

Edinburgh Art Festival 2024 – Cold War Scotland

In 1946 the Second World War was over. The Cold War, however, had just begun.

It was to last for over forty years, during which time Washington and Moscow vied for position while British citizens were advised that, in the event of a nuclear attack, they should hide under tables or jump into ditches.

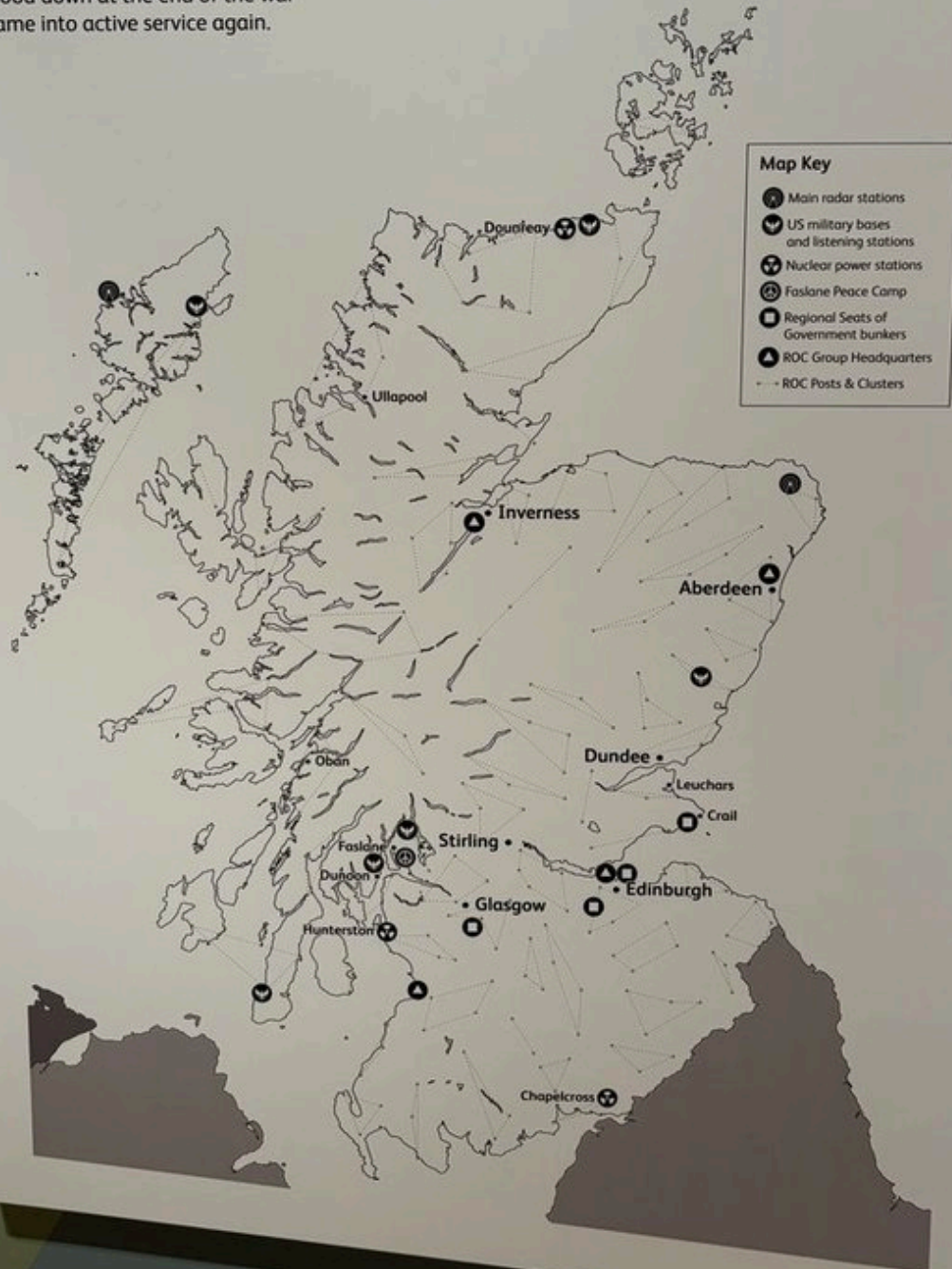
A new exhibition at The National Museum of Scotland offers vivid insights into this period of worldwide instability, one in which thousands of Scots, military and civilian, took part both at home and abroad, and Scotland itself became a strategic base for NATO.

