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Article

Original Article

Transforming Discourse, Driving Change: Gendered Nuclear Identities and the Soviet Union's Shift to Disarmament in the 1980s

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Abstract

In the late 1980s, breaking with decades of aggressive nuclear armament, the Soviet Union changed the course of its nuclear policy to promoting arms control and reducing nuclear stockpiles. This significant policy shift requires examination to support ongoing efforts in disarmament. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine highlights the importance of strengthening disarmament initiatives and international dialogues on arms control. Rational deterrence explanations, predicated on the idea that states must possess and retain nuclear weapons to deter adversaries, become self-fulfilling prophecies and entangle states in perpetual security dilemmas. This article argues that transformative shifts in nuclear politics are contingent upon discursive reconfigurations of states' gendered nuclear identities. Employing a feminist poststructuralist lens, the analysis reveals how Mikhail Gorbachev's 'peace offensive' redefined Soviet nuclear identity by reshaping masculinities and constructing a cooperative, ethical and disarmament-oriented Self. This article highlights the importance of discursive shifts in advancing arms control and reimagining nuclear politics beyond entrenched militaristic and masculine norms.

Keywords

Identity, gender, arms control, nuclear disarmament, Soviet Union

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Résumé

À la fin des années 1980, rompant avec des décennies de politiques d'armement nucléaire agressives, l'Union soviétique a réorienté sa politique nucléaire vers la limitation des armements et la réduction des stocks nucléaires. Ce revirement politique majeur mérite d'être analysé à l'aune des efforts actuels de désarmement. L'invasion russe de l'Ukraine survenue en 2022 souligne l'importance de renforcer les initiatives de désarmement et de promouvoir les discussions internationales sur la maînnrise des armements. Les explications rationnelles de la dissuasion, fondées sur l'idée que les États doivent posséder et conserver des armes nucléaires afin de dissuader leurs adversaires, se transforment en prophéties autoréalisatrices et enferment les États dans de perpétuels dilemmes de sécurité. Le présent article soutient que les mutations de la politique nucléaire dépendent de la reconfiguration discursive des identités nucléaires genrées des États. À partir d'une perspective poststructuraliste féministe, l'analyse révèle comment l'« offensive de paix » de Mikhaïl Gorbatchev a redéfini l'identité nucléaire soviétique en remodelant les masculinités et en construisant un self coopératif, éthique et porté vers le désarmement. Cet article souligne l'importance de renouveler les discours pour faire progresser la maîtrise des armements et réinventer les politiques nucléaires en dépassant des normes militaristes et masculines profondément ancrées.

Mots-clés

identité, genre, contrôle des armements, désarmement nucléaire, Union soviétique

Resumen

A finales de los ochenta, rompiendo con décadas de armamento nuclear agresivo, la Unión Soviética cambió el rumbo de su política nuclear para pasar a promover el control armamentístico y la reducción de los arsenales nucleares. El importante cambio en esta política requiere ser revisado para apoyar los esfuerzos actuales de desarme. La invasión rusa de Ucrania en 2022 pone de relieve la importancia de reforzar las iniciativas de desarme y los diálogos internacionales sobre el control de armas. Las explicaciones de disuasión racional, basadas en la idea de que los Estados tienen que poseer y mantener armas nucleares para disuadir a sus adversarios, se convierten en profecías autocumplidas y condicionan a los estados a enfrentar dilemas de seguridad perpetuos. Este artículo argumenta que los cambios transformadores en las políticas nucleares están supeditados a reconfiguraciones discursivas de las identidades nucleares de género de los estados. Empleando un lente feminista posestructuralista, el análisis revela cómo la «ofensiva de paz» de Mijaíl Gorbachov redefinió la identidad nuclear soviética mediante la reformulación de masculinidades y la construcción de un Yo cooperativo, ético y orientado al desarme. Este artículo destaca la importancia de los cambios discursivos a la hora de avanzar en el control de armas y reimaginar las políticas nucleares más allá de las arraigadas normas militaristas y masculinas.

Palabras clave

identidad, género, control de armas, desarme nuclear, Unión Soviética

Introduction

'Why flex muscles needlessly?' asked Mikhail Gorbachev in his interview with *TIME Magazine*. 'Why stage noisy shows and transfer the methods of domestic struggles to

the relations between two nuclear powers? In them the language of strength is useless and dangerous'.[1] Why indeed? The global nuclear order is currently in a turbulent state, characterised by the display of 'flexed muscles', pervasive uncertainty and deep-seated insecurity. The lessons learned from the harrowing close calls of the Cold War appear to have evaporated, as the nuclear disarmament community finds itself once again grappling with escalating tensions between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) member states. These tensions have been exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the renewed fears of nuclear use.[2] To compound matters, the already fragile nuclear arms control regime is at risk of collapsing, as Russian President Vladimir Putin suspended Russia's participation in the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in February 2023.[3] This treaty, which stands as the sole remaining agreement governing arms control between Russia and the United States, now hangs precariously. Adding to the mounting uncertainties, in March 2024, the Russian government transferred tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, thereby intensifying nuclear risks and heightening the atmosphere of unpredictability.[4]

The current unfolding developments stress the continuous imperative of deepening our insights into the motivations that prompt states to possess and advance nuclear weaponry. These endeavours are intrinsically linked with strengthening disarmament initiatives and maintaining ongoing international dialogues on arms control. As bleak as things may look, change is possible. This article argues that, decoupled from the necessity of sweeping geopolitical or structural overhauls, change could be initiated by shifts in discourse. It is thus instructive to revisit a moment in nuclear history, in which the dangerous and seemingly intractable competition between two nuclear superpowers eased off, offering a glimmer of hope to anti-nuclear activists.

The turning point in question refers to Gorbachev's efforts to lead arms control and nuclear disarmament initiatives and work towards the de-escalation of nuclear tensions

1. Mikhail Gorbachev, 'An Interview with Gorbachev: Candid Views About US-Soviet Relations and His Goals for His People', *TIME Magazine*, 9 September 1985, p. 4. Available at: https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,959753-1,00.html. Last accessed August 2, 2023.
2. Lauren Sukin, 'Rattling the Nuclear Saber: What Russia's Nuclear Threats Really Mean', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023. Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/05/04/rattling-nuclear-saber-what-russia-s-nuclear-threats-really-mean-pub-89689. Last accessed June 6, 2023.
3. Heather Williams, 'Russia Suspends New START and Increases Nuclear Risks', CSIS Critical Questions, 2023. Available at: https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-suspends-new-start-and-increases-nuclear-risks. Last accessed June 6, 2023.
4. Jack Detsch and Robbie Gramer, 'Russia's Nuclear Weapons Are Now in Belarus', Foreign Policy, 2024. Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/14/russia-nuclear-weapons-belarus-putin/. Last accessed September 17, 2024.

with the United States in the mid- to late-1980s. While Gorbachev's 'new thinking' and nuclear politics have been discussed at length by historians and International Relations (IR) scholars, there is little research that examines the gendered dynamics at work. I employ a feminist poststructuralist approach to argue that *transformative shifts in nuclear politics are contingent upon discursive reconfigurations of states' gendered nuclear identities.* Anchoring these identities in ethical considerations of human security, peace and cooperation creates a conducive environment for concrete policy actions on nuclear arms control and stockpile reduction. I understand gender as a central category of power, which encapsulates the discursive constructions of masculinity and femininity as a complex system of differential signs, serving to reinforce specific identities and facilitate political action.[5] In line with the work of Connell, Duncanson and Hooper, I question the notion that change necessitates the abandonment of masculine identities, and instead highlight *the coexistence of plural and changeable masculinities that yield diverse policy avenues.*[6] The way in which states negotiate their masculine identities in relation to Others underpins the possibility of change in their nuclear policies. I draw on poststructuralism to conceptualise nuclear identity as discursive, relational and mutually constitutive with policy, moving beyond simple causality in understanding the interplay between identity and policy. This approach reveals how identities operate within discourses and legitimise policies, entwining ideas and material factors. It unveils the mechanisms that render certain actions possible while constraining others.

This article examines how the shift in Soviet nuclear politics was articulated through discourse and explores the policy options it enabled. This pursuit deepens our comprehension of the mechanisms that guide states' choices regarding nuclear weapons. The gendered dynamics of identity constructions in the Soviet Union during the Cold War and its significance to nuclear policy have been largely overlooked by feminist and poststructuralist IR literature. My contribution addresses this gap by theoretically and empirically expanding poststructuralist and feminist interrogations of nuclear politics. First, I develop the concept of 'nuclear identity' to ground my theoretical approach. Second, I empirically expound upon the configurations of nuclear identity formation that transpired on 'the other side' of the Iron Curtain and investigate how discourses function to facilitate shifts in nuclear policy.

Addressing this gap is significant because it reveals the transformative potential that exists even within seemingly rigid masculine constructions of nuclear identity. By analysing how Soviet official discourse shifted from competition to cooperation, this article

5. Carol Cohn, Felicity Hill and Sara Ruddick, 'The Relevance of Gender for Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction', The Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, No. 38, 2005, p. 2. Available at: https://genderandsecurity.org/sites/default/files/the_relevance_of_gender_for_eliminating_weapons_of_mass_destruction_-_cohn_hill_ruddick.pdf. Last accessed August 29, 2023; Emma Rosengren, 'Gendering Sweden's Nuclear Renunciation: A Historical Analysis', *International Affairs* 98, no. 4 (2022): 1233.

