

– towards a European campaign

[Back to table of content](#)

By Roel Stynen

On July 8th, 1996, the International Court of Justice declared “that the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law...”. This provided peace movements a new argument for the abolishment of nuclear weapons, and a legal basis for actions of civil disobedience against nuclear weapons. In Belgium, small actions of civil disobedience at NATO's headquarters and Kleine Brogel air force base were the start of a campaign, Bombspotting, that over the years pushed the item of nuclear weapons, and the legal duty to disarm, high on the public and political agenda.

At the start of this Bombspotting campaign, the issue of nuclear weapons was generally perceived as outdated, irrelevant, a Cold War remnant. Nuclear weapons were absent on the political agenda (absent at least in the open), and hardly an issue for the peace movement.

The nuclear weapons stored at Kleine Brogel air force base were indeed a dubious Cold War heritage from Belgium's commitment to NATO's nuclear strategy. But contrary to the general perception and to the willingness of politicians to avoid the debate, these nukes were far from irrelevant. The nuclear weapons deployed in Belgium, the Netherlands, UK, Germany, Italy and Turkey, made, and still make, an important part of NATO's military and political doctrines. Apart from being an obstacle for global nuclear disarmament, the deployment of nuclear weapons, and the fact that Belgian F16-pilots train to transport and use these weapons, also make the Belgian state accomplice to the preparation of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Far from irrelevant, indeed.

The absence of nuclear weapons on the public and political agenda was the major obstacle to overcome in the first phase of the Bombspotting campaign. The campaign started in 1997 with small nonviolent direct actions at NATO's political headquarters in Brussels, and Kleine Brogel air force base. Small groups trespassed, to carry out what they saw as their duty as citizen's inspectors: to search for evidence of the planning of crimes against humanity. At the time, international attention was focused on the UNSCOM inspectors, searching for evidence of the alleged production of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. But at the same time, all five permanent members of the UN Security Council possessed WMD's. Under NATO flag, these WMD's were also deployed in several European countries. The action model of citizen's inspections highlighted the hypocrisy of this situation.

Strengthened with the legal argument against nuclear weapons, and drawing on this resemblance with the UN weapons inspection teams, the Bombspotting actions had a very strong appeal. But more than the topic, it was the action model itself that accounted for its success. On April 16th, 2001, more than 1500 people participated in the action at Kleine Brogel. More than a thousand people got arrested.

For a relatively large part of the participants, Bombspotting was the first time to take part in direct action. From the outset, the ambition was to enable people to take an active role in the action without necessarily being involved in the preparation a long time before. A big effort from the part of the organizers concentrates exactly on that.

We do encourage people to get in contact with a regional group, and organise and actively promote NVDA trainings as a preparation to Bombspotting, but we keep participation open to 'the average citizen', not only to 'the professional activist'. This meant that at Bombspotting actions, a large structure is set up, involving hundreds of volunteers, to enable people to participate easily and without heavy engagement.

One important way in which we lowered the threshold for people to participate, was setting up local groups. These groups, consisting out of people from very different walks of life, brought the theme of nuclear

weapons and the call for direct action for nuclear disarmament out of the campaigner's meetings and onto the streets. We experienced that local mobilizing efforts were much more effective than the national promotion campaign by the office. Through working with local groups, we ensured that nearly everywhere potentially interested people could get into contact with people working on the campaign on the grassroots level, and have face-to-face contact.

Throughout the years, these local groups took more and more responsibilities in the preparation of the actions. Their role expanded from setting up mobilization campaigns, organising collective transport, and setting up trainings in nonviolent direct action, to taking up active roles in press work, police contacts, and concrete preparation of local action, as was the case in July 8th, 2006, exactly ten years after the International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinion on the legality nuclear weapons. Local groups prepared actions at 10 sites, related to NATO's nuclear policy. Local groups took a larger share in the action, and the volunteers could learn and acquire skills, usefull in campaigning, over the years.

One serious setback is that up till now it has proved very difficult to get the local groups involved in decisionmaking and campaign planning. The coordination groups and working groups are open to everyone interested, and there is continuous communication between different levels, but the campaign as a whole is planned in a rather small group, involving mainly paid staff.