'An iron curtain has descended across the continent.'

Winston Churchill, 1946

Mapping Cold War Scotland

Military sites from the Second World War were reused and expanded to accommodate new technology and the arrival of US troops and weapons. Radar stations, bunkers and observation posts that had been stood down at the end of the war came into active service again.



As the war ended, the superpowers who had united to defeat Hitler no longer had a common cause. Instead America and the West formed the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, while the

Soviet Union and its allies signed the Warsaw Pact. Although Washington and Moscow narrowly avoided direct confrontation, their differences were played out elsewhere – often in former colonies, including Korea, Vietnam, Aden and Afghanistan. Scottish soldiers died in many of these conflicts. Meanwhile another ideological battle was starting at home, with grassroots opposition growing not only to nuclear weapons but also to nuclear power.

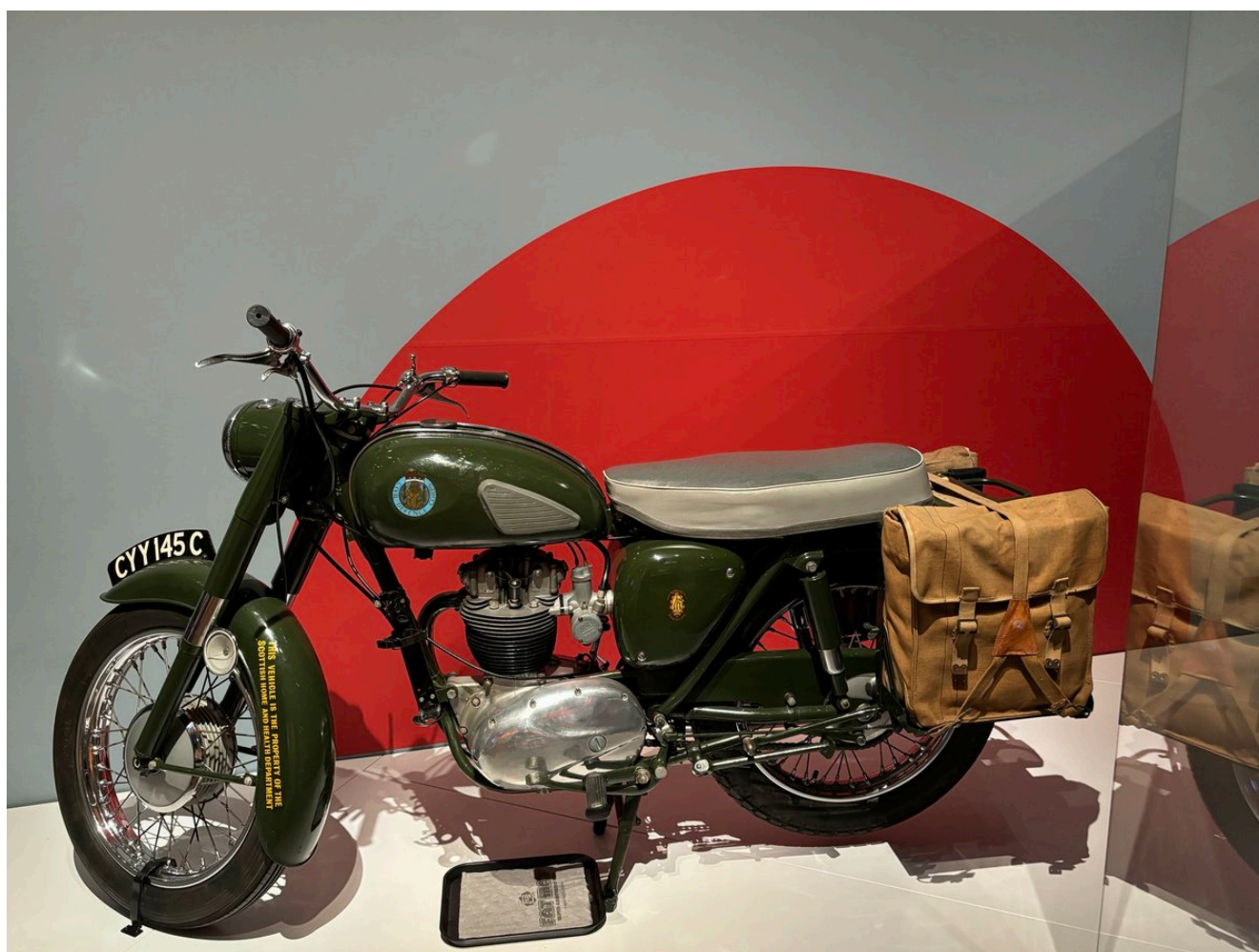


Hand painted map showing likely extent of nuclear fallout (c.1980: artist unknown)

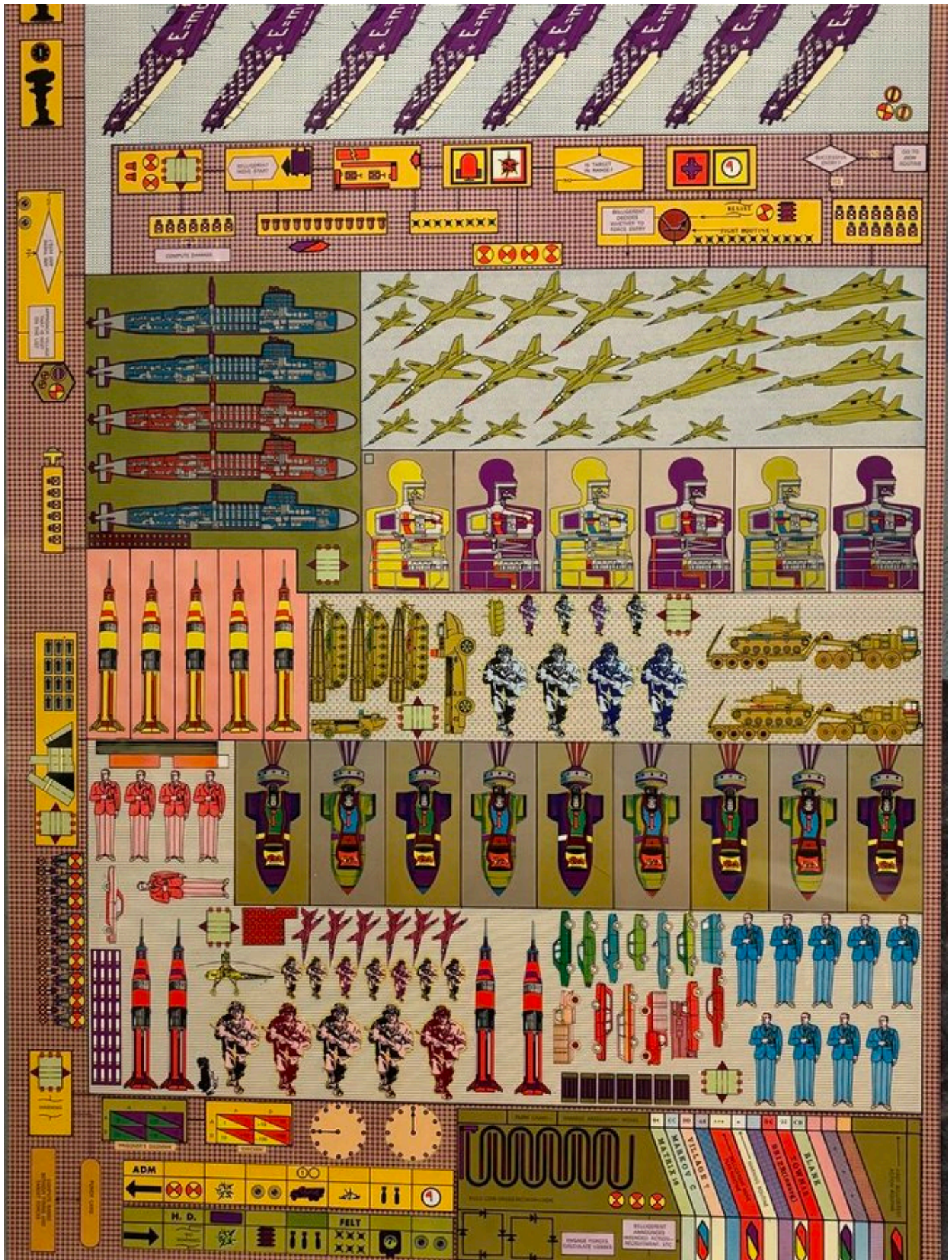
Scotland's geography and landscape made it a prime base for NATO defences. Sites left over from the war were repurposed, especially on the east coast; listening posts, bunkers and radio stations were re-opened, and British and American military personnel were deployed from Inverness to East Lothian, Dounreay to Dunoon.

