



Mushroom-shaped cloud and water column from the underwater Baker nuclear explosion of July 25, 1946. Photo taken from a tower on Bikini Island. (Image: pxhere.com, CCo Public Domain)

Hiroshima is Everywhere! Or: The Never-Ending Struggle

6 August 1945 was Day Zero in the history of our times. On that day it became clear that human beings are capable of annihilating the entire human species and completely destroying the planet. The struggle against this threat will never end.

Autor: Dr. Leo Ensel

is a researcher specialised on conflicts and intercultural training with a focus on "The Post-Soviet Regions and Central or Eastern Europe". Publications include "Fear and Nuclear Armaments, on the social psychology of unification", as well as studies on the perception of Germany in Post-Soviet states.



In the context of the new West-East-Conflict he focusses on overcoming false narratives, de-escalation and the reconstruction of trust.

The author is proudly independent and publishes on the above-named topics without following any national narrative.

On a Monday morning seventy-seven years ago, on 6 August 1945 at 8:16 am local time, a nuclear bomb was detonated above an inhabited area, for the first time. It exploded 580 metres above the Shima Hospital in the Japanese city of Hiroshima, generating temperatures of almost 4,000 degrees Celsius. At the time, the city was home to about 400,000 people and had been spared the bombardments of the war. The charge was dropped at an altitude of almost 10 kilometres by the American B-29 bomber, "Enola Gay". Three quarters of an hour earlier, another bomber had flown over the city, checking the weather conditions. It was a lovely, sunny day with perfectly clear skies. The bomb, comparable in its explosive power

to a present-day "tactical" nuclear weapon, had been named "Little Boy" by the American military forces.

Hundreds of thousands of "test victims"

More than 70,000 people died instantly. The bomb killed 90 per cent of the population within a radius of 500 metres around Ground Zero. Most of the victims were vaporised or burnt to a cinder. Within one second, the pressure wave obliterated 80 per cent of the inner town. A fire storm destroyed eleven square kilometres of the city, driving the mushroom cloud typical of nuclear ex-

plosions up to a height of 13 kilometres. Twenty minutes later, highly contaminated radio-active fallout started coming down on the area.

Deaths: 282,000, fifty per cent of these on the day of the bombing, thirty-five per cent in the following three months, fifteen per cent after November 1945. (The numbers vary. However, even using the lowest estimate of 170,000 victims does not lessen the horror.) Diseases suffered by the survivors: diseases of the blood (pernicious anaemia, leukaemia), skin diseases caused by burns (keloid growths), diseases of the liver, cataracts, post-traumatic stress disorders. To this day, people are dying of cancers caused by the bomb.

Three days later, on 9 August at 11:02 am, the US detonated another nuclear bomb – this one called “Fat Man” – above the harbour town Nagasaki in the south west of Japan. Deaths: between 60,000 and 80,000. Injured: about 75,000.

Months later, the US Strategic Bombing Survey sent doctors to the largely destroyed and contaminated cities. Their task was not, however, to provide medical assistance to the countless wounded and highly traumatised people. Their task was to scientifically assess the effects of nuclear radiation on the human organism. From the American point of view, cynically, the hundreds of thousands of people were “test victims”, they were “human guinea pigs”. A statement was circulated later on, claiming that the nuclear bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to force Japan to surrender. This was a propaganda lie.[1]

“End Time” and the “End of Time”

August 6, 1945 was not just a day of terrible catastrophe. After all, the history of humankind is full of misdeeds and horrendous crimes. What makes this date a turning point – not only for the history of humankind, but also for the entire planet – is the fact that from this day on, human beings have been capable of annihilating themselves as well as, possibly, all life on this globe.



Anti-war demonstration in Bonn, 10 June 1982, with a view of the Rheinauen (Image: Mummelgrummel, wikimedia.org, BY-CA)

The philosopher Günther Anders (1902–1992) was one of the first to take on the task of finding the appropriate words for this unprecedented – until then unimaginable for any philosopher or theologian – possibility of a man-made apocalypse. After all, what has not been put into words cannot be understood; it cannot be imagined – in fact, hardly even perceived. Towards the end of the fifties, he developed a benchmark text on this unprecedented event:



Hiroshima as the state of the world. On 6 August 1945, Hiroshima Day, we entered a new age. It is an age in which, at any moment, we can turn any place, even the earth as a whole, into a Hiroshima. We have become, modo negativo, all-powerful. However, since this also means that we can be annihilated at any moment, we have, simultaneously, become completely powerless. No matter how long it lasts, perhaps into eternity, this age will be the last: its defining characteristic, the possibility of self-annihilation, will never end – unless by means of the end itself.”

As a consequence, according to Anders, human existence must now be understood as “life in reprieve”. We have become “those-who-have-not-yet-been-annihilated”. The fundamental moral question, “How shall we live?”, has, therefore, been replaced by “Shall we live?” As Anders wrote: “For us, living the reprieve of the not-yet-annihilated, the ‘how’-query has only one answer: ‘We must ensure that this final, end time – one that might,

at any moment, suddenly become the end of time – becomes endless, and that the shift never takes place.”