6. R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2005); Claire Duncanson, 'Hegemonic Masculinity and the Possibility of Change in Gender Relations', *Men and Masculinities* 18, no. 2 (2015): 231–48; Charlotte Hooper, *Manly States: Masculinities, International Relations, and Gender Politics* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2001).

illustrates that while nuclear identities are steeped in masculinity, they are not static or impervious to change. Poststructuralist and feminist approaches serve as critical interventions and examine the fluidity of these identities and their role in enabling policy shifts. This challenges conventional understandings of nuclear politics and opens space for envisioning policy transformations in nuclear arms control and disarmament.

The article proceeds in four sections. In the first section, I engage with existing poststructuralist and feminist interrogations of nuclear politics; define 'nuclear identity', highlighting its discursive, relational and gendered nature; and outline methodological considerations guiding my poststructuralist discourse analysis. In the second section, I provide an overview of the prevailing constructions of Soviet nuclear identity that existed prior to Gorbachev's tenure. This serves as a contextual backdrop for the transformative changes that unfolded in Soviet nuclear politics. The third section explores nuclear identity constructions during Gorbachev's leadership, with a specific focus on the aspects of identity that went through profound transformations, particularly in the realm of masculinity. Finally, in the conclusion, I draw upon the insights gained and reflect on the implications and lessons that emerge for advocates of nuclear disarmament.

Feminist and Poststructuralist Interrogations of Nuclear Politics

For many decades, IR scholars predominantly viewed the issues of nuclear proliferation, non-proliferation and disarmament through the rationalist assertions of objectivity, universalism and materialism. These were primarily rooted in various strands of realism. The focus on security, rational deterrence, states' power-maximising practices and bureaucratic politics dominated thinking about nuclear weapons during the Cold War.[7] However, the work of constructivist scholars, critical peace researchers and feminist anti-nuclear activists in the 1980s raised questions about realist security-focused understandings of states' nuclear behaviour.[8] This paved the way for critical IR to re-imagine

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7. See, for example: Robert P. Berman and John C. Baker, *Soviet Strategic Forces: Requirements and Responses* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1983); Bernard Brodie, 'The Anatomy of Deterrence', *World Politics* 11, no. 2 (1959): 173–91; Bernard Brodie, *Escalation and the Nuclear Option* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966); Robert Jervis, 'Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma', *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167–214; Robert Jervis, 'Deterrence and Perception', *International Security* 7, no. 3 (1982): 3–30; Thomas C. Schelling, 'Nuclear Strategy in Europe', *World Politics* 14, no. 3 (1962): 421–32; Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966); Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961); Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better: Introduction', *The Adelphi Papers* 21, no. 171 (1981); Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Nuclear Myths and Political Realities' (1981): 1–32, *The American Political Science Review* 84, no. 3 (1990): 731–45.
8. See, for example: Shampa Biswas, *Nuclear Desire: Power and the Postcolonial Nuclear Order* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1987); Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989); Christine Sylvester, 'Some Dangers in Merging Feminist and Peace Projects', *Alternatives* 12, no. 4 (1987): 493–509.

nuclear politics as a discursive domain underpinned by gender dynamics where states actively construct and fortify their identities.

The relationship between state identity constructions and nuclear weapons is well-established in constructivist literature.[9] While much of this literature delves into the *why* behind states' decisions to acquire or renounce nuclear weapons, my focus here is on the mechanisms by which such identity constructions unfold, thereby addressing the *how* aspect of this relationship. This helps to explore a complex interplay of facets that constitute identities (e.g. beliefs, gendered hierarchies, representations of Self and Other) and to investigate how these facets enabled Gorbachev's 'peace offensive' in the 1980s.

Poststructuralist and feminist IR approaches shed light on the *how* aspect of the interplay between states' conceptualisations of Self and nuclear armaments. These contributions emphasise the role of discourse in comprehending the dynamics of nuclear proliferation and disarmament. Notably, feminist perspectives highlight the profoundly gendered nature of state leaders' practices pertaining to nuclear weapons.[10] A critical

9. See, for example: Jacques E. C. Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); William J. Long and Suzette R. Grillot, 'Ideas, Beliefs, and Nuclear Policies: The Cases of South Africa and Ukraine', *The Nonproliferation Review* 7, no. 1 (2000): 24–40; Nick Ritchie, 'Relinquishing Nuclear Weapons: Identities, Networks and the British Bomb', *International Affairs* 86, no. 2 (2010): 465–87; Nick Ritchie, 'Valuing and Devaluing Nuclear Weapons', *Contemporary Security Policy* 34, no. 1 (2013): 146–73; Nick Ritchie, 'Nuclear Identities and Scottish Independence', *The Nonproliferation Review* 23, no. 5–6 (2016): 653–75. Scott D. Sagan, 'Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?' *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1996): 54–86; Christopher A. Stevens, 'Identity Politics and Nuclear Disarmament: The Case of Ukraine', *Nonproliferation Review* 15, no. 1 (2008): 43–70.

10. See, for example: Lorraine Bayard de Volo, 'Masculinity and the Cuban Missile Crisis: Gender as Pre-Emptive Deterrent', *International Affairs* 98, no. 4 (2022): 1211–29; Shine Choi and Catherine Eschle, 'Rethinking Global Nuclear Politics, Rethinking Feminism', *International Affairs* 98, no. 4 (2022): 1129–47; Carol Cohn, 'Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals', *Signs* 12, no. 4 (1987): 687–18; Carol Cohn, 'Wars, Wimps, and Women: Talking Gender and Thinking War', in *Gendering War Talk*, eds. Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 227–46; Cohn et al., 'Relevance of Gender'; Runa Das, 'Nation, Gender and Representations of (In)securities in Indian Politics: Secular-Modernity and Hindutva Ideology', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 15, no. 3 (2008): 203–21; Runa Das, 'State, Identity and Representations of Nuclear (In)securities in India and Pakistan', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 45, no. 2 (2010): 146–69; Runa Das, 'A Post-Colonial Analysis of India–United States Nuclear Security: Orientalism, Discourse, and Identity in International Relations', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 52, no. 6 (2017): 741–59. Claire Duncanson and Catherine Eschle, 'Gender and the Nuclear Weapons State: A Feminist Critique of the UK Government's White Paper on Trident', *New Political Science* 30, no. 4 (2008): 545–63; Claire Duncanson and Catherine Eschle, 'Bombs, Brexit Boys and Bairns: A Feminist Critique on Nuclear (In)security in the Integrated Review', BASIC, 2021. Available at: https://basicint.org/bombs-brexit-boys-and-bairns-a-feminist-critique-of-nuclear-insecurity-in-the-integrated-review/. Last accessed June 15, 2023; Catherine Eschle, 'Gender and the Subject of (Anti-)nuclear Politics: Revisiting Women's Campaigning Against the Bomb', *International Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2013): 713–24; Rosengren, 'Gendering Sweden's Nuclear Renunciation'; Hebatalla Taha, 'Atomic Aesthetics: Gender, Visualization and Popular Culture in Egypt', *International Affairs* 98, no. 4 (2022): 1169–87.

examination of the interplay between gendered ideas, language and behaviour shows that states persistently attribute masculine qualities to powerful weaponry, reinforcing entrenched hierarchies that privilege traditional masculine attributes over feminine ones. However, this gendered dynamic is neither universal nor limited to states' engagement with nuclear proliferation. States may ascribe masculine attributes to nuclear restraint and disarmament, as seen in the case of Sweden.[11] In addition, states do not necessarily need to construct nuclear weapons as masculine and may employ feminine imagery to depict nuclear technology and to continuously reinforce military power.[12] Recent feminist scholarship reminds us that by unravelling and deconstructing these complex hierarchies and the origins of the nuclearised world, we can begin rethinking the global nuclear order.[13]

In a related manner, poststructuralist analyses emphasise the hierarchical nature of identities, where states construct their own identity through juxtaposition with an external Other often perceived as threatening.[14] Nuclear weapons can be seen as assuming a legitimate and indispensable role in safeguarding states' self-defined identities. In comparison to constructivism, a poststructuralist approach moves away from the assumption of pre-given identities taking into consideration their discursive nature and the performative–constitutive relationship with policy.[15] Poststructuralism problematises the presumed causal relationship between identity and policy, instead positing that identities are not only constitutive of states' policies but also shaped by them.[16] In this nuanced understanding, states' identities and policy choices are intertwined.

A significant gap in feminist and poststructuralist IR literature lies in the relative underdevelopment of gendered analyses of Soviet nuclear politics during the Cold War.

