Excerpt from Alia E. Dastagir, "How American culture went nuclear – without us realizing it," USA Today, August 6, 2015

In the beginning, the peace symbol didn't mean "peace" at all.

It was designed in 1958 as the logo for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, formed after the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, 70 years ago Thursday, followed three days later by the bombing of Nagasaki. Over time, the logo was appropriated – as symbols often are – and redefined. The peace sign is actually a combination of semaphore signals (flag code) for the letters N(uclear) and D(isarmament). Trippy.

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Those macabre events of 70 years ago have permeated our everyday lives in ways we aren't always aware. It's there, often inconspicuously, in symbols, in language and in popular culture. The question is whether there are consequences for our obtuseness.

During the Cold War, nuclear culture, which embodied the daunting reality of nuclear weapons, was widely recognized ("duck and cover" drills). When the war ended, the nuclear threat didn't disappear. It just became less noticeable.

"The end of the Cold War and the end of the expansion of the nuclear reactor industry caused a sea change," said Spencer Weart, a physicist, historian and author of the book Nuclear Fear: A History of Images. "Nuclear culture is still there, but it's now part of the collective unconscious."

Has that made people less aware of the very real threat of a nuclear war?

At the start of 2015, nine countries – the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea – possessed about 15,850 nuclear weapons, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Roughly 1,800 of these weapons are kept on high-alert status.

According to the Pew Research Center, Americans have become less concerned about a nuclear attack. A 2014 Pew report found 23% of respondents believe nuclear weapons are the greatest threat to the world. That's down from 25% in 2007 and 33% in 2002.

IMAGERY

The use of the nuclear disarmament logo by other social justice movements is an innocuous seizure. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which never copyrighted the symbol, is happy to see it widely used as a sign of peace, said activist Kate Hudson, general secretary for the organization.

But a discomforting nuclear image has also been appropriated by popular culture: the mushroom cloud.

After the atomic bombings, the mushroom cloud evoked a powerful, violent picture of enormous destruction. It took out two cities and killed thousands of people. It was serious imagery. Today, the mushroom cloud is sometimes used as a comedic tool. Kid annoys dad, trains crash, face goes red, mushroom cloud.

Robert Thompson, director of Syracuse University's Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture, finds the mushroom cloud's omnipresence in comic montages bewildering.

"It would be like using the entry gate to Auschwitz," Thompson said. "I wouldn't think it would be trivialized, but it has been."

LANGUAGE

People use language every day that's inspired by nuclear technology. "Going nuclear" has become a common expression for the ultimate or extreme action you take when all else has failed.

The term "ground zero," now attached to the site of the destroyed World Trade Center towers, originally referred to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the point on the ground below the detonation of the bomb. Thompson said the term became "resacralized" after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks.

When you heat up something in the microwave, you "nuke it." Even though what's actually happening in your microwave has nothing to do with nuclear energy. It shows how people have domesticated the power of the explosion. Albeit, incorrectly.

TV/FILM

Back in the 1960s, Weart says, a psychologist gave people a word-association test as part of a study. The tester said "nuclear," and the subjects answered with words like "bomb," "laboratory" and "war." The question was asked again in the 1990s, with subjects repeating many of the same words, except adding a new term: "The Simpsons."

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Since the nuclear age began, there's been an explosion of films and TV shows about the horrors of nuclear technology – some plausible (*The Day After*), some mythical (*Godzilla*).

But there's been a shift in how films deal with the nuclear equation.

Weart says the Terminator franchise is typical of this idea of the unconscious nuclear culture. "It shows very graphic images of nuclear war, but it's the background of the story. It assumes we understand it," Weart says. "It works its way into the subconscious because you never actually stop and think about it."

