Youth antinuclear socialisation in Japan: early encounters with the concept of nuclear weapons

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As living memory of the use of nuclear weapons dies out, lessons from the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki could become unlearned. Thus, the voices of youth antinuclear activists have never been more important. Drawing from 24 oral history interviews conducted in Japan, this article discusses the 'greying effect' of the antinuclear movement. First, it outlines a background and theoretical framework of youth political socialisation. Second, it discusses oral history as a method. Third, it traces young people's early encounters with the concept of 'nuclear weapons', discussing forces that foster and prevent meaningful youth participation in the antinuclear movement. It argues that while Japan's peace education sustains unique levels of youth engagement with atomic bomb materials and historical events, it is perceived as insufficient to motivate political action, movement participation, and can at times prevent it.

Keywords: social movements; nuclear disarmament; peace education; political socialisation; youth activism

Introduction

Why do young people join antinuclear groups in the twenty-first century? This article traces early encounters with the concept of 'nuclear weapons', drawing from 24 oral history interviews conducted with youth who became antinuclear organisers in Japan. It explores Japan's peace education's influence and limitations in socialising youth with antinuclear values, information, and aspirations for a world without nuclear weapons.

In the twentieth century, the antinuclear movement experienced three waves of global activity wherein contentious knowledge about nuclear weapons was substantially produced and circulated. The mass mobilisation of concerned citizens around the world during those years is credited with having significantly contributed to preventing nuclear conflict by pushing states to adopt arms control and non-proliferation treaties that deterrence-based policies alone do not incentivise (Wittner 2003; 1997; 1993).[1] When the Cold War ended, public perceptions of nuclear perils subsided, and movement participation significantly declined (Rosendorf et al. 2021). In the twenty-first century, the movement has operated under constrained budgets and shrinking memberships (Acheson 2021), leaving behind a (likely misperceived) 'golden age' for nuclear disarmament (Egeland 2020), and undergoing a 'greying effect' characterised by fewer youth joining antinuclear groups (Wittner 2009a: 217). Some argue the movement did not just stall but is receding "at an historic ebb" (Desai 2022: 350).

We recently entered a 'third nuclear age' – a period marked by unprecedented nuclear risks, heightened state competition and escalation options, a weakening nuclear taboo, and the erosion of arms control treaties (Braut-Hegghammer 2023; Castelli et al. 2025; Crilley 2023; Mecklin 2025; Tannenwald 2018). However, the nuclear threat's renewed salience has failed to revitalise mass grassroots mobilisation and widespread youth participation in antinuclear activism. Instead, contemporary youth grew up in a global environment where "only a small minority [of people] take part in activism that raises awareness about the dangers of nuclear weapons, lobbies for arms control, or contributes to the goal of abolition" (Tannenwald 2020: 217). The importance of this situation lies in the fact that while existential dangers have been growing, public pressures on states to exercise nuclear restraint and pursue disarmament have not.

Contemporary youth grew up in a global environment where "only a small minority [of people] take part in activism that raises awareness about the dangers of nuclear weapons, lobbies for arms control, or contributes to the goal of abolition."

In Japan, peace education is deeply tied to nuclear disarmament efforts. The term 'peace education' was first used by the Japan Teachers Union in 1951 and began to focus on "passing on the A-bomb experience" in the 1960s (Murakami 1992: 45).[2] Today, Japan's peace education is seen as a global pioneer and it involves a dense network of individuals and organisations who aim to cultivate antiwar attitudes in youth primarily by preserving '*hibakusha*' (atomic bomb survivor) testimonies across generations and, more recently, by interlacing disarmament with intergenerational justice, sustainability, social justice, and a wider culture of positive peace (Kim et al. 2024; Romano / Werblow / Williams 2022). In Japan, peace education initiatives sustain extraordinary levels of youth engagement with A-bomb-related curricula, offering its students unique opportunities to meet hibakusha in person, visit A-bombed sites, and develop a historical consciousness about the role of nuclear weapons in the world.