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11. Rosengren, 'Gendering Sweden's Nuclear Renunciation', 1247.
12. Taha, 'Atomic Aesthetics', 1186.
13. Choi and Eschle, 'Rethinking Global Nuclear Politics', 1147.
14. See, for example: Richard K. Ashley, 'The Geopolitics of Geopolitical Space: Towards a Critical Social Theory of International Politics', *Alternatives* 12, no. 4 (1987): 403–34; Eric J. Ballbach, 'Constructions of Identity and Threat in North Korea's "Diplomatic War" Discourse', *Tiempo devorado* 2, no. 2 (2015): 139–61; Eric J. Ballbach, 'North Korea's Emerging Nuclear State Identity: Discursive Construction and Performative Enactment', *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 14, no. 3 (2016): 391–414; David Campbell, 'Global Inscription: How Foreign Policy Constitutes the United States', *Alternatives* 15, no. 3: 263–86; David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); William E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Simon Dalby, 'Geopolitical Discourse: The Soviet Union as Other', *Alternatives* 13, no. 4 (1988): 415–42; Simon Dalby, *Creating the Second Cold War: The Discourse of Politics* (London: Pinter Publishers Limited, 1990); R. B. J. Walker, 'Culture, Discourse, Insecurity', *Alternatives* 11, no. 4 (1986): 485–504; R. B. J. Walker, 'Security, Sovereignty, and the Challenge of World Politics', *Alternatives* 15, no. 1 (1990): 3–27.
15. Ballbach, 'North Korea's Emerging Nuclear State Identity', 392.
16. Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 10.

While much work has been done on western contexts, the Soviet case remains underexplored, except for the Cuban Missile Crisis.[17] This omission is critical because it limits our understanding of the broader mechanisms that shape nuclear identity formation and policy shifts. As such, addressing this gap offers a more comprehensive framework for analysing nuclear politics globally.

Nuclear Identity

It is within feminist and poststructuralist understandings of nuclear politics that I conceptualise 'nuclear identity' as a constitutive part of a broader state identity, which encompasses political elites' beliefs concerning the historical nexus between power, masculinity, recognition and nuclear armaments. Nuclear identity, as conceptualised here, epitomises how these elites perceive their state as a power vis-à-vis the possession or non-possession of nuclear weapons. At its core, nuclear identity operates within the realms of discursivity and relationality. Its discursive nature emanates from its construction and articulation through words and narratives by political elites within the discourse surrounding nuclear weapons. Such discourse serves the purpose of rationalising and legitimising decisions and practices related to nuclear proliferation, arms control and disarmament.

Arguably, nuclear identities wield heightened influence owing to the rarity of nuclear use in comparison to other modalities of coercive and security statecraft. This scarcity finds its origin in the historical reality that the United States stands as the sole actor to have engaged nuclear weapons in active warfare. The existence of nuclear identities rests solely upon their perpetual articulation within discourse and their concretisation through policy actions. I view the scope of Soviet nuclear weapons discourse as the articulation of ideas concerning both Soviet and other states' nuclear weapons, their intrinsic value to the Soviet state identity, and the vocalisation of Soviet intentions and practices pertaining to nuclear proliferation and/or disarmament via the formulation of official doctrines governing foreign affairs and security policies.

A state's nuclear identity is relational, because it is defined in relation to what it is not, through relations of difference. The foundations of self-definition are grounded in a continuous process of self-assessment and comparison to key spatial, temporal and ethical Others. Difference assumes a central position in the construction of nuclear identity. Essentially, language operates by establishing meanings through a complex interplay of differential signs or juxtapositions, thereby creating binary oppositions and hierarchies where one element is valued over the Other.[18] These systems of signs are inherently unstable and thus necessitate reinforcement. It is through the deliberate articulation of difference that meaning temporarily attains stability – 'Identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into Otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty'.[19] This conversion process contributes to what Campbell calls a 'well-established

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17. See, for example: Bayard de Volo, 'Masculinity and the Cuban Missile Crisis'.

18. Ben Agger, 'Critical Theory, Poststructuralism, Postmodernism: Their Sociological Relevance', *Annual Review of Sociology* 17 (1991): 113; Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 19.

19. Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, 64.

discursive economy of identity/difference', which in its turn triggers exclusionary practices of boundary-making (policies) and additionally reinforces the representation of fear and danger in society.[20] Consequently, throughout history, political leaders have legitimised their security policies by constructing spatial Others as threatening to the security of the national Self.[21] The ideological animosity prevalent throughout the Cold War era serves as a striking exemplification of extreme spatial Othering.

It is important to avoid defining identity construction solely through radical or extreme forms, as this risks portraying discourses as static and unchangeable.[22] Identities are not exclusively constructed in relation to antagonistic or drastically dissimilar external Others. The notion of difference can assume more ambiguous forms with varying degree of Otherness.[23] Moreover, apart from the spatial dimension, difference can manifest in the temporal and ethical dimensions of identity formation. Temporal themes, for instance, encompass notions of continuity, transformation, development and progress. Within this framework, the articulation of difference may produce hierarchies and binary oppositions where the Other is positioned as inferior or superior to the Self.[24] Representational practices establish identities, and binary oppositions serve as valid means to classify certain parts of the world and justify policy directions, with the Self often assuming an a priori position of superiority and greater advancement.[25] Temporal identity constructions need not be centred solely on an external Other but can also focus on the temporal evolution of the Self that strives towards self-improvement and self-refinement.[26] This highlights the perpetual process of exploration and refinement experienced by both the Self and the Other.

Finally, aside from spatial and temporal dimensions, difference may also be articulated through an ethical dimension of identity construction. Nuclear powers often legitimise their policy choices through the discursive constructions of ethics, morality, responsibility and commitment to defend and uphold universal values.[27] Such constructions facilitate the transcendence of insular, self-centred national and strategic concerns, thus elevating them to a higher moral realm. This invokes a particular call for action and entwines the spatial and temporal identities of the parties involved as well as those being urged to intervene.[28]

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20. Campbell, *Writing Security*, 145.
21. Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 38.
22. Ibid., 41.
23. Ibid., 39.
24. Roxanne Lynn Doty, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3–4.
25. Ibid.
26. See, for example: Karl Gustafsson, 'Temporal Othering, De-securitisation, and Apologies: Understanding Japanese Security Policy Change', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 23 (2020): 511–34; Andrew R. Hom and Brent J. Steele, 'Open Horizons: The Temporal Visions of Reflexive Realism', *International Studies Review* 12, no. 2 (2010): 271–300; Ole Wæver, 'European Security Identities', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 34, no. 1 (1996): 103–32.
27. Duncanson and Eschle, 'Gender and the Nuclear Weapons State', 554; Ritchie, 'Relinquishing Nuclear Weapons', 470.
28. Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 50.

To build upon the preceding discussion of feminist interrogations of nuclear politics, a nuclear identity often assumes a masculine character and tends to be rooted in notions of masculinity that state leaders associate with the possession or, in some cases, non-possession of nuclear arms. States have traditionally navigated various manifestations of masculinity to hold on to formidable weaponry while simultaneously crafting a self-image imbued with ethics, moral rectitude and responsibility.[29] However, as the case of Gorbachev demonstrates, masculinities are not homogenous, static or predictable. This emphasises the imperative of avoiding the treatment of 'masculine' and 'feminine' as monolithic categories; discourses within the realm of international politics produce diverse forms of masculinity and femininity contingent upon circumstances, subject to transformation and susceptible to contestation.[30] Thus, the meaning ascribed to masculinity and femininity remains fluid, non-static and deeply embedded in historical contingencies, thereby allowing for potential shifts in interpretation. The Cold War itself can be seen as a testament to this dynamism and is:

> best understood as involving not simply a contest between two superpowers, each trying to absorb as many countries as possible into its own orbit, but also a series of contests within each of those societies over the definitions of masculinity and femininity that would sustain or dilute that rivalry.[31]

Furthermore, a crucial aspect of challenging entrenched masculinities necessitates replacing hierarchical and radically oppositional relations between the Self and the Other with relationships characterised by equality, mutual respect and empathy.[32] By fulfilling this condition, the potential for transformative changes becomes possible, even in the traditionally rigid and militaristic settings. Duncanson's argument highlights the significance of reshaping relational dynamics of identity construction as an important step towards breaking free from traditional and limiting notions of masculinity within military spheres. This paves the way for progressive and transformative shifts in these contexts.

Methodological Considerations

These theoretical considerations inform the interpretive strategy that I employ in subsequent sections to conduct a poststructuralist discourse analysis. Since poststructuralism assumes that all knowledge is discursively situated, the aim of discourse analysis is 'to examine how certain representations underlie the production of knowledge and identities and how these representations make various courses of action possible'.[33] To put simply, the purpose is not to capture 'truths' or fact check, but to offer an interpretation of events.

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29. Cohn et al., 'Relevance of Gender'; Duncanson and Eschle, 'Gender and the Nuclear Weapons State', 554–5.
30. Hooper, *Manly States*, 4.
31. Cynthia Enloe, *The Morning After: Sexual Politics and the End of the Cold War* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 18–9.
32. Duncanson, 'Hegemonic Masculinity', 244.
33. Doty, *Imperial Encounters*, 5.

Poststructuralist discourse analysis, as employed here, does not adhere to rigid methodological frameworks but instead focuses on the relational and contextual construction of meaning. The selected texts for the main analytical section include Gorbachev's speeches, writings, interviews and official statements from 1985 to 1991, including major international addresses and domestic policy statements. These texts were produced around pivotal moments in arms control and disarmament negotiations, which helps illuminate the performative–constitutive relationship between identity and policy. While mainly using primary sources translated into English, I performed my own translations where necessary. Poststructuralist discourse analysis does not rely on a fixed number of texts. It cannot turn to statistical significance as a measure for how many texts should be used.[34] Instead, the texts were chosen because they met three of the important criteria highlighted by Hansen: they had clear articulations of identities and/or policies; they were widely read; and they had a formal authority signalling the importance of status and power.[35]

I analyse selected texts by identifying prominent constructions of the Other and the Self, evaluating the degree of Otherness and examining constructions of space, time and ethics. To do so, I integrate the insights of Doty's and Milliken's predicate analysis and Hansen's logic of 'linking and differentiation'.[36] I look for the ways in which the key subjects/objects with which I am concerned – for example, nuclear weapons/proliferation, the Soviet Union, the United States, disarmament, arms control – are predicated upon particular signifiers, which attach certain attributes to them. I also explore how these subjects/objects are positioned relative to one another (linking and differentiation).

