
- 026. Paint as protest
- 028. Symbolic sounds
- 035. Humorous skits and pranks
- 037. Singing
- 043. Political mourning › women used the act of keening, the traditional lament used as part of funeral rites for expressions of grief, as a means of protest
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 134. Nonobedience in absence of direct supervision
- 170. Nonviolent invasion
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 021. Delivering symbolic objects
- 026. Paint as protest
- 028. Symbolic sounds
- 029. Symbolic reclamations
- 035. Humorous skits and pranks
- 037. Singing
- 043. Political mourning › women used the act of keening, the traditional lament used as part of funeral rites for expressions of grief, as a means of protest
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 134. Nonobedience in absence of direct supervision
- 170. Nonviolent invasion
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Methods in 4th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 021. Delivering symbolic objects
- 026. Paint as protest
- 028. Symbolic sounds
- 029. Symbolic reclamations
- 035. Humorous skits and pranks
- 037. Singing

- 043. Political mourning › women used the act of keening, the traditional lament used as part of funeral rites for expressions of grief, as a means of protest
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 134. Nonobedience in absence of direct supervision
- 170. Nonviolent invasion
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Methods in 5th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 021. Delivering symbolic objects
- 026. Paint as protest
- 028. Symbolic sounds
- 035. Humorous skits and pranks
- 037. Singing
- 043. Political mourning › women used the act of keening, the traditional lament used as part of funeral rites for expressions of grief, as a means of protest
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 134. Nonobedience in absence of direct supervision
- 170. Nonviolent invasion
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Methods in 6th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 021. Delivering symbolic objects
- 026. Paint as protest
- 028. Symbolic sounds
- 035. Humorous skits and pranks
- 037. Singing
- 043. Political mourning › women used the act of keening, the traditional lament used as part of funeral rites for expressions of grief, as a means of protest
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 134. Nonobedience in absence of direct supervision
- 170. Nonviolent invasion
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Environment
Human Rights
Peace

Group characterization:

- Women of all ages participated in the campaign. Many were from around England
- but other women hailed from around the world

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

The Women's Peace Camp used a consensus decision making model with no established leaders or hierarchical structure. However some early, influential members of the campaign were Eunice Stallard, Helen John, Karmen Cutler, Ann Pettitt, Linnie Seward, and Lynne Whittemore

Partners:

Cruisewatch:- an organization who attempted to track and make public the moving of missiles from location to location

External allies:

Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND)

Quaker groups

Involvement of social elites:

Singer Yoko Ono provided money for the campaigners to eventually purchase land next to the military base.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- CND
- Quaker groups

Groups in 2nd Segment:**Groups in 3rd Segment:****Groups in 4th Segment:****Groups in 5th Segment:****Groups in 6th Segment:**

Segment Length: *Approximately 2 years*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

British and American governments, American military crews at Greenham Common

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

Not Known

Repressive Violence:

The women of the camp were attacked by vigilantes from Newbury and “unofficial” army patrols, often resulting in cracked ribs and skulls. They were also the victims of sexual taunting, unnecessary strip searches, razing of camps, and throwing of stones by US air force members. The campaigners were also often arrested for their actions.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Although the women achieved all of their goals, they receive 5 out of 6 points for success. This is because though the U.S. missiles were eventually removed, they remained on British soil for many years—until the Cold War had ended. This means that though the missiles were taken down, their dismantling cannot be completely attributed to the women. Other factors that caused the Cold War to end also contributed to the missiles’ eventual removal

Greenham Commons outside Newbury, England was purchased in 1939 by the Newbury District Council for the public use of Newbury inhabitants, including the collection of firewood. In 1941 this area was requisitioned by the Air Ministry for an airfield, which was later decommissioned. Despite the decommissioning of the airfield, public ownership of the land was not fully restored. Then in 1979 NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) bought the land from the British government for the building of a military base that would house 96 Tomahawk Ground Launched Cruise Missiles (GLCMs). This action by NATO was part of a larger Cold War strategy by the U.S. to deploy small mobile nuclear missiles at air force bases throughout Europe in the event of hostile action by the Soviet Union.

In response to the announcement of the housing of nuclear missiles there, four British women chained themselves to the fence of the Greenham Common airfield on September 5th, 1981. Just over a week earlier, these women and 40 others had set off from Cardiff City Hall to walk the 100 miles to the airfield. They called themselves the “Women for Life on Earth,” and though they had not yet defined what their protest would be, they were determined to campaign against the impending American missiles. The women were opposed to the installation of the missiles because of their foreign ownership, their use of common land, and, most importantly, because of the women’s opposition to any use of nuclear weapons.