Beyond its empirical contributions, this article gleans insights into what forces facilitate and hinder youth participation in contemporary nuclear politics and the antinuclear movement. First, it outlines a theoretical framework of youth political socialisation. Second, it discusses oral history as a method. Third, it traces early encounters with the concept of 'nuclear weapons' as narrated by youth antinuclear organisers. It argues that while Japan's peace education sustains unique levels of youth engagement with atomic bomb materials and historical events, it is perceived as insufficient to motivate political action, movement participation, and can at times prevent it. In a country whose population is ageing faster than any other nation's (Takao 2022), and as the living memory of the use of nuclear weapons dies out (Starr 2022), the voices of youth antinuclear activists have never been more important.

Theoretical framework

Until recently, young people's involvement in social movements had remained significantly undertheorised despite their significant presence (Bessant 2020; Pickard 2019; Rodgers 2020; Taft 2015; 2010). Generally, the social movement actor has been assumed to be an adult or college-aged youth,[3] leaving behind "a notable silence in the sociological literature" (Gordon 2007: 635).

As recently as 2019, authoritative references such as the Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements (Snow et al. 2019) and the Oxford Handbook of Social Movements (della Porta / Diani 2015) lacked dedicated sections on the role of age, but contained sections on class, gender, race, and religion. In September 2022, the former added a section titled "student/youth movements," which does not discuss antinuclear activism. Although youth movements are becoming an increasing feature of global history (Braungart / Braungart 2023), scant scholarly work exists on the connections between young people's politics and nuclear disarmament in the post-Cold-War context (i.e. the second and third nuclear ages) (Egeland / Pelopidas 2020; Pelopidas 2017a; Buuren / Pelopidas / Sorg 2025).

Factors likely contributing to the lack of more widespread youth participation include the fading of collective memories of nuclear harm, decreasing emotional connections to the bombings, and the lack of humanitarian perspectives in educational institutions.

Some scholars highlight factors likely contributing to the *lack* of more widespread youth participation, such as the fading of collective memories of nuclear harm, decreasing emotional connections to the bombings, and the lack of humanitarian perspectives in educational institutions (Berrigan 2024; Carson 2018; Samler / Ciobanu 2020; Buuren / Pelopidas / Sorg 2025). However, such work mostly neglects theoretical frameworks from social movements and youth studies literature, and does not answer questions about why young people *have joined* 'youth-based' antinuclear groups under the existing political environment of the twenty-first century – despite the movement's global greying effect, limited organisational capacity, and overall social neglect.[4] To help fill this gap, this article offers a theoretical contribution by operationalising the concept of political socialisation and producing a snapshot view of the process whereby participants came to join antinuclear groups.

As a broader theoretical framework, the concept of 'political socialisation' can help account for why and how youth participate in politics and social movements, looking into a developmental sequence by which individuals acquire political knowledge, values, identities, and behaviours, as views of the political world and social norms are gradually formed and internalised (Fillieule 2022). The following sections explore elements of political knowledge acquisition by investigating whether early encounters with the concept of 'nuclear weapons' were conducive to a 'cognitive liberation' – subjective interpretations of the political environment which warrant movement participation (McAdam / Tarrow 2018). As such, an analysis of these encounters reveals factors that foster and prevent more widespread and meaningful participation in nuclear politics.

Methods

Twenty-four semi-structured oral history interviews were conducted with youth antinuclear organisers between June and September 2024 in Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Tokyo. The study employed three inclusion criteria. *(1) Affiliation:* participants hold membership in antinuclear groups that partnered with the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) or the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA); *(2) Youth Identity*: groups self-identify as 'youth-based' or 'youth-led' in the organisation's name or its vision-mission statements; (3) *Physical location*: individuals are physically present in Japan. After the interview, a snowball sampling procedure was employed, encouraging participants to nominate eligible peers for participation in this research. The study eschewed age brackets and nationality as participation requirements to avoid monocultural definitions of 'youth.'