Additionally, I examine masculinising and feminising practices by looking at how constructions of Self, Other, and nuclear weapons and policies are linked to or differentiated from the terms that are traditionally understood as masculine or feminine. For example, linking subjects/objects/practices to power and superiority often masculinises them, while associating inferiority with feminising practices. Importantly, I do not conflate all privilege and power with masculinity or all lack of power with femininity, as these categories are fluid and contested.[37] Rather than imposing strict categories on the data, themes emerged inductively from the analysed texts. This inductive approach allows the analysis to remain flexible and aligns with poststructuralist principles that emphasise the fluidity and historical contingency of identity construction.

In the forthcoming section, I employ poststructuralist discourse analysis informed by the above interpretive strategy to briefly examine Soviet nuclear identity constructions

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34. Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 86.
35. Ibid., 85.
36. Roxanne Lynn Doty, 'Foreign Policy as Social Construction: A Post-Positivist Analysis of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy in the Philippines', *International Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (1993): 306–307; Jennifer Milliken, 'The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods', *European Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 2 (1999): 231–2; Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 41–6.
37. Hooper, *Manly States*, 4.

prior to Gorbachev's tenure. This illuminates the context from which transformative shifts in nuclear politics emerged, focusing on how Soviet leaders constructed various forms of otherness and masculinity.

Soviet Nuclear Identity (1945–85)

Catch Up and Overtake

The emergence of Soviet nuclear identity can be seen as an integral part of the broader effort to solidify the Soviet Union's state identity in the aftermath of World War II. In this context, the Soviets deliberately constructed the Self as an exceptional superpower and envisioned themselves as the future global centre of Marxism-Leninism.[38] 'Catch up and overtake' emerged as one of the dominant political discourses during Joseph Stalin's rule, and it helped to continuously enable and legitimise a large scale of Soviet industrial and military build-up along with territorial expansion. Stalin emphasised the significance of competing and necessarily winning the competition against the United States by means of temporal Othering:

> you must in the shortest period possible liquidate [our socialist homeland's] backwardness and develop real Bolshevik tempo in the task of building up its socialist establishment. There are no other ways. This is why on the eve of October Lenin said: 'It's either death, or to catch up and overtake the advanced capitalist countries'.[39]

Nuclear armaments served as instrumental tools for the validation of Soviet magnificence and the embodiment of a masculine ideal. However, the simultaneous US advances in the nuclear realm, coupled with the devastating bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, posed a direct threat to Soviet identity, rendering it vulnerable and presenting it as inferior in comparison to the masculinity projected by the United States. The Soviet officials interpreted the bombings of Japan as an assault on their state, thereby necessitating swift development of their own nuclear arsenal.[40] This imperative extended beyond the realm of material security, encompassing the preservation and stabilisation of their constructed superpower identity. In 1949, the Soviets successfully conducted their first nuclear test and embarked on a four-decade-long nuclear arms race.

Soviet nuclear identity, in addition, was constructed as espousing a commitment to peace in stark contrast to the perceived 'aggressive' and 'warmongering' nature attributed to the United States. These constructed narratives served to legitimise the acquisition of Soviet nuclear weapons; they positioned the Soviets as actors driven by ethical objectives such as the preservation of peace and the salvation of the world

38. Kevork K. Oskanian, 'A Very Ambiguous Empire: Russia's Hybrid Exceptionalism', *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 1 (2018): 35.

39. Joseph Stalin, 'O Zadatchakh Hozyaystvennikov [On the Tasks of Business Executives]', in *Works, Vol. 13, Joseph Stalin*, 1931. Available at: https://petroleks.ru/stalin/13-18.php. Last accessed June 16, 2023.

40. David Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb: The Soviet Union and Atomic Energy 1939–1956* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 132–3.

from malevolent imperial forces. According to this narrative, the Soviet Union, possessing a sophisticated understanding of diplomatic language, stood as a counterforce against the potential outbreak of war, which the monolithic power of the United States, lacking such comprehension, would unleash if its atomic monopoly remained unchallenged. In his interview to the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* in 1951, Stalin stated:

> Would it not be more correct to say that matters are directly the opposite, that it is the interests of preserving peace that require first of all the liquidation of such a monopoly and then the unconditional prohibition of the atomic weapon too? I think that the proponents of the atom bomb may agree to the prohibition of the atomic weapon only if they see that they are no longer monopolists.[41]

Consequently, Soviet nuclear weapons were deliberately depicted as instruments of peace, while American weaponry assumed the role of a genuine peril threatening global stability.

We'll All Die

Following Stalin's death in 1953 and the rise of Nikita Khrushchev to power, the Soviet leadership continued to construct an assertively competitive nuclear identity, which enabled substantial endeavours into the development of increasingly powerful nuclear armaments. The advent of the hydrogen bomb in 1953, accompanied by the realisation of its boundless explosive potential, compelled Soviet officials to view nuclear warfare as an existential menace, prompting a transition from 'the capitalists will die' to 'we'll all die'.[42] This change of perspective was rooted in the Soviet authorities' embrace of the doctrine of mutual assured destruction (MAD), which reshaped the essence of the 'catch up and overtake' mentality. Khrushchev was convinced that having a strong arsenal for retaliatory strikes against a US attack would deter any thought of assaulting the Soviet Union, leading him to believe that only 'insane imperialists' would entertain such an idea. He stated: 'There are only two ways, either peaceful coexistence or the most destructive war in history. There is no third way'.[43]

Arguably, the acceptance of MAD should have logically fostered a more measured view of nuclear deterrence, potentially slowing the arms race. However, both sides continued to escalate, increasing missile numbers and their destructive capabilities. While MAD theoretically removed the rationale for further nuclear armament, the reinforcement of the Soviet competitive nuclear identity sustained the arms race and drove policy decisions marked by assertiveness, nuclear sabre-rattling and brinkmanship. The Soviet

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41. Joseph Stalin, *Prohibition of Atomic Weapons*, For Peaceful Coexistence: Postwar Interviews (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1951). Available at: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1951/10/06.htm. Last accessed June 18, 2023.

42. Campbell Craig and Sergey Radchenko, 'MAD, Not Marx: Khrushchev and the Nuclear Revolution', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 1–2 (2018): 214.

43. Nikita Khrushchev, 'Speech to 20th Congress of the CPSU', 24–25 February 1956. Available at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/khrushchev/1956/02/24.htm. Last accessed August 8, 2023.

leadership persevered in nurturing the image of a nuclear superpower, substantiating their claims of supremacy and invincibility vis-à-vis capitalist nations. The Self's stark contrast and innate superiority over the Other defined the Soviet nuclear identity. This culminated in Khrushchev's construction of the Soviet Union as a state that ultimately caught up with and overtook the United States. He stated: 'If Lenin would arise, he would have been pleased to see his cause become so strong, that the capitalistic world admits being unable to win the war against the socialist countries'.[44]

Thus, the doctrine of MAD transcended its mere role as a deterrent or constraint for the Soviet Union; it functioned as a mechanism through which the Soviets could construct and fortify the very identity of invincibility that they embodied.

Soviet nuclear identity during Khrushchev's era assumed a pronounced machismo, marked by a display of hyper-masculinity. The Soviets elevated their status in the contest of missile might and used comparisons with their US counterparts to showcase their power and capability. In 1959, Khrushchev remarked: 'You want to threaten us indirectly. We have powerful weapons, too, and ours are better than yours if you want to compete'.[45] Embracing the tenets of MAD while acknowledging one's inherent vulnerability was tantamount to conceding frailty. Khrushchev's often bombastic rhetoric found its anchor in showcasing his willingness and preparedness to use nuclear weaponry – an incessant reiteration that underpinned the Soviet 'manhood': 'you won't get anywhere without taking a risk. We cannot beg for anything from our opponents – we can only grab'.[46] The superpower-laden macho nuclear identity centred on radical spatial Othering. It enabled risky decisions during the late 1950s and early 1960s such as the Soviet detonation of the 50-Mt '*Tsar bomba*' in 1961 – an unmatched showcase of nuclear might with little strategic value.[47] Amid this, the Berlin crisis unfolded, dividing the city for nearly three decades, followed by the near-catastrophic Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Bayard de Volo's gender analysis of the latter reveals that Khrushchev's emotional behaviour and ultimate backing down and removal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba delegitimised and emasculated him in the eyes of many. Despite Khrushchev's efforts to ease tensions with the United States, he lost power in 1964. Bayard de Volo largely attributes this to the feminisation of Khrushchev as a leader.[48] The Cuban Missile Crisis reveals how deviations from dominant masculine norms – here seen in Khrushchev's

44. Nikita Khrushchev, 'Speech by Comrade Khrushchev at the 6th PUWP CC Plenum', Warsaw, 20 March 1965, Wilson Centre Digital Archive. Available at: https://digitalarchive.wilson-center.org/document/111920. Last accessed August 29, 2023.