Excerpt from Susan Southard, "What U.S. citizens weren't told about the atomic bombing of Japan," Los Angeles Times, August 6, 2015

Today, Americans' silence on this crucial chapter of the atomic bomb story is, in large part, an extension of U.S. denial and suppression since the end of the war. Immediately after the bombings, high-level U.S. officials publicly – and adamantly – refuted news reports about the bombs' horrific aftereffects. Gen. Leslie Groves – director of the Manhattan Project where the atomic bombs were developed – dismissed these reports as propaganda, even as he sent teams to measure radiation levels to ensure the safety of U.S. troops about to enter both cities. Later that year, Groves testified before the U.S. Senate that death from high-dose radiation exposure is "without undue suffering" and "a very pleasant way to die."

In Nagasaki, newborn death rates skyrocketed in the nine months after the bombing: 43% of pregnancies in which the fetus was exposed within a quarter mile from the hypocenter ended in spontaneous abortion, stillbirth or infant death. Young mothers giving birth in the ruins did not know it yet, but even those infants who survived would face severe physical and mental disabilities.

For years, tens of thousands of hibakusha ("atomic bomb-affected people") suffered agonizing radiation-related illnesses. Many died. Meanwhile, Gen. Douglas MacArthur's occupation press code censored Japanese news accounts, personal testimonies, photographs and scientific research on the survivors' conditions. In the United States, virtually all reports about the devastation and radiation-related deaths stopped after a confidential memo to American media outlets requested that all reports about the atomic bombs be pre-approved by the War Department – particularly those containing scientific or technical details.

In 1946 and 1947, opposition to the bombings began appearing in U.S. media – including John Hersey's "Hiroshima," first published in the New Yorker, and a scathing essay by journalist Norman Cousins in the Saturday Review. U.S. government and military officials hurriedly strategized how to prevent what they considered "a distortion of history" that could damage postwar international relations and threaten U.S. nuclear development. Two articles by prominent government officials – the first by Karl T. Compton, a respected physicist who had helped develop the atomic bombs, and the second by former Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson – offered intelligent and persuasive "behind the scenes" perspectives on the U.S. decision to use the bombs. These powerful justifications effectively quelled civic dissent and directed focus away from the ongoing suffering of the people of Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

By the early 1950s, hibakusha cancer rates for adults and children soared, and many more hibakusha developed liver, endocrine, blood and skin diseases, and impairments of the central nervous system. Mortality rates remained high. Most commonly, survivors experienced violent dizzy spells and a profound depletion of energy. Fears about genetic effects of radiation exposure on their children haunted them for decades. Thirty years after the war, high rates of leukemia as well as stomach and colon cancer persisted. From the survivors' perspective, the atomic bomb had burned their bodies from the inside out.

As Japanese and U.S. scientists continue studying hibakusha, their children and grandchildren to try to comprehend the full impact of radiation exposure, can we come face to face with the terrorizing realities of nuclear weapons? We don't have to suppress our condemnation of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, mistreatment and killings of Allied POWs, and slaughter of civilians across Asia to do so. Our full understanding of history will deepen our integrity as a nation and impact our current and future nuclear weapons policies across the world.

Excerpt from Herman Wong, "How the Hiroshima bombing is taught around the world," Washington Post, August 6, 2015

Also, these Reddit comment threads speak to the changing currency of textbooks, pillars of knowledge whose preeminence has dimmed in a world where books, articles and discussions are readily available to the curious mind. The comments are edited for length, but not for grammar or typos.

Japan

In response to comment asking for anyone taught in Japan:

My wife is Japanese, born and raised in Hiroshima. Her grandparents witnessed the bomb from two different locations just outside the city as children.

She has told me about how they were taught about the bomb in her school in Hiroshima. It seems they have special classes all about the bomb. She says they learn technically how it works, all

about the effects of radiation, and about its development. She says they are taught about the decision making process behind the decision to drop it. She says they are taught in great detail about the physical and psychological effects of being directly affected by it. They are also taught about the aftermath of the bomb with regards to rebuilding the city.

It sounded very different from the lesson taught to me in U.S. schools — that the bomb was a "necessary evil" that was going to cost less lives than the supposed only alternative of an invasion of the Japanese main islands.

The Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima is visited by the young students. They can see the A-bomb Dome from their equivalent of Central Park. In other words, there are constant reminders of this tragedy that put their city on the map.

