

Nobel peace prize awarded to Japanese atomic bomb survivors' group for its efforts to free the world of nuclear weapons

Wednesday 23 October 2024, by [BRUNET Luc-André](#), [KARAMOUZI Eirini](#) (Date first published: 11 October 2024).

The 2024 Nobel peace prize has been [awarded](#) to Nihon Hidankyo, a Japanese grassroots organisation created by survivors of the two US atomic bombs that were dropped on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945.

The Norwegian Nobel committee [recognised the organisation](#) “for its efforts to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons and for demonstrating through witness testimony that nuclear weapons must never be used again”.

Discussion of the bombings, which killed [more than 100,000](#) Japanese people, was largely a taboo in the immediate post-war period. This was, in part, thanks to [American press censorship](#) in occupied Japan.

But, in 1954, an American nuclear weapons test at Bikini Atoll in the Pacific Ocean produced such extensive radioactive fallout that it affected a Japanese fishing boat, [the Lucky Dragon](#), causing one death from radiation poisoning.

The Lucky Dragon incident prompted many of the atomic bomb survivors, who are known as the *hibakusha*, to speak out about their experiences. And it was within this context that Nihon Hidankyo was created in 1956.

Since then, the *hibakusha* have played an immeasurable role in [activism against nuclear weapons](#) worldwide. Their testimony, the Nobel committee said, has “helped to generate and consolidate widespread opposition to nuclear weapons around the world”.

The US detonated an atomic bomb over the Japanese city of Hiroshima on August 6 1945. Shutterstock.

In 1975, for example, a group of *hibakusha* that included Setsuko Thurlow, a member of Nihon Hidankyo and a globally renowned campaigner against nuclear weapons, organised an exhibition on the atomic bombings at the Toronto public library.

This helped trigger the development of a significant anti-nuclear movement in Canada. By the early 1980s, tens of thousands of Canadians [regularly demonstrated](#) against their government’s support for US nuclear weapons.

Then, in 1984, another survivor of the Hiroshima bombing called Takashi Morita co-founded a *hibakusha* organisation based in São Paulo to [share their stories](#) and raise awareness in Brazil of the devastating consequences of nuclear weapons.

Growing awareness of the experiences of the *hibakusha* throughout the 1980s inspired Europeans to protest against the deployment of new nuclear missiles in their countries. The phrase “no Euroshima!” became a [popular slogan](#) for the European peace movement.

Nihon Hidankyo’s efforts have focused not only on sharing the experiences of *hibakusha*, but also using them to gain support for the abolition of nuclear weapons worldwide.

The organisation has been a key supporter of the UN [treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons](#). This treaty, which entered in force in 2017 and has been signed by 94 countries, prohibits states from participating in any nuclear weapon activities.

The International Campaign for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons – in which Setsuko Thurlow is a leading figure – was [awarded the Nobel peace prize](#) in 2017 for its efforts to achieve this legally binding prohibition of such weapons.

Still work to do

Within Japan, Nihon Hidankyo has worked to challenge the government’s position on nuclear weapons. The Japanese government is [supportive of American nuclear weapons](#), despite the horrors witnessed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and depends on them as a deterrent against its several nuclear-armed neighbours.

Successive Japanese governments have [insisted](#) on the importance of nuclear weapons for the country’s national security. But it remains a controversial stance for many in Japan. Every Japanese school child typically visits Hiroshima or Nagasaki to learn about the nightmarish consequences of nuclear weapons.

The decision to award the Nobel peace prize to Nihon Hidankyo is particularly timely. In 2023, the world’s nine nuclear powers spent [over US\\$91 billion](#) (£69.5 billion) on nuclear weapons. And since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russian president Vladimir Putin has repeatedly [threatened](#) to use his nuclear arsenal.

These concerning developments were [acknowledged](#) by the Nobel committee. When awarding Nihon Hidankyo with the prize, the committee said it was “alarming that today this taboo against the use of nuclear weapons is under pressure.”

The world’s nuclear powers – [especially China](#) and the US – are expanding and modernising their arsenals. North Korea is [continuing to develop](#) its nuclear weapons programme. And tensions are fast [escalating](#) between nuclear-armed Israel and near-nuclear Iran.

The threats posed by nuclear weapons are more apparent now than they have been at any time since the cold war. With barely 100,000 *hibakusha* alive today, it is imperative that we listen to their voices and their warnings.

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- a href="<https://theconversation.com/profiles/eirini-karamouzi-2233079>">Eirini Karamouzi, [University of Sheffield](#) and [Luc-André Brunet](#), [The Open University](#)

Eirini Karamouzi. I joined the University of Sheffield in September 2014. I hold an MSc in European Politics and Governance and a PhD in International History, both from LSE. I have held a A.G. Leventis Fellowship at SEESOX, St Anthony's College, Oxford (2014-15), a Max Weber Fellowship at the European University Institute in Florence (2013-14) and a Pinto Postdoctoral fellowship at LSE IDEAS (2011-12). I am an expert in the history of European integration, Cold War, political and social history of Modern Greece, and Southern Europe.

My second project focused on peace movements and the role of activism in nuclear policy. I was Principal Investigator of the two-year project (2016-2018), 'Protest as democratic practice: peace movements in southern Europe, 1975-1990' (Max Batley Fellowship Awards scheme) with Prof Ziemann and Prof Grasso (Politics). Dr Giulia Quaggio was the Postdoctoral fellow of the project. I published different pieces in *International History Review*, *Journal of Contemporary History* and *Cold War History*. Along with Luc-Andre Brunet we are running an AHRC networking grant (2022-2024) on 'Global Histories of anti-nuclear activism in the Cold War'. We have published a special issue on Anti-nuclear activism in South Africa, and an edited volume *Beyond the Euromissile Crisis: Global Histories of anti-nuclear activism* (Berghahn, 2025), accompanied by a Open Learn MOOC on the same topic.

My latest research looks at the role of tourism as an alternative way of telling Greece's post-war social, economic and cultural history.

- Luc-André Brunet is Senior Lecturer in Contemporary International History at The Open University in the UK and Co-Director of the Peace and Security Project at LSE IDEAS. His research focuses on the dynamics between peace and anti-nuclear activism, on the one hand, and policymaking and diplomacy, on the other. He is Principal Investigator of the AHRC-funded project 'Global Histories of Peace and Anti-Nuclear Activism' and is currently completing a book on Canada, the global nuclear order and the end of the Cold War. He is editor of *NATO and the Strategic Defence Initiative: A Transatlantic History of the Star Wars Programme* and (with Eirini Karamouzi) the forthcoming volume *Beyond the Euromissile Crisis: Global Histories of Anti-Nuclear Activism*. He also co-edits a new book series with McGill-Queen's University Press on *Global Nuclear Histories*.

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