45. Cited in William Safire, 'The Cold War's Hot Kitchen', *The New York Times*, 23 July 2009. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/24/opinion/24safire.html. Last accessed August 9, 2023.

46. Cited in Craig and Radchenko, 'MAD, Not Marx', 219.

47. Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War: The Insider Story of an American Adversary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), 410; Alex Wellerstein, 'An Unearthly Spectacle: The Untold Story of the World's Biggest Nuclear Bomb', Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 2021. Available at: https://thebulletin.org/2021/11/the-untold-story-of-the-worlds-biggest-nuclear-bomb/. Last accessed December 5, 2024.

48. Bayard de Volo, 'Masculinity and the Cuban Missile Crisis', 1228.

retreat – could destabilise leadership and identity. As such, masculine identity forma-tions, while shaping Soviet policy, also placed rigid constraints on leadership behaviour, demonstrating that even peaceful or conciliatory discourses remain gendered.

Speak Softly While You Are Carrying a Big Stick

Following Khrushchev's ousting, the Soviet administration had to confront the repercus-sions stemming from his bellicose rhetoric and perilous policy. According to the Politburo special report on Khrushchev's mistakes, his actions 'damaged the prestige of the Soviet Union and its armed forces' and simultaneously strengthened the global standing of the United States.[49] Averting the recurrence of similar crises became the paramount concern for the incoming Soviet leadership under Leonid Brezhnev and necessitated profound shifts in foreign policy and nuclear proliferation strategies. Brezhnev's *modus operandi* in policy formulation was often characterised as the 'speak softly while you are carrying a big stick' approach.[50] As an antidote to Khrushchev's brinkmanship, the new adminis-tration seemed to gravitate towards 'sobriety, pragmatism, and the establishment of cred-ibility through the attainment of conspicuous capabilities to match objectives and declaratory policy'.[51]

Brezhnev embarked on the construction of a nuclear identity that transcended the confines of spatial juxtaposition with the radical Other – the United States – and encom-passed a temporal dimension, engaging with the earlier iteration of the Soviet Self. Khrushchev's actions had inflicted harm upon the Soviet superpower identity, prompting the new Soviet leadership to overtly disavow his conduct and policies as part of a broader effort to construct a new Self. An editorial within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's (CPSU) principal theoretical journal *Kommunist* characterised the approach adopted by the new administration as

> opposing aggressive imperialist circles without allowing itself any saber-rattling or irresponsible talk . . . [designed to] assess the situation soberly and to find a precise orientation in it under all circumstances, favorable as well as adverse, [and] to weigh, in a sober manner, the possibilities which we have [rather than to] succumb to illusions.[52]

The Soviets thus began to construct a nuclear identity of a responsible and resolute state – a global safeguard against nuclear perils, while concurrently continuing with nuclear armament. This resonates with Duncanson and Eschle's concept of a 'responsi-ble steward', which describes an identity rooted in masculine notions of protection – rational, decisive, but measured in its actions and careful to avoid overt displays of

49. Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 193–4.
50. Honore Marc Catudal, *Soviet Nuclear Strategy from Stalin to Gorbachev: A Revolution in Soviet Military and Political Thinking* (London: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1988), 58.
51. Roman Kolkowicz, 'Strategic Parity and Beyond: Soviet Perspectives', *World Politics* 23, no. 3 (1971): 437.
52. Cited in Ibid.

aggression.[53] During Brezhnev's era, this 'responsible stewardship' is reflected in the near absence of flamboyant demonstrations of nuclear power or direct threats towards the United States, signalling a form of masculinity that prioritises stability and responsibility over brute force. Brezhnev emphasised peace and an unwavering commitment to avoiding conflict: 'We are striving to make our diplomacy vigorous and active, and at the same time we exhibit flexibility and caution'.[54] This shift enabled the productive Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) between the Soviet Union and the United States, culminating in the signing of the 1972 SALT I and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaties, which imposed constraints on defensive sites and offensive nuclear weapon launchers. Notably, the Soviet expansion of armament was pursued without belligerent displays of aggression. Brezhnev's *détente*-oriented tenure acted as an intermediary between Khrushchev's brinkmanship and Gorbachev's disarmament initiatives.

Gorbachev and Transformative Shifts in Nuclear Identity/Politics

Following a brief interlude marked by the leadership of Yuri Andropov (1982–4) and Konstantin Chernenko (1984–5), Mikhail Gorbachev assumed the position of CPSU General Secretary in 1985. His tenure witnessed profound paradigm shifts in perceptions concerning the Self, the Other and the role of nuclear weapons. Reflecting on the disarmament efforts of the 1980s, Gorbachev stated: 'I am also convinced that nuclear deterrence, instead of protecting the world, is keeping it in constant jeopardy'.[55] These convictions led to a profoundly different nuclear identity for the Soviet Union and paved the way for a novel brand of decisive disarmament-oriented policymaking. Gorbachev emerged as a truly distinctive figure among Soviet leaders, as he boldly and openly challenged the inherent military efficacy of nuclear weapons. This was an unprecedented departure from the earlier Soviet stance. In stark contrast to his predecessors, Gorbachev, along with his advisors, constructed a nuclear identity of the state that not only sought to actively reduce its own nuclear arsenal but also aspired to attain a nuclear weapon-free existence, setting a commendable precedent and advocating for global disarmament.

Portraying Gorbachev as an innovative, agency-driven figure has its detractors. Several IR scholars have argued that Gorbachev's leadership was shaped as much by structural constraints as by his personal vision. For example, English emphasises that Gorbachev was navigating deeply entrenched Soviet elite structures, which limited his freedom to radically alter the course of the Cold War.[56] He highlights that Gorbachev's efforts at disarmament and economic reform were shaped by his need to maintain internal support, balancing the pressures of a conservative Soviet military establishment and

53. Duncanson and Eschle, 'Gender and the Nuclear Weapons State', 562.
54. Cited in Kolkowicz, 'Strategic Parity and Beyond', 437.
55. Mikhail Gorbachev, 'The Madness of Nuclear Deterrence', *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 April 2019. Available at: https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-madness-of-nuclear-deterrence-11556577762?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=1. Last accessed June 15, 2023.
56. Robert English, 'The Sociology of New Thinking: Elites, Identity Change, and the End of the Cold War', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7, no. 2 (2005): 43–80.

international expectations for reform. These constraints arguably point to a more structurally driven leadership. At the same time, Bennett shows how Gorbachev's conscious decisions not to rely on force in crucial moments, such as the non-violent handling of Eastern European revolutions in 1989, were a departure from historical Soviet responses to dissent.[57] This suggests that while Gorbachev faced structural limitations, he also wielded agency in reshaping Soviet policy by prioritising disarmament and non-aggression, even at the risk of alienating powerful domestic factions.

From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, while structural critiques are valid, the power of discourse cannot be underestimated. Gorbachev constructed a new nuclear identity that sought to redefine the Soviet Union's global role. This not only enabled shifts in policy but also challenged the long-standing norms associated with militarised masculinity. Gorbachev's discourse shows that even within constrained systems, discourses can be reframed to open new political possibilities, including paths towards disarmament and cooperation. This reinforces the argument that change, though difficult, is possible even when identities remain embedded in masculine logics. Furthermore, focusing solely on structural explanations risks obscuring the constitutive power of individual leaders' discourse within even highly bureaucratic and propagandistic systems like the Soviet Union. A feminist poststructuralist approach emphasises the role of discourse in constituting reality, meaning that the language and framing employed by leaders like Gorbachev do not merely reflect existing material or structural conditions but actively shape them.

As the chief architect of *glasnost'* and *perestroika*, Gorbachev redirected policy focus away from the military competition and the value of deterrent strategies towards collaboration and disarmament, and from emphasising military might to prioritising economic necessities and democratisation.[58] He began his tenure by imposing a moratorium on Soviet medium-range missiles in Europe and urging the United States to follow suit.[59] He emphasised the significance of the arms talks with the United States that had already begun in Geneva in preparation for the main summit meeting with US President Ronald

57. Andrew Bennett, 'The Guns That Didn't Smoke: Ideas and the Soviet Non-Use of Force in 1989', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7, no. 2 (2005): 81–109.

58. David Holloway, 'State, Society, and the Military Under Gorbachev', *International Security* 14, no. 3 (1989): 6. *Glasnost'* or 'openness' was a term popularised by Gorbachev in the mid-1980s and used to depict his reform for increased government transparency and openness of the Soviet media. Gorbachev's primary objective was to reduce constraints on the free flow of information and to enable public discussions of social and political problems (see, e.g. John M. Battle, 'Uskorenie, Glasnost' and Perestroika: The Pattern of Reform under Gorbachev', *Soviet Studies* 40, no. 3 (1988): 370). *Perestroika* or 'restructuring' refers to Gorbachev's program of economic and political reforms in the mid- to late-1980s aimed at accelerating and decentralising the Soviet economy and adopting elements of market economy. Ultimately, this series of reforms has failed, leading to economic chaos (see, e.g.: John Blaney and Mike Gfoeller, 'Lessons from the Failure of Perestroika', *Political Science Quarterly* 108, no. 3 (1993): 481–96; Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 307–308).