My wife told me that these special classes on the A-bomb are only taught in Hirishima and Nagasaki and are not part of the national curriculum in Japan in general.

The rest of the world

- I am an Australian who learnt about the bombings primarily through japanese language class. As you can probably guess there was a bias toward the japanese with a focus on the lives lost (mostly stories about children during and born after the bombings).
- Brazilian here. I remember this part of World History being very sad and polemic. Our teachers tried hard to show us the consequences and power of the bomb.
- Canadian here. ... I remember being taught that the second bomb was unnecessary. My social studies teachers tended to vilify the U.S. for Nagasaki.
- Chilean here. It was only pointed as the weapon that ended the war. Really brief
- French here. Basically we see the bombings as part of the atrocious disasters of world war 2, through the technological advanced massive killings weapons "progress".
- German here. In school, most of the history of war was about the German atrocities. … Other atrocities (killing of native Americans, Hiroshima, CIA involvement in toppling democratic states leading to torture etc.) were not covered at all, or only very briefly.
- In Greece, it goes like this: The WWII ended with the atomic bomb of Hiroshima and Nagashaki. That's it, really, just a reference.
- What I was taught in India was that even though the Japanese never surrender, when there was a possibility of a nuclear threat, they were ready to surrender. However, the president at the time chose to do it anyway to send a message to the world (or mainly the USSR). Nowadays, when we were taught this important moment in Indonesian history, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was seen as a stepping stone that eventually provided the opportunity to proclaim our independence.
- Iranian here. They teach us that the U.S dropped one bomb, Japan surrendered, the U.S dropped the other bomb to test it.
- Italian here. In 4th grade (10 years old) we studied it the first time, dedicating a lot of time to the victims and the horrors of the bomb…. Later on, in middle school and high school the message was always the same: the Americans compellingly "thought" the bomb was the ONLY thing that could end the war.

- Korean here and I attended a school in Seoul. From what I remember being taught about the bomb while in Korea was 2 parts — first, to end a long drawn out invasion of Japan and any territories in order to secure a surrender. There were moral considerations but mostly the discussion involved the mechanics of using war technology developed during a time of war to save American lives. And secondly, to demonstrate to the world that the US had the technology and was willing to use it as the US considered a post war political climate.
- Here in Lithuania it just said the US needed to finish the war with Japan quickly but at the same time they needed to show strength. So that they will be taken seriously in the future.
- Malaysia. There wasnt much detail explained about the bombing, just that it happened after pearl harbour and the japanese surrendered after that and then the war ended.
- I'm from Mexico, and I remember there was some emphasis on how the bomb was unnecessary (since the war was already drawing to a close) and how it was one of the many atrocities of the war.
- Netherlands here. The main narrative in high school history was the cost of invasion and the political desire for a swift end to the war.
- In New Zealand I was taught it was to speed the end of the war. The morality of it was questionable but understandable in the context of the time (i.e. no one at the time knew about black rain and the horrible drawn out deaths from radiation). The reasons for dropping it were to save American lives in a landing on the main islands after the high causalities in Okinawa and other island hopping campaigns.
- Singaporean. The main questions raised were not why the bombs were dropped, but why they were dropped so late, and only after so many died and suffered.
- Here in South Africa, we learned why the bombs were dropped, and whether that was reasonable as an action of war and as a prevention of even more deaths. We read/listened to countless primary sources, and ended the quarter with a week-long debate on whether or not it was justified.
- Swede here. We were mostly just taught about the war going on in Europe from what I can remember. ... It almost felt like we were running out of time at the end of the semester; "The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor so the Americans dropped two bombs to end that fight".
- I was taught in Switzerland. We were taught about them as more of a start to the Cold War, rather than as an end to the Second World War. This was because it was viewed as an American show of nuclear strength to the Soviets in order to act as a deterrent, rather than just an act of aggression against Japan.
- UK History teacher here (secondary). I like to use it as an example to develop the student's argument formation. It's usually taught as a standalone lesson with the topic 'Was the dropping of the atomic bombs justified?' Give the kids evidence, reports, accounts and let them make up their mind.