Apart from the political goals of the campaign, the introduction of nonviolent direct action to a large and diverse public can be considered as a significant achievement in itself.

2005: the first cracks in NATO's nuclear policy

From the beginning on, direct action was combined with lobbying. Numerous parliamentary initiatives have been taken. In 2005 Bombspotting could very proudly announce a big political succes: both houses of parliament voted a resolution in which parliament demands the government to take steps to remove NATO's nuclear weapons from Belgian soil, as a step towards abolishment of nuclear weapons worldwide. The Belgian parliament was the first parliamentary organ in NATO countries to vote such a resolution. The resolution was part of what can be seen as the first cracks in NATO's nuclear policy. Around the same time, and under the impulse of the Belgian resolution, NATO's nuclear weapons were object of political debate in Germany, with the Minister of Defense in favour of putting the issue on NATO's official agenda. A similar debate took part Norway. Unfortunately, none of the nuclear sharing countries had the courage to support the Germans.

With this resolution voted, Bombspotting had somehow reached the maximum possible on the political level. From a purely political analysis, we had a choice between either repeting ourselves over and over and bump against the limits of what within our reach politically, or take the campaign to an international level.

International participation

For several years on, we had invited international activists to participate, but at this point we were faced with new challenges. How could we help create pressure on the NATO member state governments? The last word on that has not been said, we are still in a process of planning the further steps in our campaign. We are far from a truly international campaign, but there have been efforts and discussions that others might learn from.

One very common way to give a campaign international outreach is by inviting internationals to join in. I will not go into too much detail about what this involves on the practical level. Very basic things, such as food, accommodation, a place to have meetings, transport,... are easily overlooked, but become enormously important in the stressful situation that an action can be. Make sure the international participants have all the information they need to take decisions. Take language problems in account – e.g. when you have a home base telephone number or legal assistance, take care the people doing these tasks can handle different languages. Give the internationals time to accustom and to prepare for the action, both at home and close before the action. Run through the different phases of the international's stay and role in the action seen

through from the international participant's perspective. What information does he/she need? What could help him/her feel secure and comfortable? Also consider to meet with one or a few of your international guests before, to prepare this together.

An excellent example of an instrument designed exactly for this purpose is the “Faslane 365 Resource Pack” (www.faslane365.org) This booklet gives basic information on the purpose and political context of the year-long Faslane blockade, contains useful information groups need to autonomously prepare for participation, and offers lots of practical advice on mobilisation, tactics, training,...

In our experience, a nonviolent direct action training with the international participants proved to be very helpful. Trainings are an opportunity to go through action scenario's extensively and to prepare to handle problems and difficulties that might arise.

One can have the feeling that participation in actions abroad does not bring your own campaign much further. Moreover, it is time-consuming and might cost a lot of money. On the other hand, going there yourself can enhance the visibility of your own campaign internationally. It 's very often a very effective way of meeting people that you can work with in the future.

One example: the participation of French Greenpeace activists inspired them to take action against the development by the French army of new missiles, designed to carry nuclear weapons. In September, during the first large manifestation against the M51 missile, about 30 Bombspotters took part in the first Bombspotting-style citizen's inspection at the Centre d'Essais des Landes near Bordeaux. We gave advice and assistance in the preparation of the action, and Bombspotting NVDA trainers returned a few months after the action to give a 'training for trainers'.

But action abroad can never replace action in your own country. Therefore, again, it is of the utmost importance to think about what you expect from the involvement of internationals and from your own participation abroad.

You can think of ways to increase the significance of the international presence. At the Bombspotting XL action in 2005, where citizen's inspectors targeted four different sites related to nuclear weapons in Belgium, activists were present from all NATO member countries hosting NATO nuclear weapons: UK, US, Italy, Germany, Turkey, the Netherlands, plus activists from other countries, such as Finland, France, Greece, Portugal, Spain. Our press work drew attention specifically to this, and all of the international delegations did their own press work towards their respective countries. When working this way, it is not just a question of inviting internationals, let them participate and that 's it. A lot more work is necessary - coordinating press efforts, dividing roles before, during and after the action,...

November 2006: European Complaint action in over 50 cities

In the run-up to NATO's Riga summit in November 2006, Bombspotting and Greenpeace International joined efforts to organise a European complaint action. The summit had been announced months before as a milestone in the transformation of the transatlantic alliance.

