

Opinion – Reflecting on Hiroshima

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, AUG 9 2024

I am back again in Japan with Japanese peace institutes, marking this most solemn of events in the global peace calendar. On 6 August 1945 Hiroshima endured a traumatic human loss of statistically seismic proportion – followed on 9 August by equally devastating mass casualties in Nagasaki. The human and environmental impact of these bombs as a sole exemplar of tactically deployed nuclear weaponization, had equally catastrophic implications for the narrative of international relations. As I spoke briefly to Hiroshima's Mayor, Kazumi Matsui, he told me "even as almost all of the hibakusha (A-bomb victims and survivors) had now perished, their pained souls linger to remind the international community never again to repeat that evil day".

For Japan, national humiliation and the diminutive status of a hitherto divine Hirohito dynasty, conjured visions that eternal spirits had abandoned them. The atomic bomb accelerated a nuclear arms race between competing superpowers, and (subsequently) among regional adversaries, and transformed international relations. I also interviewed the Mayors for Peace, an international body sponsored by the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Their spokeswoman said, "no one else should suffer as we have. Our Hiroshima-Nagasaki Courses convey this message to future generations by exploring the facts of the bombings and the experiences of the hibakusha. Currently, Hiroshima-Nagasaki Peace Study Courses run at 78 universities, a third of them outside Japan..."

In his speech expressing concerns about Russia's prolonged war in Ukraine and Israel's ongoing attack on the Gaza Strip, Mayor Matsui added, "I wonder if the state of the world is deepening doubt and suspicion among nations and the public's belief that one must resort to force to resolve international problems". His words reverberated across the massive Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, as victims of the atomic bombing were remembered. The physical and psychological impact, and the torturous post-WW2 legacy of the atomic bomb, was felt way beyond the territorial borders of Japan. Yet a review of academic IR scholarship suggests alarming neglect of Hiroshima and Nagasaki Days and a memorialisation shrouded in political sensitivity.

These actions remain the only use of nuclear weapons in armed conflict. Scholars still debate the ethical and legal justification for the bombings. The significance of Hiroshima is perhaps most felt in this international legacy – in fashioning a culture of peace memorialisation that along with Vietnam, and most likely now Ukraine- serve as rallying points. Hiroshima/Nagasaki Days, while now enjoying greater diplomatic prominence, remain symbolic of the erstwhile neglect of peace memorialisation in the terrain of international relations. More frequently, peace ceremonies are indistinct from war remembrance so that their salience for improving international relations is largely lost.

It is also a matter of regret that while municipal authorities across the world have historically commemorated past battles, they have invariably allocated only meagre funds in memorialising peace. Opening a "Peace Museum" in Chicago in 1981, its founding director, Marianne Philbin regretted that war memorials were ubiquitous while her country possessed "no proper museum dedicated to building peace". Symbolically, this museum faced financial struggles with federal government. It has taken much independent initiative to progress the goal of peace memorialisation and to exhibit those (often intangible) fragments of cultural heritage that might constitute "a lexicon of peace". Such an object is meritorious in any part of the world but the challenge is all the more compelling in countries possessing a history as tragic as Japan's. The psychological nightmare which haunted post-WW2 Japan, and which cast a shadow over its reconstruction, is poignantly documented in Robert Jungk's, *Children of the Ashes*.

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In Japan, prefectural governments and NGO initiatives have made the post-WW2 peace museums movement an inspiration to international society and Hiroshima Day is their showcase. Yet the construction of such diverse “edifices to peace” in post-war Japan has not been without controversy, reflecting (and sometimes accentuating) underlying political tensions. The spirit of Hiroshima/Nagasaki has been at the centre of this museological pilgrimage. Often museological professionals have been more courageous, sometimes even in confrontation with state authorities.

Writing in August 2024, it is difficult not to be awestruck by the inspiration of Hiroshima/Nagasaki in the global memorialisation of peace. First of all, are the core of museums which explicitly possess “peace” in their title, and are dedicated to peace education through the visual arts. This would include Chicago’s Peace Museum (now a virtual project), the Peace Museum in Bradford UK, Oslo’s Nobel Peace Prize Museum, and indeed more than fifty distinctive museums across the world. Hiroshima and Nagasaki have encouraged new peace collections like Germany’s Peace Museum Meeder, the Peace Palace at The Hague, the League of Nations Museum in Geneva, and museums of “public peace-making activity” such as the Museum of the Olympic Games in Lucerne. This “family” of museums also incorporates the search for peace “within peoples” as in the Yi Jun Peace Museum in Holland whose founder has been lobbying for another Peace Museum strategically sited in the Korean de-militarised zone, to encourage future Korean reconciliation. At the heart of this activity, is an apocalyptic vision of nuclear holocaust which is why my most recent visit to Japan amplifies its significance in the international heritization of peace.

The peace flame of Japan imbues many different “issue-based” entities which have been formed in response to specific events. There are quite a number of Japanese museums of this type, such as Liberty Osaka, with its focus on human rights; Tokyo’s Children’s Peace Museum; Nagasaki’s Shokokumin Museum and the Poison Gas Museum on Okunoshima Island with its “righteous appeal” against chemical weapons. Japan finds solidarity in museums (such as Yad Vashem in Israel or Washington DC’s Memorial Museum) and interpretative centres at former concentration camps (e.g., Dachau and Bergen-Belsen in Germany, and Auschwitz in Poland). In recent years, peace centres have opened on the European war-sites of Caen and Verdun. Just as the battlefields of Flanders became equated with the dawn of a new era in war, so too have Hiroshima and Nagasaki assumed a symbolic place in the nuclear age.

This museological portrayal of peace in international relations is especially reflected in the revision of the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum which first opened in April 1996 and which offers a radical re-interpretation of modern Japanese history. This facility builds on traditional predecessors confined to displaying the human impact of the atom bomb. Predictably, the new museum has outraged many on the Japanese political “right”. By conceding the wrongs of Japanese military imperialism alongside the morality of nuclear war, it enrages Japanese military veterans.

The ethereal spirit of Hiroshima/Nagasaki is also an inspiration to “issue-based” facilities for peace memorialisation such as the emerging phenomena of museums of genocide like the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh, and genocide exhibits in the Rwandan capital, Kigali and the Burundian city, Bujumbura. Hiroshima/Nagasaki are thus invoked to visualize mass-scale horror. While there was a nascent peace museum tradition prior to the atom bomb, Hiroshima/Nagasaki propelled peace museologists across the world. The many “museums of non-violence” – notably the numerous Gandhi museums dotted around India and elsewhere – also reflect on the sacrilege of the Atom Bomb.

The issue of “presenting peace” cuts to the heart of the debate about war guilt and societal atonement. In contrast, the renewal of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum in recent decades has shown that progressive prefectural administrators are willing to put peace rather than the honour of the war dead, at the centre of its international relations. By transforming its galleries, the new Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum has become a refreshing vehicle of international relations. This museum is now an instrument of Japanese international relations purveying a “soft diplomacy” which seeks to give global prominence to Hiroshima/Nagasaki days. The expansion of the worldwide peace movement is evidence of the continuing dialogue concerning “museums of war and peace” and Hiroshima/Nagasaki Days are at the heart of that conceptualization.

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About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning and holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.