59. Seth Mydans, 'Gorbachev Ready for Reagan Talks; Freezes Missiles', *The New York Times*, 8 April 1985. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/1985/04/08/world/gorbachev-ready-for-reagan-talks-freezes-missiles.html. Last accessed August 10, 2023.

Reagan in November 1985, called for a freeze on strategic nuclear weapons, and announced a unilateral moratorium on nuclear tests starting on 6 August 1985 – the 40th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.[60] Gorbachev extended the moratorium twice despite continued US nuclear testing.

In October 1986, Gorbachev initiated a crucial arms control summit with President Reagan in Reykjavik where he proposed eliminating all strategic nuclear weapons, but the summit adjourned with no agreement due to the disputes over the US Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) ambitions.[61] However, Gorbachev's persistence led to the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 1987, mandating the dismantling of medium- and short-range nuclear missiles. This was the first arms control agreement to require the reduction of nuclear stockpiles rather than mere restriction.[62] Another significant achievement was the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty I (START I) signed by Gorbachev and US President George Bush in 1991 just before the collapse of the Soviet Union and Gorbachev's forced resignation. The treaty limited both sides to 6000 warheads each. Despite reaching a peak of 45,000 nuclear warheads in 1986, the Soviets steadily reduced their numbers by 2000 every year until 1997.[63]

The forthcoming sub-sections examine the discursive reconfigurations of Soviet nuclear identity and ensuing nuclear policy changes. This analysis explores various facets of Gorbachev's nuclear identity that emerged from the discourse analysis such as constructions of human security, notions of responsibility, ideological divergences vis-à-vis the United States, dimensions of cooperation, and aspirations for peace and global nuclear disarmament. The final sub-section outlines the limits and challenges brought about by these discursive reconfigurations. The analysis shows the fluid character of the masculine attributes of Soviet nuclear identity and the changing nature of the way in which Gorbachev constructed this identity in relation to Others, including the United States and the temporal constructions of the earlier Soviet Self.

Human Security

The evolution of Soviet nuclear identity unfolded in two interconnected ways: Gorbachev's emphasis on human security and the universal perils posed by nuclear weapons. His emphasis on human security accentuated the primacy of universal human values, shifting the focus from state-centric security to the safeguarding and preservation of human life. This transformative process contributed to Gorbachev's reassessment of nuclear weapons as the primary source of strength, instead prioritising human security and the pursuit of peace:

60. Matthew Evangelista, 'The New Soviet Approach to Security', *World Policy Journal* 3, no. 4 (1986): 563. ***

61. Robert C. Grogin, *Natural Enemies: The United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War, 1917–1991* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001), 330. SDI was President Ronald Reagan's ambitious plan to develop a space-based missile defense program.

62. David Holloway, 'Gorbachev's New Thinking', *Foreign Affairs* 68, no. 1 (1988): 75.

63. Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, 'Global Nuclear Weapons Inventories, 1945–2013', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 69, no. 5 (2013): 78.

Initiating active steps to halt the arms race and reduce weapons is a necessary prerequisite for coping with increasingly acute global problems – those of the deteriorating state of man's environment and the need to find energy sources and combat economic backwardness, hunger and disease.[64]

During the first year of his tenure as General Secretary, Gorbachev stated:

While insisting on the cessation of the arms race, we also believe it is immoral to waste hundreds of billions on developing means of annihilation, while hundreds of millions of people go hungry and are deprived of elementary essentials.[65]

Disarmament was not only constructed as necessary to avoid nuclear war but also as necessary to tackle other issues existent in the world: 'The pattern imposed by militarism – arms in place of development – must be replaced by the reverse order of things – disarmament for development'.[66] This created a new Soviet Self – a responsible protector of humanity – that was different to the one that engaged in an unprecedented expensive arms race, intimating a temporal construction of difference in relation to the aggressively masculine earlier Soviet Union.

Consequently, the transition from arms race to stockpile reductions is interlinked with a change in constructions of masculinity. Gorbachev constructed a distinct form of masculinity that diverged from the conventional association with competitiveness and the propensity to wield threats of war. He now prioritised a commitment to disarmament and the preservation of peace. This is seen in his own reflections:

In general, I would have to say that the Soviet Union's strength today lies in its unity, dynamism, and the political activity of its people [. . .] But we are opposed to playing power games, for this is an extremely dangerous thing in the nuclear-missile age.[67]

The explicit rejection of 'power games' signifies a departure from the ethos of one-upmanship and competition-driven masculinity of the earlier Soviet leadership. Connell notes that certain qualities traditionally associated with masculinity, such as courage, steadfastness and ambition, can be channelled towards the cause of peace.[68] By framing his approach as a 'peace offensive', Gorbachev continued to shape a masculine identity for the Soviet Union, albeit one that aligned with rationality and the pursuit of peace rather than warfare. He consistently denounced the futility of the arms race and emphasised the need for disarmament, maintaining that such measures should be evident to any

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64. Mikhail Gorbachev, *Socialism, Peace and Democracy: Writings, Speeches and Reports* (London: Zwan Publications, 1987), 44.
65. Gorbachev, 'Candid Views About US-Soviet Relations', 7.
66. Gorbachev, *Socialism, Peace and Democracy*, 44.
67. Ibid., 59.
68. R. W. Connell, 'Arms and the Man: Using the New Research on Masculinity to Understand Violence and Promote Peace in the Contemporary World', in *Male Roles, Masculinities and Violence: A Culture of Peace Perspective*, eds. Ingeborg Breines, Robert Connell and Ingrid (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2000), 30.

sensible individual. Consequently, the nature of Soviet nuclear identity remained masculine during Gorbachev's tenure, but the underlying concept of masculinity transformed. The earlier Soviet Self's power dynamics, characterised by hyper-masculinity, excessive aggression and risk-taking, were disparaged, giving way to a rational, moderate and civil/political masculinity cultivated by Gorbachev. This reshaping of masculinity intertwined with other dimensions of Soviet nuclear identity and facilitated the feasibility and necessity of arms control and nuclear stockpile reductions.

Ethics and Responsibility

Gorbachev unequivocally emphasised the Soviets' obligation and duty to disarm, as well as the endeavour to exert influence over disarmament efforts worldwide. He stated, for instance that 'the stakes are too high and the responsibility too great for us not to try every possibility of influencing the position of others by force of example'.[69] As such, he constructed a nuclear identity that possessed paternalistic qualities. Hearn and Collinson explain that paternalism represents a distinctively masculine discourse that seeks to wield power by accentuating the moral foundation of cooperation and the significance of personal trust relations; it draws upon the familial metaphor of the 'rule of the father' – one characterised by authority, benevolence, self-discipline and wisdom.[70]

Indeed, Gorbachev's assertion that the expenditure of billions on perilous arms races is both senseless and immoral served to construct the Soviet Union as a responsible, moral and ethical entity. At the core of paternalism lies the exercise of power in manners that purportedly enhance the self-interest of subordinates, with such practices often depicted as 'benefitting' and 'protecting' their intended recipients.[71] Gorbachev's human security discourse consistently underscored the imperative of safeguarding human life on a global scale and rescuing humanity from the nuclear menace, thus constituting one facet of constructing a paternalistic masculine identity. This sentiment is evident in Gorbachev's interview with *TIME Magazine*:

> That is our firm position [ban on the militarization of space] and it is based on our assessment, an assessment that we regard as being highly responsible, an assessment that takes into account not only our own interests but the interests of the U.S. as well.[72]

Gorbachev constructed an ethical nuclear identity of a responsible and rational superpower that prioritised the interests of all and actively pursued commendable objectives such as addressing global challenges. These constructions, while sharing some similarities with the periods of weapons acquisition and the arms race, diverged in their approach to reinforcing the masculinity of Soviet nuclear identity. Rather than emphasising military might and competition, the focus shifted towards cooperation, peace and

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69. Gorbachev, *Socialism, Peace and Democracy*, 39.
70. Jeff Hearn and David L. Collinson, 'Men, Masculinities, Managements and Organisational Culture', *German Journal of Research in Human Resource Management* 12, no. 2 (1998): 215.
71. Ibid., 216.
72. Gorbachev, 'Candid Views About US-Soviet Relations', 13.

disarmament. As articulated by Gorbachev himself: 'The new mode of thinking with its humane, universal criteria and values is penetrating diverse strata. Its strength lies in the fact that it accords with people's common sense'.[73] This paradigm shift made the implementation of policies such as the 1985 unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing possible, as it exemplified the conduct expected from a paternalistic state – one that is wise and leads by example. Gorbachev stated: 'Undoubtedly, a mutual moratorium by the USSR and the United States on any nuclear blasts would be a good example also to other states possessing nuclear weapons'.[74] Despite its novelty, distinctiveness and peace-centric orientation, Gorbachev's discourse was still firmly rooted in masculine tropes. His construction of a 'responsible steward' remained a masculine one and emphasised paternalistic leadership rather than domination. The move towards cooperation and paternalism shows that such reconfigurations of masculine constructions can enable concrete steps towards arms control and disarmament.

