

# **The humble star of hope: environmental heroes in the shadow of war**

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War is no longer declared  
but continued. The unheard-of thing  
is the everyday. The hero  
keeps away from the fighters. The weak man  
has moved up to the battle zones.  
The uniform of the day is patience,  
its decoration is the humble star  
of hope worn over the heart.

From "Everyday", by Ingeborg Bachmann

The year opens under the shadow of war. There is no chance of the Bush administration abandoning its plans for the invasion and colonization of Iraq. The limp prevarications of other major powers on the United Nations Security Council and US allies will most likely dissolve when push comes to shove. In any case, the US has made it clear that while it would like to attack Iraq with allied and UN support, it is equally prepared to invade alone. All that is needed to the figleaf of legitimacy an excuse for war plausible enough to survive a brief moment of scrutiny by the global mass media.

Apart from the extraordinary contempt of the US for the opinion of even major US allies in Europe and the Middle East, what is remarkable about the present moment is the degree of fatalism and acceptance of the inevitability of war and its unavoidable ensuing human and environmental and political catastrophe. This is not just a fear of war, or a sense of impending crisis, or anxiety about a danger of accidental drift towards war. Rather, it is a belief that nothing can stand in the way of the Bush administration's determination to have a war. There seems to be nothing that anyone rational can do.

No rational objection seems to have any appeal to the White House. When the very conservative US Secretary of the Treasury pointed to the dangers of a potentially costly war at a time of incipient economic recession in the US, he was replaced by a more compliant state manager. The European allies - little England apart - not only have

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<sup>1</sup> 「希望の小さな星：戦争の影にある環境ヒーロー」, [Kibo no chisana hoshi: sensou no kage ni aru kankyô hiiro ('The humble star of hope: environmental heroes in the shadow of war')], 環境雑学マガジン、[Kankyô Zatsugaku Magazin], 138 (January 14, 2003), [Japanese and English].

substantial Muslim minorities, but also happen to live next door to the war zone. Not surprisingly the Europeans are a little more cautious than the Texan across the ocean. But to no avail.

Bush, like the early Reagan, is brazen in his contempt for the call to negotiate with allies of just slightly different opinion, either abroad or in the US. "Don't even bother!" the White House says . "We will proceed as planned however much you squawk. Either get out of the way or be run over." In large part, of course, this is part of the standard operating procedure of radical US administrations: it is a useful way of demoralizing opponents who are unsure of the degree of support they might receive if they stand firm against war. In the end, any Administration has to negotiate to some extent.

But the most important target of this war-talk is domestic - the US public with its well-known aversion to seeing its children dying in foreign wars. What the Bush administration fears most - apart from Sadaam Hussein complying with all UN resolutions - is what US hawks long ago labeled "the Vietnam syndrome". There are three threats to the Bush plan, any one of which could dissolve the public support for the war in the US. If the war in Iraq lasts longer than a few months, or if the bodies of GIs and US air crew start piling up, or if news reporting of the murderous effects of smart bombs and cruise missiles and ammunition and tank battles depleted uranium shells in the streets of Baghdad and Basra cannot be effectively censored, then the present mix of support for the war and fatalism about opposing it will quickly dissolve - and with it, the chance of a second term for Bush.

Though little reported in the compliant mainstream media, there is clear evidence that in the US itself an organizational and intellectual framework for opposition to the war already exists. Not only are well-informed antiwar websites proliferating across the internet, but regular well-organized antiwar demonstrations take place almost every week in major cities across the country. If we compare the present level of US antiwar organization to the period in just before President Lyndon Johnson sent half a million US ground troops to South Vietnam in 1965, it is clear that if the war is anything but short and painless, organized mass opposition will erupt- exactly as the Administration fears.

This thought is, in itself, hardly encouraging since it would follow from a protracted and close fought war in which the people of Iraq and its environment would be savaged by both the US and their own forces. But it does help to shift our thinking a little, and to remember that there are people who have knowingly sacrificed their own freedom to tell us the truth about the military machines of their own country, and in particular, to alert us to the lies of the nuclear states of the world.

Among many possible examples, two that come to mind - especially just now, with a new year stained at birth with the stench of war - are two men in prison for crimes against the nuclear state - Mordechai Vanunu, imprisoned by Israel for 18 years in 1987, and Grigory Pasko, sentenced to four years in a Siberian prison by a Russian military court in December 2001.

Vanunu, a Moroccan Jew who emigrated to Israel as a child, worked as a technician in the top secret Israeli nuclear weapons factory at Dimona in the Negev desert. Opposed to the Israeli government's Palestinian policies, and troubled by the secrets he was required to keep at work, Vanunu resigned from Dimona and left Israel for Australia in 1985xxxx. After a time of soul-searching, Vanunu decided he had to make the world aware of the dangers of Israel's nuclear weapons, and released his material to the British newspaper, the Sunday Times, well aware that it was reasonable to expect - on the basis of its record of dealing with dissidents - Israeli intelligence would pursue him for the rest of his life - or even take it.

