research group reported that, during 1981, employment was nearly 30% lower than during 1974, admittedly a boom year. But real wages for skilled workers declined by 16% and for the unskilled by 18% during 1981. Industrial production decreased by over 15% during 1981. During the first two months of 1982, vehicle sales fell by 58% over the same two months of 1981. Inflation continues at a rate of well over 100 percent. Under such conditions, even the control of subversion, now largely accomplished, seems rather expensive. The industrialists and labor leaders have had enough.

Aware of their growing unpopularity, even among sectors willing to go along with repression, the military has debated the possibilities of opening up government to acceptable political groups. These debates are acrimonious because not all officers of the armed forces would agree that their mission is accomplished, that their dirty war is over. Many fear reprisals for atrocities committed if civilians return to government and many fear the loss of privileges or budget cuts.

Given the recent history of Argentina and the present situation, the explanation of the Falklands or Malvinas policy is perhaps more understandable. The nation has been, for the last fifty years, under enormous pressure as demonstrated by increasing social disintegration, political failure and the legitimisation of a xenophobic nationalism. Its future, barring an unpredictable revolution of its basic structures, would appear to be tragic.

Visions of a thaw in the Cold War

— Peter Ormonde

English historian E.P. Thompson is a major force in the British and European peace movements. His latest book Zero Option, due for Australian release later this year, is a collection of essays, articles and pamphlets from the last two years. The topics range from Thompson’s analysis of international relations, through polemics against conservative academics and politicians, to a scathing piece on the recent war in the South Atlantic — the War of Thatcher’s Face.

The book is published by the Merlin Press. Below, Peter Ormonde gives an outline of Thompson’s ideas on disarmament and politics.
Undoubtedly, the MX missile will be the greatest single artifact of any civilisation. It will be the ultimate temple of exterminism. The rockets in their shelters, like giant menhirs pointing to the sky, will perform for the free West not a military but a spiritual function. They will keep the evil spirits at bay, and summon worshippers to the phallic rites of money. Within the aura of those gigantic circles, the high priests of ideology will perform ritual sacrifices of taxes. In distant outposts of the faith, at Westminster, Brussels, and the Hague, Druidical servitors will bow inow to the West and incant missilic runes.

Many Millenia afterwards, visiting archeologists from another planet will dig among the still radioactive embers and debate the function of the great temple. The debate will be in vain. For the temple will be erected to celebrate the ultimate dysfunction of humanity: self-destruct.*

E.P. Thompson has an apocalyptic vision. It is a vision shared by a growing number of Europeans and others who, like Thompson, are fighting those pressures driving the European juggernaut towards nuclear annihilation.

Thompson has a soft spot for visionaries, especially those with an apocalyptic vision. One of the most perceptive and sensitive passages in his epic work *The Making of the English Working Class* was devoted to a portrait of Joanna Southcott, “a simple and at times self-doubting woman”, a prophetic leader of a fundamentalist Christian cult from the opening of the last century. Southcott warned her contemporaries: “The midnight hour is coming to you all, and will burst upon you. I warn you of dangers that now stand before you for the time is at hand for the fulfilment of all things.”

*The Making of the English Working Class* is an extraordinary piece of historical writing permeated by Thompson’s thorough-going commitment to a concept of social change as a historical process in which humankind is the determining agent.

Thompson is violently opposed to any

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* "The MX project has now (February 1982) been cut down in size and shifted in site, no doubt in response to my criticisms." (Note in the original article.)
political philosophy that accepts the notion of pre-determination. For Thompson, humankind makes its own history; the outcome of any historical struggle is dependent on the interventions of political forces and social groupings.

The prophet Southcott was moved by a hell-fire Christianity: a cataclysmic moment of judgment delivered by a vengeful god. The agent of Thompson's Armageddon is a lot closer to home — it resides in the ideological labyrinths of the military-industrial-political complexes of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Thompson's judgment will be delivered by the peoples of Europe and eventually the world — or it will rain down from a thousand anonymous delivery systems.

"Exterminism"

Thompson has another vision — a European (leading to a global) upsurge of popular protest against the grinding mills of "exterminism" — that social/cultural/economic complex that keeps the world frozen on the edge of nuclear destruction.

E.P. Thompson is a respected (if controversial) historian but he is probably more widely known these days as a prominent activist in the European Nuclear Disarmament movement. His avalanche of articles, pamphlets, speeches and talks are also striking sympathetic chords in North America, the Pacific and, significantly, within Eastern Europe. His ideas have provoked a sharp reaction from the political hierarchies of both East and West.

Thompson identifies the threat to human survival not simply as aggressive imperialism or the death throes of a corrupt and vicious economic system. Rather, he sees a self-reproducing reciprocal suspicion and antagonism that has been embedded into the economic, political and social structures of both blocs.

Thus, just as Thompson hails the growing rumblings of discontent about US domination from within NATO, he also lauds recent moves in Romania, East Germany and Poland towards a greater economic and ideological, political and military independence. Thompson sees the development of an independent and autonomous movement for democracy within both East and West as intrinsically linked with the issues of disarmament and the regeneration of an international order based on diplomacy and discourse.

In this series of essays, notably Beyond the Cold War and Notes on Exterminism, the last stage of civilisation, Thompson argues that the ruling elite of the USSR, by accepting the arguments of a "defensive" nuclear weapons system and deterrence, locked the Eastern bloc into much the same ideological and economic strictures as apply to the Western " arsenals of freedom".

Carried on by the chronic inertia inherent in its bureaucratic structure, the USSR, Thompson argues, strove for parity with the US during the post-Khrushchov years under the tutelage of the current leadership which has close links with the USSR's already well-developed, though in many instances, technologically inferior, military-industrial-political complex.