Through these criteria, the study samples from a universe of organisations that are (a) antinuclear, (b) youth-based, and (c) physically active in Japan. The study does not aim to sample or represent the views and experiences of all young people in Japan. Instead, claims made in this article about interviewed youth speak to a broader universe of organisations that are 'antinuclear' insofar as their initiatives align with ICAN's and UNODA's efforts for nuclear disarmament, while representing a narrower case of groups that make 'youth' a central component of their organisational identity in Japan. The analysis and conclusions concern the experiences of youth who *have joined* those networks, and not why others have failed to do so – it is harder to explain non-events. Individually, participants may hold different attitudes towards issues regarding the desirability of 'nuclear energy', 'arms control', and may (not) view themselves as members of a wider 'peace movement'. All participants provided informed consent and were assigned pseudonyms in accordance with ethical, legal, and academic research standards.

Snowball sampling resulted in participation from eighteen female and six male narrators, aged between 11–33 (average 22.9) years old. (...) The study does not aim to sample or represent the views and experiences of all young people in Japan.

Snowball sampling resulted in participation from eighteen female and six male narrators, aged between 11–33 (average 22.9) years old. This age range corresponds with a wider trend of research on youth activism, which typically covers people between 12–35 years old (Conner 2024). Sixteen interviews were conducted in English and eight were supported by volunteer interpreters (Japanese – English), lasting between one-to-five hours. Twenty-three interviews were conducted in-person in Hiroshima and in rented offices in Nagasaki and Tokyo to provide a safe, quiet, and comfortable environment. One interview was rescheduled and conducted online over Microsoft Teams. About a third of all transcription was done manually, and the rest using an offline and locally-run *Whisper* model, following the British Oral History Society's guidelines as of spring of 2025.[5] Rather than aspiring to being 'correct', the transcribed text aims to historically represent the speaker's narration, rhythm, intonation, and intended meaning as close as possible, with grammar and word order "left as spoken" (Thompson / Bornat 2017: 343). An ellipsis (…) is used to mark when content is omitted for redundancy or other reasons. Square brackets [ ] are used to preserve grammatical correctness where possible.

Oral histories are recordings of personal testimony delivered in oral form and situated in the narrators' broader economic, social, historical, cultural, and political contexts (Yow 2005). While historians are in a "perpetual dialogue with the dead" (Smith 2010: 9), oral historians engage with the living to understand the significance of subjectivity, memory, social processes and narratives across cultures and generations. Oral history was selected as a method due to its capacity to access "subjugated voices, excluded from the historic records for reasons of political, geographic, class, gender, or ethnic affiliation" (della Porta 2014: 130). It

often reaches people who are less likely to leave documentation that survives the passage of time and overabundance of written historical records (Thompson / Bornat 2017).

Youth are rarely considered significant political or historical agents (Gordon 2010; Taft 2010), and nuclear weapons' history is no exception. Historians in the field have mostly focused on the lives of prominent scientists who made them (e.g. the Oppenheimers, Tellers, and Fermis) and politicians who made decisions about them (e.g. Roosevelt, Khrushchev, Obama). Few studies document the lives of non-elite local workers and their descendants affected by them (see Gómez 2022). Historians documenting opposition to nuclear weapons have similarly focused on "prominent individuals (e.g. people like Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell, Petra Kelly, and Andrei Sakharov)", and not so much on the "rank and file", or "the many unsung heroes of the movement" (Wittner 2011: 286). This research contributes to the historical record with 24 oral histories that feature 'ordinary' youth antinuclear organisers in Japan.

This study has several limitations. Some stem from my positionality as a researcher born and raised outside Japan, who does not speak Japanese. Participants may have viewed me as an outsider – part visiting researcher, part tourist – and potentially as someone shaped by Western assumptions about activism. To mitigate this, participants were invited to interview only if they self-identified with the eligibility criteria outlined above. Additionally, this study relied on volunteer interpreters who, although possessed prior experience, may have failed to convey nuances lost in translation. To mitigate this, original audio will be kept for future archival deposit. Furthermore, due to funding constraints, the study relied on consecutive (rather than simultaneous) interpretation. As a result, natural flow of conversation was often slowed down by the interpretation process. This may have limited participant spontaneity and stream of thought. Moreover, the study draws on a small sample and does not claim to represent the views of all youth across Japan. Instead, the study captures a snapshot view of how members of a small network of youth-led antinuclear organisations viewed themselves at that moment in time. All interviews were conducted prior to the announcement that Nihon Hidankyo would receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 2024, which has resulted in some degree of renewed interest in disarmament. Lastly, it is impossible to know how participants' views might have changed since then, or had the interviews taken place later in life.