Cold War Scotland includes maps showing the various

installations (and a *hand painted* one showing the effects of nuclear fallout relative to the distance from the blast), and also the sites of nuclear power stations – for, as a new age dawned, nuclear power was being promoted as the answer to the world's energy needs. Power stations appeared at Hunterston, Chapelcross and, yet again, Dounreay, where Scotland's first nuclear reaction took place in 1957.



This exhibition features everything from monitoring equipment to the 'Survive to Fight' protective clothing issued to the armed forces. There's a motorbike provided to the Royal Observer Corps, a section of the first transatlantic cable that facilitated the Washington-Moscow hotline (which actually consisted of two teletypewriters, to avoid spoken misunderstandings) set up in 1963, and a screenprint and lithograph by Sir Eduardo Paolozzi taking the viewer through the decision-making process of a Cold War military response to enemy action.



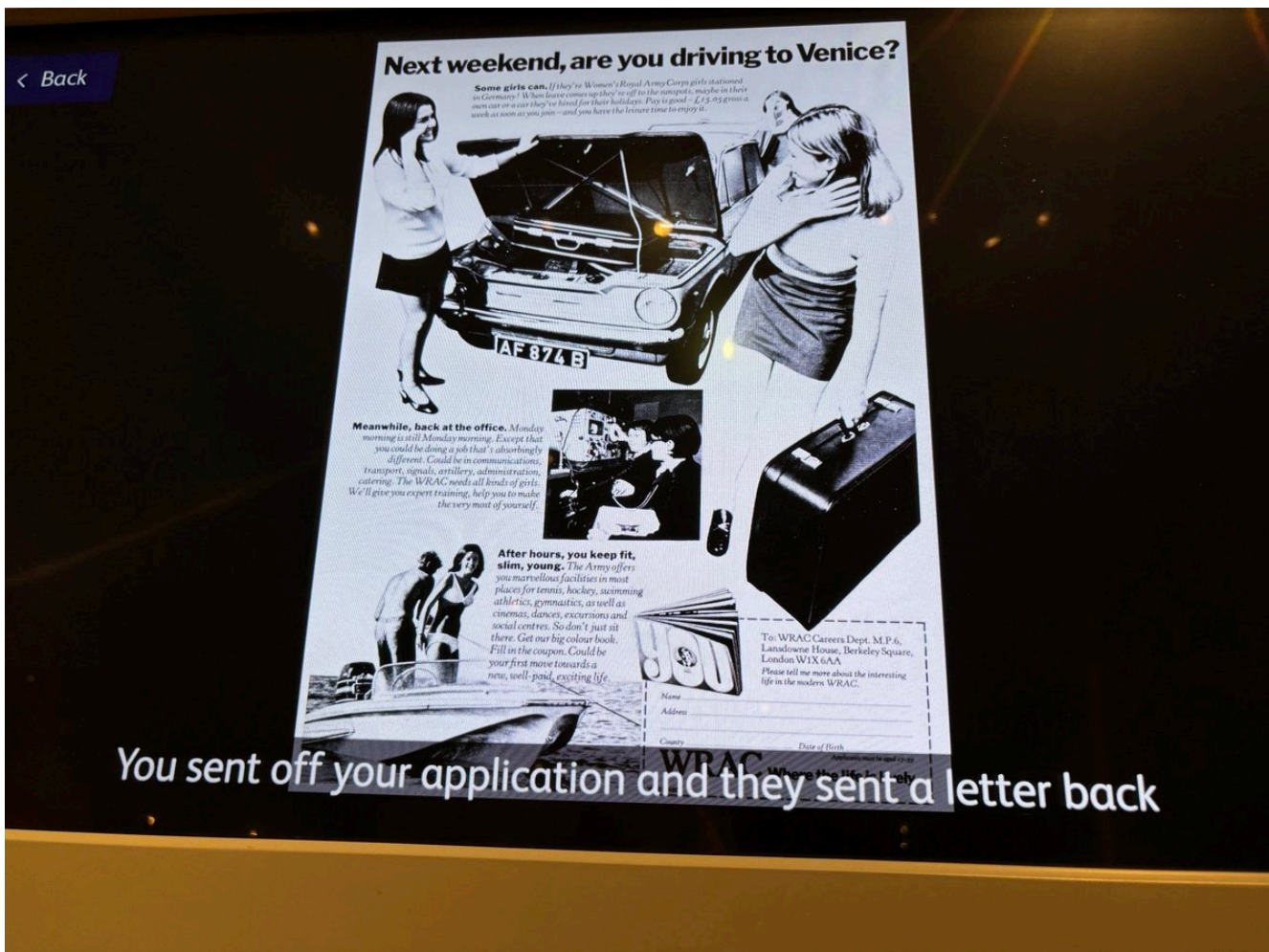
Sir Eduardo Paolozzi: Agile Coin Gross Decision Logic from the portfolio Zero Energy Experiment Pile (Z.E.E.P.) (1970) (on loan from National Galleries Scotland)