We felt it was time to increase the pressure. Things started to shift in parliaments in several European countries, but so far state officials lacked the political courage to put the issue on the agenda. In the course of the transformation discussions within NATO, it's nuclear strategy would inevitably be discussed – probably late in the process, given that hardest things are kept for the last moment. This was a point where more pressure on the member states could make a difference.

Two times before, in 2002 and 2004, we had organised national Complaint Actions. They had been very successful and had proven to be significant steps forward for our campaign. On the action day, local groups all over the country gathered in their home town, have a short briefing and go to the local police office. There they filed an official complaint against our government because of the preparation of war crimes.

Over the years, thousand of complaints had been filed. They had all been neglected. Nevertheless the complaint actions meant a very strong political signal. They attracted significant media attention and helped in putting the issue on the discussion table. Through its very idea, it drew attention to the state of legal complicity our government is in. In 2002, this complaint day also worked as a mobilizing moment towards 'Get in SHAPE', the Bombspotting action at NATO's military headquarters SHAPE one month later. The action didn't need much preparation and the idea was very easy to explain. People could very easily join in. Moreover, it fitted in our direct action story: respectful of the normal channels open to us as citizens, we ask the legal system to investigate the crimes we report to the police. If they don't take action, we feel obliged to take responsibility to put an end to these crimes, through nonviolent direct action.

For these reasons, the complaint day was thought a good action model to try at an international level.

We launched the call to take part in our European complaint action more than half a year before the actual date. This allowed us to take time to contact potential partners, to introduce the idea to a wide range of groups (e.g. on the WRI Triennial conference). The long time running up to the action also allowed us to adapt our plans and message. For example, Greenpeace International only joined in 2 months before the launching of the action. This meant the call for action had a long time to get around, groups could take their time to discuss the idea. Very important was the fact that potential partners could fit the action in their own agenda, both in time and in terms of message. The complaints were online, adapted to the different legal and political context for each country. There was a common message, but groups had space to fit this message in their own story. For example, CND groups could refer to UK's own Trident nuclear weapons, Italian groups had the direct link to the nuclear weapons stored in Italy. We also provided a step-by-step manual online, so groups had very practical guidelines and tips at hand.

The local action, small as they sometimes were, were part of a bigger whole. There was continuous communication between the coordination group and the local contacts. The Italian Greenpeace contacts knew how things went with the CND groups in the UK or local MOC groups in Spain, and the other way round. This common framework was stressed by a final action in which we send a bailiff to NATO's Secretary General with a citizen's summon to remind him of his obligations under international law. The press work done about this referred to the complaints filed all over Europe.

It's very difficult to assess the impact of actions like these. Most actions were done by small groups and drew limited press coverage. They did not trigger an immediate political response, and we expect no legal consequence will ensue. But seen against the modest, and realistic, expectations we had ourselves, we were happy with the results. Legal complaints were filed in over 50 cities, in Germany, UK, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. These are all countries where campaigns for nuclear disarmament already existed. But the action was an opportunity for these groups to enscribe themselves in an international context. Off course, the same goes for Bombspotting. We clearly showed made our own public, media and politicians, that the internationalisation of our campaign had taken a start. From this point of view the action was also an excellent opportunity to gain visibility, and, the other way round, to discover what is moving in different countries, where can we find possible partners for future steps.

Planning ahead

At the time I'm writing this, looking back on the first steps in the internationalisation of our campaign, we are in a process of rethinking and planning the next steps. This is not an easy task, but I think you can not underestimate the importance of it. What do we expect from this internationalisation? What do we expect from it, and in what span of time? Can we estimate the time and energy that is needed to accomplish these goals? Do we have this energy? How will the international work fit in with our local visibility and regional groups? It will take us several discussions in the weeks ahead to assess these and other questions, to translate the answers into concrete steps in our campaigning. Things take time, and pushing doesn't always help.

To be continued...

Related content

[en](#)
[es](#)
[fr](#)
[de](#)

Comments

There are no comments on this article. Have you got something related to this topic, you'd like to say? Please feel free to be the first person to make a comment.

Add new comment

Your name

Email

Homepage

Language

English



Subject

Comment

[About text formats](#)

Save

Preview