"No profit" claim

The vulgarised marxism that claims that the USSR has no profit motive and therefore no need for weapons adopts a mechanical and simplistic view of the problem, reducing the complex political/ideological forces underlying militarism to an artificial, contrived shibboleth. One simply has to examine recent history (USSR-China, Afghanistan, Kampuchea, China-Viet Nam, Poland) to put to rest that other reassuring formulation that socialism, by definition, is an anti-militarist force for peace.

In the political vacuum of Soviet orthodoxy these "events" are rearranged and reinterpreted as expressions of that fundamental antagonism: Imperialism versus socialism, reaction — progress, them and us. Thompson thinks it unlikely that many will
find the apportioning of blame a very rewarding task when the larger part of Europe lies in ashes.

It is the world-view that allows such a distortion, perpetuated by entrenched interests on both sides, that is at the centre of the problem. Thompson argues that the only solution lies with increasing democratic control over the decisions of both blocs and the assertion of new priorities.

That the justification for Soviet armaments is wearing thin is shown by the fact that the workers of Western Europe are taking little consolation from the assertion that the SS-20s targeted on their families are "purely defensive".

The truth, according to Thompson, is that there can be no "defensive" nuclear weapon that works by annihilating the civilian populations of the opposing country — or those who unfortunately happen to live within striking distance of either superpower's missile silos.

"Both superpowers are armed for instant and annihilating attack," Thompson writes. "Barbed wire, pillboxes, trenches, anti-tank guns — the accessories of a Maginot Line — might be characterised as defensive weapons, but ICBMs may not."

Now, according to Thompson, both blocs are subject to similar economic pressures and distortions arising from the increasing militarisation of their economies. Longer lead times in research and development, pressures for larger production runs to reduce unit costs, and the need to keep the weapons industries producing, innovating, planning to maintain skills and capacity ... all these pressures apply for both the corporate and the socialist-based economies. Of course, they are manifested differently and the political responses of the state are different but together they serve to maintain and enhance the "deterrence" industries of both blocs, and each other.

An economy in which the manufacture of nuclear weapons is the "leading sector" — around which are clustered the most innovative industries — in much the way the motor car industry has stimulated Western industrial growth this century is the epitome of exterminol production.

The logic of deterrence has led to a situation where there are sufficient warheads to obliterate Europe 30 times. Is it of much importance whether NATO can do it 15½ times while the Warsaw Pact can only manage 14½, Thompson asks.

Thompson argues that the ideology of the Cold War has penetrated the economic and social structures and the culture of both societies.

Unfortunately, while the growing symbiosis between military, political, industrial and ideological wings of "US Imperialism" is all too apparent, secrecy and lack of public accountability screen such a process in the USSR. However, the career of the present Soviet leadership and Leonid Brezhnev is a clear barometer of the relationship between the Soviet military and political apparatuses. The same applies in other Warsaw Pact countries, such as Poland, to varying degrees.

Reagan's efforts to whip up the Cold War mentality of the 1950s have met with, at best, mixed success. Internally, the xenophobia whipped up by Reagan, Thatcher and Fraser has exploited people's willingness to be diverted from immediate economic and domestic crises.

The failure of the US initiative to boycott the Olympics, the failure to even maintain an effective ban on sales of "strategic technology" to the USSR by US corporations, and the current inability to halt the European-USSR gas deal, point to the obvious and indisputable fact that times have changed since the 1950s.
I'm enough of a "determinist" to believe that there are solid economic foundations beneath this shift. Increasing trade between East and West, including heavy borrowings by the Eastern Bloc have fostered alternative interests to the almost total economic and political dependency of the 1950s allowing, in fact, demanding some moves towards political independence from within NATO and an increasing unwillingness to submerge lucrative trade deals to the propaganda interests of the USA. Perhaps no case is more illustrative of this conflict that the perplexing muddle Doug Anthony gets into every time the idea of blocking wheat and wool sales to the Soviets is suggested.¹

Reagan cannot turn back the clock and eliminate the progress of the last 30 years. That's not to say Reagan's Cold War is any less dangerous than its predecessor. If anything, it looks more desperate, more "adventurous", a full-blown confrontation and more "thinkable".

However, Thompson not only perceives the dangers of this instability but also the positive developments and potentials for change that underlie Reagan's desperation.

I have concentrated very much on the "heretical" substance of Thompson's apocalyptic vision of a relentless exterminism, but in this collection of essays and articles Thompson devotes a substantial space to describing the development of the massive groundswell of protest in opposition to exterminism currently building up in Europe (both East and West).

For very obvious reasons, Thompson cannot prescribe the ideological composition of this movement in detail, but he can give some general indications of the positive goals for which the movement strives. These include firstly: disarmament and resumption of conciliation and detente (but on a much-expanded basis, involving interests other than those of the two superpowers), increasing economic, political and social (cultural) independence and, critically, the struggle for increased democracy and human rights.

Certainly, the Australian left has been involved in the developing movement around the principles of non-alignment. However, some of the broader social and political issues raised by Thompson and the vast European movement he reflects have yet to be decisively hammered out here.

Thompson writes with a brilliant and, at times, poetic style using devastating satire and an evilly-black humour to get his message across. This particular collection of his recent writings is easily readable. In fact, it'll probably just whet your appetite for more of this remarkably creative marxist. His attacks on the Haigs, Reagans, Thatchers and more anonymous gnomes who inhabit the fungus-laden recesses of the deterrence bunker are timeless pieces of polemical writing. Don't miss them.

NOTES:
1. One of the most comprehensive ans stimulating books on this following this line of argument is Mary Kaldor's The Disintegrating West (Pelican, 1979).