The material Vanunu brought and the story he told was checked out rigorously by the Sunday Times and its scientific consultant, the nuclear physicist Frank Barnaby. After weeks of checking, Barnaby accepted Vanunu's story as true. On the basis of the evidence provided by Vanunu, for the first time it was possible to conclusively show that Israel possessed nuclear weapons. Not just one or two primitive devices, but several hundred sophisticated weapons that could be delivered by bomber, artillery or missile. Although the Israeli government at first derided the claims published in the Sunday Times in September 1986, Prime Minister Shimon Peres eventually conceded the truth: Israel was and is a major nuclear power.

Vanunu paid the price he expected. Just before the story broke, he was lured by an Israeli woman working for Mossad to Rome, where he was kidnapped, drugged, and taken illegally and secretly to Israel. A secret court sentenced him to 18 years in prison, the first 12 of which he endured in solitary confinement.

Grigory Pasko was a Russian naval lieutenant, working as a naval journalist in Vladivostok, once the home port of the Soviet Navy's mighty Pacific fleet. But even just a few years after the collapse of the Soviet state, the bulk of the once proud fleet was rusting in the backwaters of Vladivostok harbour. The most advanced classes of nuclear-powered missile and attack submarines were visibly turning into radioactive hulks in broad daylight as naval funding for personnel and maintenance - let alone sea-going operations - simply disappeared. Russian Pacific Fleet authorities in Vladivostok - as well as their colleagues in the even larger Atlantic fleet based in Murmansk close to Norway - faced an environmental and health problem that had been waiting to emerge since the beginning of the nuclear age. What should be done with the grossly contaminated nuclear reactors and the surrounding radioactive parts of their hulls in the rusting submarines and other warships?

Their answer was simple and familiar; dump the reactors at sea. To be fair to the Russian government, they did not do this secretly. The Japanese government was informed of the plan to dump radioactive materials from the rotting Vladivostok submarines in the deeper parts of the Sea of Japan. The Japanese government, in its wisdom, raised no serious public objection - possibly because it had carried out similar dumping of radioactive waste at sea itself. More to the point, the Japanese government decided not to burden its citizens with news of the Russian dumping in the semi-enclosed Sea of Japan.

Pasko approached an NHK producer with news of the dumping activities, and cooperated with Greenpeace International in a plan to film the Russian navy dumping at sea. A Greenpeace boat followed a Russian ship from Vladivostok harbour, filmed it dumping many barrels of radioactive materials and machinery in international waters between the Russian and Japanese coasts. The ensuing uproar forced the Japanese government to protest publicly, and the Russians eventually stopped the practice.

Pasko, however, was arrested for treason. While this charge was eventually dropped, a series of highly unfair military tribunals led to a four year prison sentence, despite high-level diplomatic protests and special missions from the European Union. Little has been heard from the government of Japan. More surprisingly, there has been little Japanese mass media attention to the issue, and neither have Japanese environmental organizations, apart from Greenpeace Japan, campaigned for Pasko's release.

People such as Vanunu and Pasko are heroes in a cynical age where the idea of the hero seems either foolish or anachronistic. Surely, we think, we have learned that the heroes we were told about as children were deeply flawed, hollow men or worse, mere hypocrites.

Or, breathing the air of a world transformed by Marx as much as by Freud, we are all structuralists of one brand or another, seeing individuals as mere representatives of the great economic or technological or cultural forces that figure the stage on which we act out our structured roles.

Or, wary now of the mass media personalizing social forces by picking out "famous leaders" and ignoring the realities of the hard work of hundreds of thousands of "ordinary people" in social movements, we ignore the importance of real sacrifices made by particular people.

Each of these three criticisms of the simple idea of the hero is well-founded, but easily overstated or misdirected. To be sure, Vanunu was no pure and shining prince. He was snared by Mossad because he was an unhappy and lonely man who wanted a girlfriend - a classic "honey trap" intelligence operation. But who ever said that heroes have to be perfect? What was important is that he knowingly made a choice for the human interest against narrow national interest, and that he took an intensely unpopular ethically based stand, well knowing what the likely consequences would be. It is we who have the problem, not him, with our misplaced expectations of perfection - or what the sociologist Richard Sennet called "the myth of purified identity".

Anti-nuclear and anti-war movements are deeply dependent on the actions of people such as Vanunu and Pasko to provide the information about the realities of the nuclear state and the preparations for war. While it is true that mass movements are the product of the unnoticed work of thousands of people, at certain crucial moments, they are also dependent on the actions of just a small number of individuals making decisions that few of us can contemplate.

As the New Year opens, we should remember and honour Vanunu and Pasko - and many others like them elsewhere - and offer them our thanks for their actions and their example. We should award them, in the words of the Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann, "the humble star of hope".

It is awarded  
when nothing goes on,  
when the drumbeat subsides,  
when the enemy has grown invisible,  
and the shadow of everlasting arms  
covers the sky.

It is awarded  
for desertion of the flag,  
for courage in the face of the friend,  
for the betrayal of unworthy ,  
and for the nonobservance of every order.

**Links for Pasko;**

- [Amnesty International and Greenpeace join forces on a cyber appeal for Grigory Pasko](#)
- [The Pasko case \(Bellona\)](#)