The following sections discuss patterns in participant responses to questions such as "When did you first hear about the concept of nuclear weapons?" and subsequent open-ended follow-up questions (e.g. "can you say more about that?"). Responses were coded in NVivo14 to identify prominent patterns under the category of 'early encounters', which then served as the basis for the narrative analysis in this article, presented as preliminary findings focused on Japan, but stemming from a broader study on antinuclear political socialisation.

Peace education, "to be frank, it is not enough."

Japan's national education began to systematically include materials about the atomic bomb in the late 1960s due to growing concerns that young people had little knowledge, no interest, or even positive views of nuclear weapons (Yuasa 2024). Since then, children have been consistently included in numerous peace activities and commemorative events, which are particularly salient in Hiroshima and Nagasaki (see Figures 1–3), and include, but are not limited to: school trips to museums, listening to hibakusha testimonies, reading comic books, touring atomic bombed cities, observing memorial ceremonies on TV, folding paper cranes, singing songs, watching films, performing in plays that re-enact surviving or dying from the atomic bomb, and (more recently) experiencing virtual reality simulations of the events of 1945.[6] Growing up in the only nation bombed with wartime nuclear weapons, "every child in Japan is taught at school that Japan became a peaceful and democratic country after World War II" (Yuasa 2024: 3).

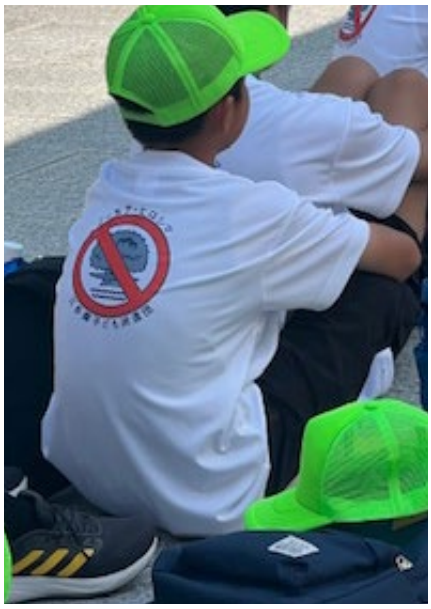

Figure 1. A boy wears a T-shirt that reads *"No More Hiroshima. Mitama Children's Dispatch."* Photo taken by author
5 August 2024.

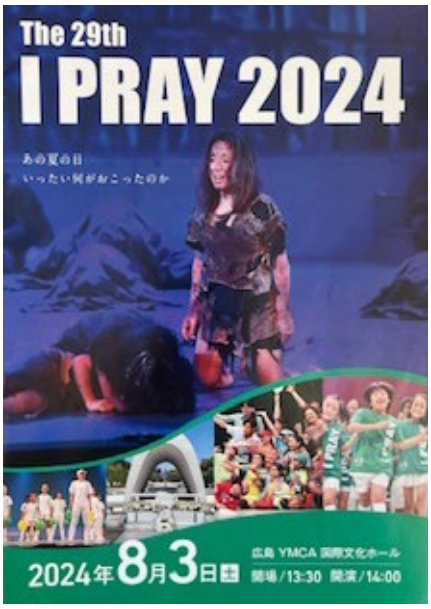

Figure 2. A flyer advertising the Creative Drama/Musical "I PRAY" featuring young actors. Photo taken by author
12 July 2024.

