

74 YEARS AFTER HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI BOMBINGS

Spiralling anger and nuclear dangers



shaped city. Americans had been bombing Japan for months except in two key cities: Kyoto and Hiroshima. A rumour was lurking around, however, that the Americans were saving something special for Hiroshima. The prefectural government, sensing impending attacks, had ordered completion of wide fire lanes, hoping it would contain fire caused by raids. The depraved radioactivity of the fire to come was something that no one had comprehended.

August 6 started out as a tranquil day until at exactly five minutes past eight, a titanic flash of light cut through the sky: the Enola Gay. The rumour now manifested a deafening reality of hell on earth: a lethal "Little Boy" that killed 100,000 people. For Hatsuyo Nakamura, a Hiroshima resident, the atomic bomb reflected that unlucky split second that buried her children in debris, and somewhere nearby, her mother, brother and sister too. The horrid aftermath unfolding around her reached so far behind human mind that it was impossible to think it was caused by human beings, like the scientists who designed the disaster, the pilot of Enola Gay, or President Truman, or even Japanese militarists who had helped to fill her surviving lungs with the aftermath of radiation, who had brought the spoils of war to her weak and destitute bones.

"The bombing almost seemed a natural disaster—one that it had simply been her bad luck, her fate (which must be accepted), to suffer," wrote the New Yorker journalist John Hersey in his article "Hiroshima: The Aftermath" in July 1985, narrating Nakamura and other survivors' stories four decades after the nuclear nightmare. Almost 39 years earlier, in August 1946, a year after Japan's surrender,

Hersey had published his first coverage of Hiroshima—a 30,000-word account of six survivors. Ominously titled “Hiroshima”, it birthed a new kind of journalism—non-fiction story-telling with the elements of fiction—and changed the construction of historical narratives by extrapolating from underneath the cataclysmic mesh of politics and militarisation in war, the simplest yet omnipresent cost and witness to it all: human lives.

Today, 74 years after the worst apocalyptic human actions, Hersey's *Hiroshima* seems more relevant than ever, as possession of nuclear weapons has become a modicum of economic superiority, and global and regional domination.

On February 2, 2019, first the United States and then Russia announced a formal suspension of their obligations to their Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, signed in 1987 by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, which forbade the US and the then Soviet Union from producing, testing or deploying mid-ranged, ground-launched weapons. The exit is to officially take place on Friday, August 10. One of the reasons stated by President Trump included

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Japanese troops rest in the Hiroshima railway station after the atomic bomb explosion.

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his frustration that China was not involved in the treaty. Arms control advocates have been warning that the termination of the INF along with trade tensions can provoke a nuclear arms race. And that seems to be a very near reality: on August 3, 2019, US Defense Secretary Mark Esper told reporters that the US was considering deploying new missiles in Asia, a move likely to anger their Chinese competitors, which also have been known to conceal and manoeuvre production of ballistic missiles.

There are plenty of other examples of nuclearisation in today's world, painted all across world politics this year, such as the Iran-US relations that teetered on the knife edge of an imminent nuclear war, after the US imposed sanctions on Iran in May 2018. While the turbulence has subdued, it is nowhere near over. Last Wednesday, the US imposed sanctions on Iran's foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, and according to the

parliamentary news agency Iceana, Zarif said this Saturday that Iran will take further steps to reduce its compliance with the landmark nuclear deal from 2016. On the other hand, following President Trump's historic visit to North Korea, Wall Street Journal's intelligence analysts concluded that "the secretive state is accelerating its production of long-range missiles and fissile materials, both key components in nuclear weapons."

Despite these ongoing issues between the nuclear states, India and Pakistan—closely backed by the US and China, and with 140 and 150 nuclear weapons that each possesses respectively—are the only two nuclear powers to have “bombed” each other in history, earlier this year in February, after a Kashmiri suicide-bomber, allegedly belonging to the Pakistani-based Jaish-e-Mohammad, killed 40 Indian troops. India’s subsequent launch of airstrikes—and as long as the diplomatic negotiations were being eschewed and

threats of “all eventualities” were being fired, the threats of the age-old border conflict spiralling towards a flashpoint for a future nuclear war—was certainly real and deadly. The current global situation reflects the proliferation risks of nuclear power, which arguably reconstructs the chances of history repeating itself, in the midst of a regional or international crisis.

That's precisely why revisiting the destructive birth of the nuclear age is crucial. But this commonly means fixating ourselves on the planned Hiroshima attacks, and narratives that stress the overbearing power of science that ended hundreds of thousands of human lives in a matter of minutes. But the massive human cost was rendered boundless and innumerable not only by the atomic chemicals, but the war-numbered heartlessness of those who, three days after Enola Gay wiped out Hiroshima, continued on the second mission of Operation Centerbomb II to bomb the urban and industrialised Japanese city, Kokura. The atomic payload used this time, called Fat Man, was signed by the pit crew who had assembled it, some had even written messages—"Here's to you" and "a second kiss for Hirohito." (Similar distasteful nationalism at the expense of war undergirded people's reactions on social media to the Kashmir turmoil this year.)