Ideological and Nuclear Rivalries

Gorbachev's approach to international politics encompassed notable ideological transformations. Diverging from his predecessors, he embraced the perspective that socialism and capitalism were not isolated systems but rather integral components of a shared human civilisation, arguing that their ideological disparities should not hinder their relations, given their fundamental shared values.[75] Gorbachev stated:

> What is required here is that we should rise above national selfishness, tactical considerations, differences and disputes, whose significance is nothing compared to the preservation of what is most cherished – peace and a secure future.[76]

These developments reflect profound transformations in the construction of spatial and temporal Others. Particularly noteworthy is the shift from conventional reinforcement of fundamental ideological disparities between the Self and the Other through the lens of competition. Gorbachev's rhetoric conveyed a departure from the significance assigned to such disparities, emphasising instead the imperative of safeguarding human life on a global scale.

The Cold War arms race was largely propelled by the ideological clash between socialism and capitalism. Gorbachev, recognising this, sought to dismantle the portrayal of the Soviet Union as the 'focus of evil' and the source of universal danger, which had

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73. Mikhail Gorbachev, 'The Speech in Murmansk at the Ceremonial Meeting on the Occasion of the Presentation of the Order of Lenin and the Gold Star Medal to the City of Murmansk', 1987. Available at: https://www.barentsinfo.fi/docs/Gorbachev_speech.pdf. Last accessed June 15, 2023.
74. Mikhail Gorbachev, 'Soviet Leader Mikhail Gorbachev Today Announced a Five-Month Moratorium on Nuclear Testing', *United Press International Archives*, 29 July 1985. Available at: https://www.upi.com/Archives/1985/07/29/Soviet-leader-Mikhail-Gorbachev-today-announced-a-five-month-moratorium/3654491457600/. Last accessed June 5, 2023.
75. Holloway, 'Gorbachev's New Thinking', 71.
76. Gorbachev, *Socialism, Peace and Democracy*, 37.

fuelled the arms race for decades.[77] In doing so, he aimed to strip the Soviet nuclear identity of its ideological dogma. While Gorbachev still defended Soviet socialism, he diverged from his predecessors by not emphasising the quest for superpower status or asserting the superiority of socialism over capitalism. He instead advocated a new form of cooperation among states, transcending ideological differences. Gorbachev's UN speech encapsulated this perspective:

> We are not giving up our convictions, philosophy, or traditions. Neither are we calling on anyone to give up theirs. Yet we are not going to shut ourselves up within the range of our values.[78]

Another shift that facilitated the transformation of the Soviet nuclear identity entailed a resolute emphasis on the perils inherent in nuclear rivalry, as opposed to an approach driven by a relentless pursuit of surpassing adversaries. Preceding Soviet leaders found nuclear competition essential and perceived a failure to keep pace as a manifestation of weakness, backwardness and technological inferiority. Conversely, Gorbachev constructed a different nuclear identity for the Soviet Union, already evident in his inaugural address as General Secretary on 11 March 1985 where he openly stated his intentions for disarmament:

> Never before has so terrible a threat loomed so large and dark over mankind as these days. The only reasonable way out of the existing situation is agreement of the confronting forces on an immediate termination of the race in arms, above all, nuclear arms . . . An agreement which would help all to advance toward the cherished goal – the complete elimination and prohibition of nuclear weapons for good.[79]

This foregrounds Gorbachev's aspiration to completely eradicate nuclear weapons. While all Soviet leaders acknowledged the importance of arms control, reductions and the threats associated with nuclear weapons, the concept of total disarmament held limited significance within their construction of Soviet nuclear identity. Gorbachev, on the other hand, presented the struggle against the nuclear threat and the arms race as paramount for safeguarding universal peace, positioning it as the 'fundamental direction of the [CPSU] Party's activities in the international arena'.[80] Soviet nuclear identity evolved

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77. Gorbachev, 'Candid Views About US-Soviet Relations', 3.
78. Mikhail Gorbachev, 'Address by Mikhail Gorbachev at the UN General Assembly session (Excerpts)', *Wilson Centre Digital Archive*, 7 December 1988. Available at: https://digital-archive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116224. Last accessed June 15, 2023.
79. Mikhail Gorbachev, 'Excerpts from Gorbachev's First Speech as USSR Leader', *United Press International Archives*, 11 March 1985. Available at: https://www.upi.com/Archives/1985/03/11/Excerpts-from-Gorbachevs-first-speech-as-USSR-leader/7718246188921/. Last accessed June 5, 2023.
80. Mikhail Gorbachev, 'Resolution on the Political Report of the CPSU Central Committee to the 27th Congress of the Communist Party', *Soviet News*, 12 March 1986. Available at: https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/party-congress/27th/27th-cong-resolution-on-political-report.pdf. Last accessed June 15, 2023.

from a fiercely competitive nuclear superpower that feared falling behind the United States to a cooperative state that championed disarmament and expressed readiness to eliminate *all* its nuclear weapons. After the Reykjavik summit, Gorbachev reflected:

> It is clear to every sober-minded person that if we embark upon the road of deep cuts and then complete elimination of nuclear weapons, it is essential to rule out any possibility which could be used by either the Soviet or the U.S. side for gaining unilateral military superiority.[81]

This illustrates Gorbachev's efforts to link his new stance on nuclear policy to rationality or 'sober-mindedness'. From the onset of his tenure as General Secretary, Gorbachev constructed a nuclear identity for the Soviet Union characterised by rational stewardship, aiming to foster cooperation with the United States on all facets of nuclear disarmament. 'Confrontation is not an inborn defect of our relations', Gorbachev stated. 'It is rather an anomaly'.[82]

Gorbachev's statements reflect his construction of an ethical nuclear identity, where policy articulations bear significant moral weight and function as calls to action. Furthermore, they align with Duncanson and Eschle's notion of 'protector masculinity', which involves 'an enforced linkage between the protector and protected in the face of an *external threat*' (emphasis in the original).[83] A notable feature of Gorbachev's discourse here is that the external threat is no longer the United States, but rather nuclear weapons themselves, including the Soviet ones. This nuclear identity is constructed not through the notions of opposition and hierarchies but through relationships based on equality, empathy and mutual respect, thereby precipitating a profound transformative process and fundamentally challenging existing power dynamics. Contrarily, when examining the historical dispositions of earlier Soviet and US leaders, a different narrative emerges. In their nuclear pursuits, these leaders often expressed strong moral obligations to safeguard their respective nations from perceived threats associated with the other side. However, these constructions of nuclear identity laid the foundation for divergent policies, characterised by the pursuit of nuclear armament and a relentless arms race, rooted in a hyper-masculine and fiercely competitive ethos. By acknowledging and critically examining these distinctions, we can gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between ethics, gender and nuclear politics.

Peace and Global Disarmament

Throughout their nuclear history, the Soviets consistently portrayed themselves as champions of peace. Initially, this self-image was established through comparisons with the 'belligerent' United States, validating their pursuit of nuclear acquisition and expansion.

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81. Mikhail Gorbachev, 'Summit Aftermath: The View from Moscow; Excerpts from Speech by Gorbachev About Iceland Meeting', *The New York Times*, 15 October 1986. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/1986/10/15/world/summit-aftermath-view-moscow-excerpts-speech-gorbachev-about-iceland-meeting.html. Last accessed June 5, 2023.
82. Cited in Mydans, 'Gorbachev Ready for Reagan Talks'.
83. Duncanson and Eschle, 'Gender and the Nuclear Weapons State', 554.

Essentially, Soviet nuclear armament was perceived as a force for good, while American counterparts were viewed as jeopardising global stability. Under Gorbachev's leadership, this self-concept persisted, but with a redefined emphasis. Rather than relying on Soviet arms to avert nuclear catastrophe, peace now hinged on comprehensive disarmament. The foundational basis for the Soviet nuclear identity shifted away from countering the United States as a deterrent against a pre-emptive strike, towards a desire to collaborate despite ideological disparities, ultimately striving for a world without nuclear weaponry. Gorbachev stated:

> In questions of preserving peace and saving mankind from the threat of nuclear war, let no one remain indifferent or stand aloof. This concerns all and everyone. Each state, large or small, socialist or capitalist, has an important contribution to make.[84]

Gorbachev's emphasis on the dangers posed by nuclear weapons and his resolute dedication to complete disarmament forms the core of the peace-oriented aspect of Soviet nuclear identity. In his own writings, he made a clear distinction between peaceful words and peaceful deeds:

> There is no shortage today of statements professing commitment to peace. What is in short supply are concrete actions to strengthen the foundations of peace. All too often peaceful words conceal war preparations and power politics.[85]

During the periods of nuclear weapons acquisition and the arms race, the peace-oriented aspect of Soviet nuclear identity came across as particularly contradictory due to the concurrent reinforcement of its highly competitive and hyper-masculine dimensions. While states rarely explicitly construct themselves as warmongering or menacing, the portrayal of aggressive armament to pursue noble objectives such as ensuring peace, stability and countering the US threat, simultaneously facilitated the arms race and bolstered the perception of the Soviet Union as a morally principled nuclear superpower. At this juncture, the serious intentions to eliminate nuclear weapons did not factor significantly into the Soviet nuclear identity or policy. However, under Gorbachev's leadership, it not only took centre stage in his policy agenda but also served as the cornerstone of a nuclear identity that he was constructing for the Soviet Union. Gorbachev's arms control proposals of the early 1986 largely emphasised this:

> By the end of 1999 there will be no nuclear weapons on earth. A universal accord will be drawn up that such weapons should never again come into being . . . the USSR is ready to reach agreement on any other additional verification measures.[86]

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84. Gorbachev, *Socialism, Peace and Democracy*, 45.
85. Ibid.
86. Mikhail Gorbachev, 'Excerpts from the Soviet Leader's Statement on Arms Control Proposals', *The New York Times*, 17 January 1986. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/1986/01/17/world/excerpts-from-the-soviet-leader-s-statement-on-arms-control-proposals.html. Last accessed June 15, 2023.