As is so often the case though, it's the personal stories of

those who lived through these times that really bring what is now history to life.



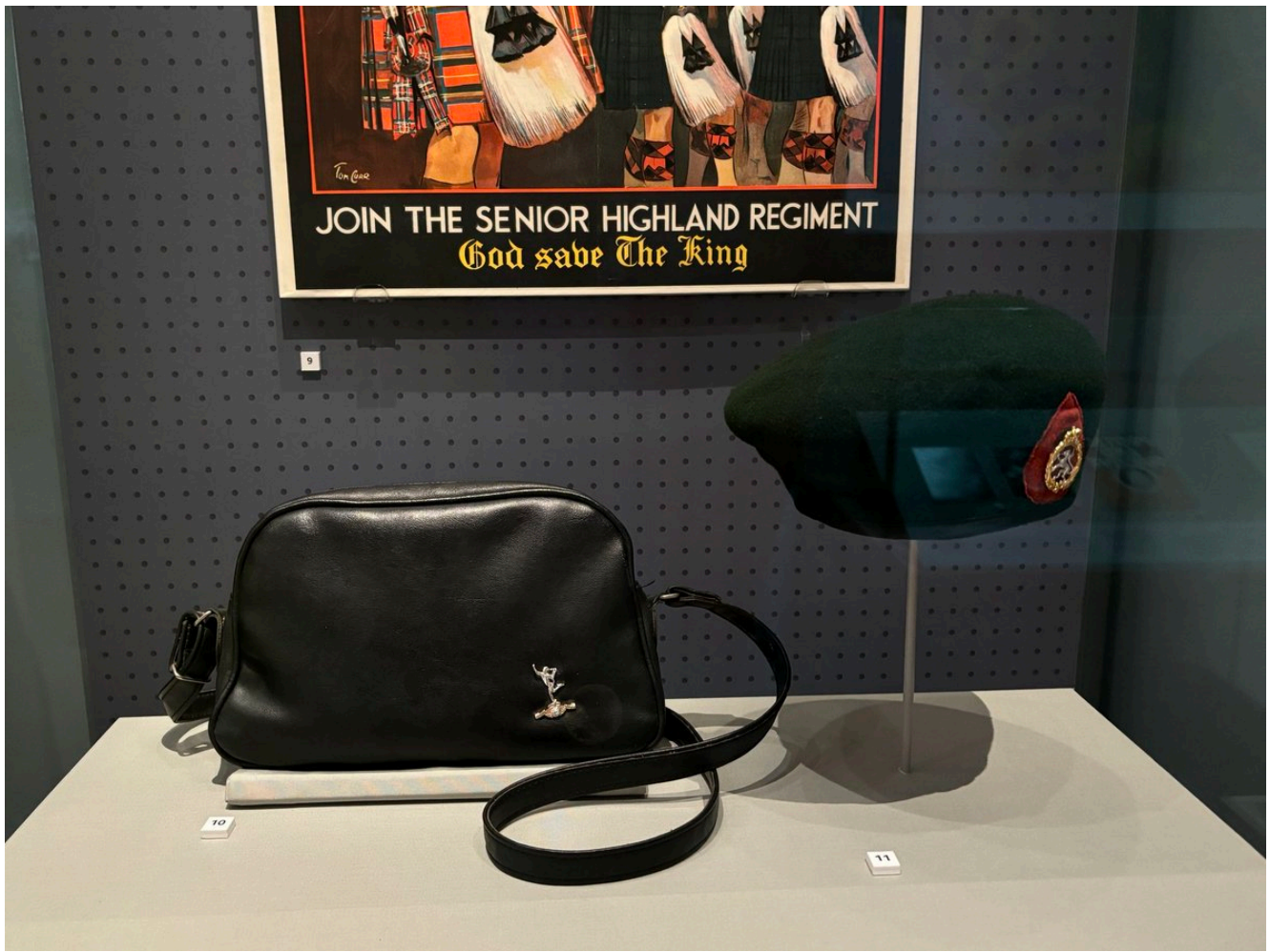
In 1975 Isabel Jackson from Kilwinning in Ayrshire was intrigued by an advert in a teenage girls' magazine. "Are you driving to Venice this weekend?" it asked. "These girls can." "These girls" were members of the Women's Royal Army Corps stationed in Germany. Isabel couldn't wait to join up, and soon she was a switchboard operator on a base in Bielefeld.