For reasons still debated upon by historians, the visual bombing of Kokura couldn't be managed, and in forty-five minutes or so, a secondary target was decided and destroyed: Nagasaki, where nearly twice as many were killed and injured. President Truman himself had been surprised by the second bombing, coming as it did so soon after the mass destruction of the first. The day after Nagasaki, Truman issued his first affirmative command regarding the bomb: no more strikes without his express authorisation, one he failed to give earlier. Even if Hiroshima—as the first devastating planned nuclear attack in human history—remains the most prominent deterrent example, Nagasaki, with greater consequences, saw the first use of a nuclear weapon to wage raw anger. Nations today must ensure it will be the last.

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Why despair is beating hope



misogyny, or homophobia, but rather that we grant them efficacy. We believe that extremist ideals must be combated, because we implicitly consider them potent enough to attract new adherents, and contagious enough to spread.

At the same time, we tend to take positive ideals less seriously, instinctively disbelieving that it is possible to make meaningful progress toward closing the wealth gap or ushering in a zero-

as unrealistic. "That resolution will not pass the Senate," she said, "and you can take that back to whoever sent you here and tell them."

Now consider the case of the white supremacist who murdered 51 mosque-goers in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March: he granted his obnoxious ideals efficacy. His stated goal was to reverse "The Great Replacement" of white Europeans by Africans and Middle Easterners, which, he claimed, would also "save the environment." That is plainly absurd. And yet, when a 19-year-old murdered one person and wounded three in an attack on a California synagogue in April, we paid attention to the fact that he may have made online references to the Christchurch shooter's manifesto. And in both cases, we openly acknowledge that these men are the ideological offspring of the Norwegian white supremacist and mass murderer Anders Breivik.

achievable. Even in affluent New Zealand, true believers in the effort to end homelessness are setting themselves up for inevitable disappointment. Imagine a young medical researcher who dreams of curing cancer. By the end of her career, she has pioneered a revolutionary treatment for acute myeloid leukaemia. Technically, her dream was not realised. But would she have made the invaluable contribution that she did if she hadn't embraced the unrealistic dream of curing cancer?

Early in her term as prime minister, Ardern promised to halve child poverty within ten years. Her opponent in the 2017 election, Bill English of the governing National Party, long rejected targets on child poverty on the grounds that it could not be measured. He eventually committed to a comparatively modest target as a shock election debate tactic. If Ardern manages to remain in office for another ten years, I would wager that child poverty will not have been halved. Her promise will not have been kept. But like the disappointed cancer researcher, Ardern will be able to point to efforts that made a measurable difference.

Reducing childhood poverty, like tackling climate change, requires widespread human cooperation and some degree of individual sacrifice. The problem is that it is easier for us to conceive of a technological fix for complex social problems than it is to imagine politicians and citizens uniting around a common cause. And, because we view technological hurdles as superable, we have more resolve—and tend to be more tolerant of failure—when pursuing such goals. For example, though a fire took the lives of the Apollo 1 astronauts—Edward H. White II, Virgil I. “Gus” Grissom, and Roger B. Chaffee—NASA did not miss US President John F. Kennedy’s deadline for landing on the moon. Likewise, we quietly root for SpaceX CEO Elon Musk when he fantasizes about colonizing Mars.

Still, we cannot count on some beneficent billionaire to develop a new miracle technology that will save us from climate change. Only genuine cooperation can tackle that problem and many others like it.

Shared ideals can be powerful motivators, regardless of their moral content. Many among the first generation of Soviet revolutionaries genuinely believed in the vision of a

communist utopia free of human exploitation, and they made the necessary personal sacrifices to bring it about. It wasn't so long ago that we viewed modern-day Nazis as hopelessly deluded. Their occasional marches were almost a source of comic relief—stories saved for slow news days, alongside the pensioner who bequeaths a fortune to his cat. Now, we have to take Nazis seriously once again; we have to worry about the sacrifices they may be willing to make for an evil cause.

Sadly, we have no choice but to accept the perverse efficacy of their ideals; but nor should we ignore the potential power of positive ideals as engines for cooperation and moral progress. We should allow ourselves to indulge some of our more optimistic fantasies. They usually bear at least some fruit. And some fruit is better than none.

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carbon economy. Policies proposed to achieve such ethical ends are regarded as unrealistic non-starters, and the politicians who endorse them are regarded suspiciously or dismissed out of hand. Taken together, our biases lead us to cede the motivating power of idealism to the bad guys, when we could be harnessing it for the common good.

During the 2017 New Zealand general election, many commentators mocked the optimistic vision advanced by Labour Party leader Jacinda Ardern as “fairy dust.” Likewise, when Dianne Feinstein, a Democratic US senator from California, was approached by schoolchildren calling on her to endorse Green New Deal legislation, she dismissed their demands

Obviously, we should continue to worry about white-supremacist and other extremist ideals spreading online and resonating with some among us. But if we are going to take the persuasive power of such "influencers" seriously, we should do the same with positive ideals that may at first seem absurd. Sprinkled among Arden's "fairy dust" was the hope of eradicating student indebtedness and significantly reducing child poverty. Simply by taking these goals seriously, we can grant them the same kind of efficacy that we already impute to toxic ideologies. If we don't dismiss them out of hand, we can begin to think about how they might actually be realised.

No worthwhile moral ideal is fully

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