Periods of resistance

The astute analyses by people like Günther Anders and Albert Einstein – “The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything – except how we think; as a result, we are drifting towards an unparalleled catastrophe. We need a new way of thinking, if humankind wishes to survive.” – were not entirely without consequence.

In July 1955, the philosopher Bertrand Russell called for a ban on any future world wars, since they would inevitably be fought with weapons of mass destruction. His appeal was signed by Nobel laureates in physics, Max Born and Albert Einstein, among others. Towards the end of the fifties, the new social movements “Fight Nuclear Extinction” and the “Easter March Movement” emerged in Germany in response to newly announced plans to equip the German armed forces with tactical nuclear weapons. When the Federal Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, downplayed the significance of these plans, describing them as “expanding the artillery”, eighteen highly respected German nuclear scientists (among them Nobel Prize winners Otto Hahn, Max Born and Werner Heisenberg) jointly signed the “Göttinger Manifesto”, unambiguously declaring a position of civil disobedience: “None of the signatories are willing to contribute to the production, testing or deployment of nuclear weapons in any way.”

During the sixties, the Easter March Movement lost some of its impetus – at the behest of the US, the German Social Democratic Party had cut off their financial support. However, during the early eighties, following the so-called NATO “Dual-Track Solution”, there was a renaissance of the movement alongside the new Peace Movement. Never before had so many people been aware of the threat of nuclear annihilation (and were willing to act) as in the eighties in western Europe, the US and, in very different circumstances, in some states of the Warsaw Pact.

For a brief, wonderful moment, in the guise of Mikhail Gorbachev's “New Thought”, Einstein's 1946 declaration had taken centre stage in world politics. And not in vain: thanks, above all, to the efforts of the Soviet administration of the day, 80 per cent of all nuclear warheads world-wide were destroyed!

2500 times the force of the Second World War

However, times have changed considerably since then. During the past two decades – exclusively on the initiative of the US – almost all disarmament and arms control agreements have been abandoned, including the most significant arms control treaty in the history of the world, the INF Treaty, signed by Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan towards the end of 1987.

It is not only since Russia's war against Ukraine that the Cold Warriors have been gaining ground: nuclear weapons have been regaining social acceptability for quite some time; a new, even more dangerous spiral of nuclear armament lies before us. Scenarios for possible first strikes – both in the US and in the Russian Federation – and concepts of limited and winnable nuclear wars are ready to be tried. And German politicians, particularly those of the previously pacifist Green Party, continually babble on about “nuclear sharing”. Meanwhile, taken together, the nuclear bombs currently distributed around the world have an explosive force of about 2500 times that of the entire Second World War!

At present, resistance to these developments is only just beginning, tentatively, to take shape, supported by groups such as the 2017 winner of the International Nobel Peace Prize, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), the organisation of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), and the initiative “Justitia et Pax”.^[2]

A dark cloud

The task that lies before us is huge: the goal must not only be pursued with unprecedented tenacity, but without illusions – and without an end!

This had also been masterfully brought to paper by Günther Anders in the late fifties: “No matter how powerful humankind may be – there is one thing that cannot be done: to undo what has been done! And, great as the capacity for learning may be, there is one thing that can never be learned – to unlearn what has been learned. The nuclear weapons that have been created can be destroyed; the knowledge of how to produce them will stay with us for ever.”

In other words: even if there were no longer a single nuclear warhead left, even if there were no tests, no test flights, no launching pads, and no nation working on the production of these weapons – the danger would remain. Since destroying these weapons would not destroy the capacity to produce them, we would still, for the entirety of future time, be in an apocalyptic situation – a situation in which humankind could annihilate itself.

According to Günther Anders, the necessary struggle to physically destroy all existing weapons of mass destruction – a cause frequently given voice to by Mikhail Gorbachev ^[3], ninety-one years old at the time of writing – must therefore be supported by another category of measures. These must prevent us from doing what we could do: producing the weapons that we cannot unlearn how to make.

“In other words, the transformation of humankind will have to be an ethical transformation. The understanding that this knowledge must be an absolute taboo will have to take root in every one of the

billions of human beings, becoming so deeply part of us that anyone even contemplating the use of this knowledge for political purposes will be condemned by all of humanity.”

The harsh reality is this: the struggle against the danger of nuclear self-annihilation will have to be a never-ending battle. Every coming generation – should there be any – will know that, like a dark cloud, the possibility of annihilation will always lie before them. To end with the words of the great philosopher of the nuclear age:



Every new day will be a day won. But never will a day be won that can guarantee a tomorrow. That goal can never be reached. What lies ahead of us is an eternity of uncertainty. And ours will be the never-ending task of ensuring that this eternal uncertainty does not end.”



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