Interviewed today, she clearly has wonderful memories of her time there. She felt she was doing a worthwhile job while also enjoying the social life provided by the NAAFI – “we had quizzes, dances and of course, it being the 1970s, discos. It was happy times.” On recruitment she was given a SOXMIS card explaining how to look out for Soviet Military Mission cars (which were to be reported immediately), and she was also shown photographs of “known KGB associates”

‘It was quite daunting.’

Isabel’s uniform – complete with WRAC hat – are displayed, and in the film she demonstrates how the latter was to be worn, rakishly, above one eyebrow. There’s even a WRAC handbag.



WRAC handbag and hat

Meanwhile, back in 1960, Aberdeen University student Kristin Barrett joined a fledgling Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Her boyfriend had a car and she persuaded him to take her to Faslane (home of the UK's Trident missile deterrent),

'He wasn't very brave. I wanted to sit down but he wouldn't.'

So she joined the campaigners blocking the access road to the site herself. She also took part in one of the Easter Marches from Aldermaston to London, and later the 1982 peace march from Inverness to Edinburgh. By then she had a young daughter, so she simply took her along with her,

'People were kind, we went from community to community.'



Kristin demonstrates the formation of the CND sign, which was based on semaphore

Kristin bought lots of badges to hand out to potential supporters.

'It made people who didn't want to speak out but were in sympathy feel they were doing their bit...it's important in politics to give people a choice of how they express themselves.'



Kristin's handwritten instructions on how to make a 'peace pram' (which she used to campaign in Blairgowrie every Saturday) are displayed too.



A PRAM STALL ?