The Chernobyl nuclear accident in April 1986 prompted Gorbachev to highlight the dangers of nuclear weapons to reinforce the construction of the Soviet Union as a peace-loving state and as being uniquely qualified to lead the way on disarmament. The aftermath of this disaster prompted the Soviet leadership to approach nuclear disarmament as a 'moral imperative independent of political calculations'.[87] This made future agreements on arms reduction even more necessary. In his speech after Chernobyl, Gorbachev stated:

> The accident at Chernobyl showed again what an abyss will open if nuclear war befalls mankind. For inherent in the nuclear arsenals stockpiled are thousands upon thousands of disasters far more horrible than the Chernobyl one.[88]

At that time, Gorbachev emerged as a pioneer in articulating a comprehensive plan to begin and conclude by year 2000 with the thorough elimination of nuclear armaments – a proposal characterised by its unprecedented detail and precision.[89] Fundamental to Gorbachev's discourse on disarmament was the categorical repudiation of the prevailing notion that nuclear-strategic parity alone affords satisfactory assurances of peace. This paradigm shift reconfigured the conventional Cold War understanding of peace, which was anchored in the MAD doctrine. Gorbachev presented his convictions to Richard Nixon during the former US president's visit to Moscow in 1986:

> Even if one country would constantly be arming itself, and the other would do nothing, then this first country still would gain nothing. For the weak side may simply detonate all its nuclear devices, even on its own territory, and it would mean suicide for it and a slow killing for the adversary.[90]

Gorbachev's unwavering commitment to arms control and disarmament enabled a remarkably fruitful sequence of negotiations in Stockholm. In a pioneering departure within the realm of arms control, the Soviets, under Gorbachev's leadership, agreed to on-site inspections for conventional weaponry, an unprecedented milestone that would ultimately prove indispensable for the realisation of the INF Treaty a year later.[91] Gorbachev continued to reinforce the necessity for total disarmament after signing the Treaty with the United States:

87. Vladislav M. Zubok, 'Gorbachev's Nuclear Learning', *Boston Review*, 12 July 2000. Available at: https://www.bostonreview.net/forum_response/vladislav-m-zubok-gorbachevs-nuclear-learning/. Last accessed August 8, 2023.
88. Mikhail Gorbachev, 'Excerpts from Gorbachev's Speech on Chernobyl Accident', *The New York Times*, 15 May 1986. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/1986/05/15/world/excerpts-from-gorbachev-s-speech-on-chernobyl-accident.html. Last accessed June 15, 2023.
89. Gorbachev, *Socialism, Peace and Democracy*, 37–8.
90. Cited in Zubok, 'Gorbachev's Nuclear Learning'.
91. Ibid.

> It is our duty to take full advantage of that chance [signing the INF Treaty] and move together toward a nuclear free world, which holds out for our children and grandchildren and for their children and grandchildren, the promise of a fulfilling and happy life, without fear and without a senseless waste of resources on weapons of destruction.[92]

Gorbachev's nuclear identity constructions re-imagined the Soviet Union as a peace-maker in a new sense: as a world leader in peace and disarmament. This shows that the Soviets continued to reinforce an identity that was exceptional and masculine by nature, taking on the role to save the world from the dangers of nuclear weaponry. The construction of such nuclear identity to a large extent enabled a breakthrough in arms control agreements with the United States and significant arms reductions during Gorbachev's tenure. At the same time, broader political and economic factors contributed to the swift dissolution of the Soviet Union from the geopolitical landscape.

The Limits and Challenges of Discursive Transformation

Despite Gorbachev's construction of a nuclear identity centred around peaceful collaboration, the realisation of total nuclear disarmament remained elusive. The conflation of nuclear armaments with manifestations of masculine potency and, on the other hand, disarmament with vulnerabilities persisted, albeit with some attenuation, within both Soviet nuclear discourse and notably within the US discourse. Evidently, the entrenched linkage between nuclear armaments and the broader landscape of international politics, with its entwined associations with notions of masculinity, remained profoundly ingrained. This dynamic, in part, might explain the lack of trust and popularity experienced by Gorbachev among his compatriots within the CPSU. As conveyed by the former Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko:

> I wonder how puzzled must be the US and other NATO countries. It is a mystery for them why Gorbachev and his friends in the Politburo cannot comprehend how to use force and pressure for defending their state interests.[93]

Gorbachev's colleagues frequently criticised him for his reluctance to use force claiming that he 'had no guts for blood' or that he was 'incapable not only of using dictatorial measures, but even of resorting to hard-line administrative means'.[94] This highlights the persistence of gender-inflected hierarchies within the ambit of Soviet political and security discourses. Gorbachev's pursuit of disarmament was met with condemnation from both allies and adversaries. Cohn notes how American security specialists referred to

92. Mikhail Gorbachev, 'Remarks on Signing the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty', *The Ronald Ragan Presidential Library Online Archive*, 8 December 1987. Available at: https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-signing-intermediate-range-nuclear-forces-treaty. Last accessed June 16, 2023.
93. Cited in Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 318.
94. Cited in Ibid., 319.

Gorbachev and his entourage: 'I've met these Soviet "new thinkers" and they're a bunch of pussies' or 'They're a bunch of pussies for pulling out of Eastern Europe'.[95]

Despite the evolution towards the construction of a different kind of masculinity, the link between military might, nuclear weaponry and masculine identity persisted both in Soviet discourse and within the broader security discourse. Cohn et al. contend that impediments to disarmament 'are created by the ways in which masculine identities and roles have become conjoint with weapons possession for many (male) combatants'.[96] This dynamic played a role in eroding Gorbachev's domestic support. His colleagues perceived him as too 'soft' to wield power effectively. As observed by Russian politician Vladimir Lukin, a critic of Gorbachev: 'Firmness was necessary in such a country as Russia, not to mention the Soviet Union'.[97] This highlights Gorbachev's predicament, echoing the perennial challenge faced by statesmen who opt for less aggressive, non-militaristic courses of action. While alternative readings of feminisation or emasculation may arise in relation to Gorbachev's approach, it is crucial to note that the discourse remained rooted in masculine tropes. Rather than representing a departure from masculinity, it reflected a reconfiguration of masculinities, emphasising strength through restraint and responsibility, as opposed to traditional forms of militarised masculinity. While Gorbachev's reconfiguration of masculinity exposed vulnerabilities in the short term – such as diminished domestic support and scepticism from international actors – it represents a critical step in decoupling power from aggression, offering a model for more sustainable and peaceful nuclear politics.

Conclusion

This article utilised a feminist poststructuralist approach and argued that the reshaping of the various facets of Soviet nuclear identity during Gorbachev's tenure carried profound implications for comprehending the transformative shifts in nuclear politics. The article demonstrated that combining feminism and poststructuralism opens space for reimagining nuclear disarmament policies beyond security and geopolitical considerations. As the security significance of nuclear armaments was reconceptualised to encompass peace, collaboration, human security and global disarmament, the pathway to consequential arms control accords and reductions in nuclear arsenals became both plausible and desirable. Moreover, the transition from radical Othering to more equitable relationships rooted in mutual esteem, equality and ethics further enabled Gorbachev's accomplishments.

The Soviet discourse under Gorbachev reveals a Self–Other relationship that was not strictly oppositional but collaborative, suggesting a broader rethinking of identity construction in nuclear discourse. This highlights how such identities can evolve beyond binary antagonisms and open possibilities for more fluid and cooperative frameworks in nuclear policy. While numerous factors played a role in dismantling the intense nuclear rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States, the role of

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95. Cohn, 'Wars, Wimps, and Women', 235–6.
96. Cohn et al., 'Relevance of Gender', 3.
97. Cited in Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 319.

discursive metamorphosis in driving transformative change in nuclear politics is crucial. In this context, theoretical applications of feminism and poststructuralism present a much-needed intervention in advancing nuclear arms control and disarmament as they offer perspectives that challenge traditional militaristic narratives and open avenues for more inclusive and peace-oriented policies.

Considering the contemporary challenges in nuclear politics, the lessons learned from Gorbachev's transformative efforts hold significance. By critically examining the interplay of gendered constructs, relationality and ethical considerations within nuclear identities, policymakers and advocates of nuclear disarmament can chart a path forward towards strengthening disarmament initiatives and maintaining ongoing international dialogues on arms control. Ultimately, embracing discursive reconfigurations of nuclear identities, grounded in notions of equality, mutual respect and cooperation, offers a promising trajectory for building a safer and more secure global nuclear order. Moreover, acknowledging the fluidity of gendered constructs within nuclear identity challenges traditional masculine notions associated with nuclear weaponry and provides a basis for reimagining nuclear politics through a more inclusive lens.

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