Upon arrival at the Common, the first four women—inspired by suffragettes—chained themselves to the fence. The rest of the women, who had expected immediate arrest, were not quite sure of how to proceed. Then appeared the US. base commander from inside the Greenham compound. After the marchers presented him with a letter against the use of nuclear missiles, the base commander announced to the women that, as far as he was concerned, they could stay as long as they liked. The women decided to do just that. Twelve years of encampment and protest followed, and the women were ultimately successful in achieving their goal: the American missiles were dismantled and cleared from Greenham Common. Protesters spent the first few months of the campaign getting settled in at Greenham Common and trying to raise publicity for their cause. Their numbers wavered, at times dwindling to three people. However, they kept a small encampment, with tents and a fire, established outside the entrance to the Greenham Common base. Throughout the campaign, protesters were supported by family, friends, community members, Quaker groups, and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). Although the campaign was started by a small group of women, decisions were all made by consensus and there were no defined leaders. Crucially, in February of 1982, the campaign voted to become women only. Although they had been majority women in any case, the decision helped solidify the campaign’s identification with the feminist movement and differentiate it from other nuclear disarmament campaigns. The camp also evolved to contain several subset camps, each named after a different color of the rainbow. Each smaller camp had its own

distinct personality, and women formed strong relationships with the other members of their group. This helped maintain camp solidarity, and played a role in the empowerment of women that the campaign so strongly promoted.

The campaign's first big action took place on December 12th, 1982—the anniversary of NATO's decision to place U.S. missiles in Europe. Through chain letters, word of mouth, and networking among peace activists, the Greenham women spread the word that they wanted to arrange for a large protest. It was to be the first of large yearly 'gatherings' to mark the somber anniversary. They wanted to attempt to encircle the base through linking arms. Campaigners were worried that they might not have enough people, and instructed protestors to bring scarves to lengthen the chain. Much to their surprise, 35,000 women showed up to participate. They "Embraced the Base" and decorated the fence with photos, children's toys, and mementos. This hugely successful action was widely publicized and covered by the press. The action became a turning point in the campaign, and by 1983, there were dozens of regular Greenham campers, with hundreds more turning up on weekends.

Despite the campaign's wide publicity and endurance, installation of the missiles went ahead. The arrival of the missiles was announced for November of 1983, and the Greenham women planned accordingly. On October 29th, 1983, the campaigners organized a "Hallowe'en Party," complete with 'black cardigans'—code for bolt cutters. Over 1000 women, many dressed up as witches, cut down sections of the fence surrounding the base. The action was meant to symbolize the women's destruction of their own 'Berlin wall' and an attempt to get through to the military crew. In another symbolic move, during the December 12th 1983 anniversary gathering, 50,000 women held up mirrors to the military crews, forcing them to 'reflect' on what they were doing.

Although the installation of 95 American nuclear missiles was complete, the Greenham women persisted in their protest. In 1984, police began mass evictions of the camps. Yet, the women just kept on returning and rebuilding. 1984 also marked the beginning of 'Cruisewatch', a segment of the campaign focused specifically on the U.S. military's new training regime. As part of their preparation in case of attack, U.S. military crews were instructed to regularly disperse the missiles into the countryside surrounding the base. These dispersed missiles were meant to provide back-up in case Greenham Common were attacked. The Greenham women's Cruisewatch campaign tracked and publicized every single missile that was driven into the countryside over the next few years. If they could, protesters even attempted to block the missiles, at times lying on the ground in front of the vehicles. Protesters also regularly cut the fence surrounding the base, and a few ventured inside. The women used witty and imaginative tactics to gain publicity and shock the U.S. military crews. When cutting the gates, they might be dressed in children's clothes, holding teddy bears; they also splashed holy water on the gates and let snakes inside. The women used their 'gentle' image to their advantage, utilizing fanciful tactics that were bold and unusual.

The Greenham women kept up their encampment through 1987, when the first disarmament treaties were signed between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The first missiles were removed from Greenham in 1989, and the last in 1991. The campaign ended in 1993, when the majority of women began to leave. They had stayed on those extra years as protest against other nuclear weapon bases. There were a few women, though, who continued living at Greenham; these women were a continual reminder of the continued presence of, and potential destruction of, nuclear weapons in other parts of the world.

Though there were many causes for the eventual nuclear disarmament, the role played by the Greenham women and other anti-nuclear activists was vital. The peace movement brought the world's attention to the atrocities produced by nuclear weapons, and the Greenham women's peace camp was an important part of that process. The women's goal—to remove U.S. missiles from British soil—was fully accomplished. In addition, the camp succeeded in empowering not only women who participated in the campaign, but also women worldwide. The camp proved that women had the power to create lasting social change and defend human rights. According to Greenham women, being a part of the camp changed their lives forever. Also, the culture of peace campaigning in Britain, which had previously been male dominated, was revolutionized by Greenham women. In 2000, as the last of the Greenham women left, a commemorative sculpture was built at Greenham to recognize the historic camp. The women's endless courage and perseverance has become a symbol for peace and women's rights worldwide.

Research Notes

Influences:

The Greenham women were inspired in their protests by the suffragette women who fought for women's rights in the early 20th century. They were also inspired by the Committee of 100 (1961-68), an anti-hierarchical group campaigning for British unilateral nuclear disarmament, using non-violent direct action. (1)

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Additional Notes:

This campaign was researched separately by Arielle Bernhardt and Olivia Ensign in 2010. Their two cases were then combined on 16/05/2011 by Max Rennebohm.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Arielle Bernhardt and Olivia Ensign, 19/03/2010

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