- Why?** It gives Jo Bloggs a chance to buy the CND badge she's been after for ages. It's a great focus for open-air campaigning. And it makes a good press photo!
- When?** Any time you can get a couple of campaigners together. Suggest Saturday morning.
- Where?** Any focal point - small town centre, or suburban post office. Better on a wide pavement.
- How?** Decide on your issue (Trident? Civil Pretence?) and on your strategy (ballot? petition? soap-box?). Send for \geq £30 of balloons, badges + stickers (suppliers in Sanity). Stock up on SCND News, local leaflets. Decorate your pram (or push-chair or trolley) with posters, badges cloth, stickers and balloons, and you're ready!
- When you're out there, SMILE and offer a free leaflet, aiming for a relaxed chat rather than for an instant signature. Fresh-air campaigning really does work, and it's fun!
- Permission?** Play it by ear. If you mention to the local police station that you are going to do some petitioning, they won't object, and are unlikely to worry if you sell a few badges too. If, like me, you get addicted to peace peddling, invest a tenner in a pedlar's certificate from your local police.
- GOOD LUCK!** From the Tayside Peace Pedlar (0250) 4594

While East and West engaged in a perilous standoff, others were attempting to build bridges. The Scotland-USSR Friendly Society organised INTOURIST holidays to the Soviet Union.

Visitors brought back cigarette cases, cameras, ornaments – and more badges; one even had an evening dress made from silk purchased in Samarkand. Soviet fish factory ships often visited Shetland and Ullapool. Their crews made friends with the locals and bartered with Soviet cigarettes. And in 1962 the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich was Guest of Honour (much to the disapproval of a Catholic Herald journalist) at the Edinburgh International Festival, and, despite his numerous bodyguards and “layers of KGB”, the British guitarist Julian Bream managed to meet him.

WELCOME TO THE SOVIET UNION 78

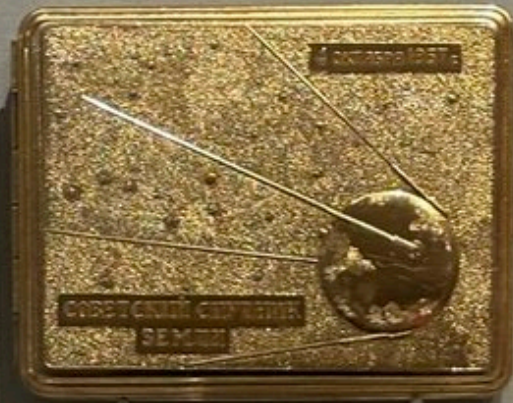
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In 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed, and – in theory at least – the Cold War ended. US Navy submarines left Holy Loch, and over the next few years various military bases closed. **Cold**

War Scotland ends with photographs from a project by Shetland based artists Roxane Permar and Susan Timmins. They explore Cold War sites, using sculpture, sound, film and photography to interpret these spaces; their images of abandoned ROC posts, listening and radar stations were taken on Shetland and at Inverbervie in Aberdeenshire.



(c) Roxane Permar and Susan Timmins

Meanwhile the arguments about nuclear power rumble on. On 26 April 1986, No 4 Reactor at Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant exploded. As part of the fallout, rain clouds carrying radioactive material contaminated grazing pastures across Scotland. Exhibited here is a Geiger counter issued to farmers in Ayrshire that same year to check the radioactivity of their sheep. Restrictions on the movement, sale and even slaughter of animals recording high levels remained in place for decades.



The last entry on the timeline displayed at the entry to the exhibition is this:

'2300s - monitoring of decommissioned nuclear sites

anticipated to end.'

Cold War Scotland is an excellent exhibition, with plenty to interest everyone, not just those with personal memories of those years. On the day I visited, young children were asking their parents lots of questions about everything from secret bunkers ("Did everyone have one?") to four minute warnings.

Cold War Scotland is at the National Museum of Scotland, Chambers Street until 26 January 2025. The museum is open 10am-5pm every day and admission is free.

At 10.15am on Thursday 22 August, Wednesday 25 September and Tuesday 29 October you can join a **Morning Tour** with the exhibition curator. Tickets cost £12 (£10 concessions.)

At 2pm on Thursday 5th September, **Spotlight On: Cold War Scotland** offers a talk delving deeper into the stories featured in the exhibition. It will explore how the Cold War influenced Scottish lives, politics, landscapes and technologies. Tickets £5/£4.

For more information and to book tickets for the tour or talk, visit <https://www.nms.ac.uk/exhibitions-events/?museum=1445>.