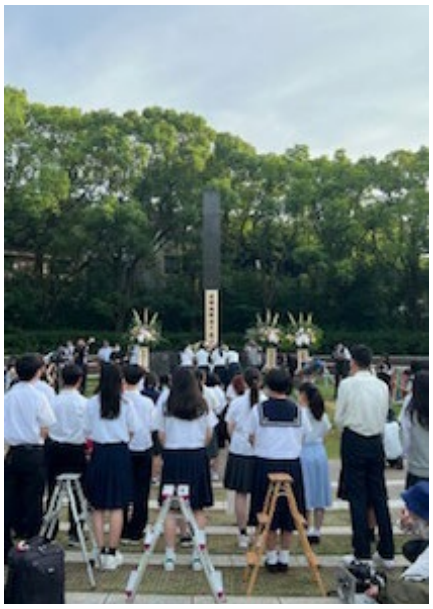

Figure 3. High School students gather around Nagasaki's hypocentre on Memorial Day. Photo taken by author
9 August 2024.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki, peace education programmes aim to comprehensively cover facts of the atomic bombings in relation to the self, one's family, society, and the world (Henriquez 2020; Nogami 2006; Yamana 2023). Parents are encouraged to begin the task of peace education "the moment the seed in the mother's womb is fertilized" (Shōji 1991: 25-26), and to describe to their children the cruelties of war "precisely because they are young" (Shōji 1991: 39).[7] By impressing "the misery of war and the atomic bombing on the generations of younger people who will be tomorrow's leaders" (Mayor Takashi Hiraoka, as cited in Kawano 2018: 8-9), peace educators intend to pass down hibakusha memories and their will for 'no more Hiroshimas', to make Nagasaki 'the last city' to suffer nuclear devastation, for 'we shall not repeat the evil', and one day achieve 'a world free from nuclear weapons'.[8] Therefore, a key goal of peace education in these two atomic bombed cities is to socialise youth against war and nuclear weapons, and in favour of peace and nuclear disarmament.

All youth interviewed in this study referred to their peace education as having been generally unrelated to the present, uninteresting, biased, and insufficient to motivate political action.

However, all youth interviewed in this study referred to their peace education as having been generally unrelated to the present, uninteresting, biased, and insufficient to motivate political action. None of the 24 interviewed participants described peace education as a key reason why they joined antinuclear groups, which suggests that youth joining antinuclear networks may be motivated by other factors or undervaluing peace education's influence socialising them. Their early encounters with the concept of 'nuclear weapons' were usually conceptualised through past-tense narratives about the atomic bomb that fixated in 1945 and had no relation to contemporary nuclear politics. As one participant explained:

"we didn't learn what is the situation today. How many nuclear weapons around the world now? Who have these nuclear weapons? I don't think I learned about these things. So, that's the difference. . . Atomic bomb in Hiroshima, for example, is something [that] happened 79 years ago. Nuclear weapons, it's about today's society, politics, and our life".[9]

Other participants voiced the same distinction – "rather than the concept of nuclear weapons, I understood the concept of A-bomb"[10] – noting that most educational programmes, including the more comprehensive curricula provided by peace educators in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, were overfocused on the past. One participant explained the limitations of the iconic Hiroshima Peace Notebook, a resource which offers specialised peace education materials on the atomic bomb from elementary school to high school:

"while I believe that this booklet, this Hiroshima Peace Notebook, is very important uhm there are some points that I'm a bit critical towards. One of them is that, to be frank, it's not enough. And one of the reasons I feel this way is that, you know, how we live today, how we face social issues, these are the things that should be at the root of peace studies. And with this notebook, of course, we can learn, but it's rooted in history. It's about the past. I think there should be more emphasis on how we view today and how we view society, you know, at this moment."[11]

Bored with Peace: "I was sleeping in front of the survivors."

Early encounters with the concept of nuclear weapons typically take place in elementary school in Japan. Children are often prompted by parents or teachers to conduct interviews at home to find out if they have hibakusha relatives. While such homework can relate atomic bomb history with current family background, it often fails to convey a sense of contemporary relevance or urgency. For some youth, realising that their (great) grandparents survived the atomic bomb imbues fresh meaning to previously uninteresting materials. One participant said he felt no relationship with atomic bomb history until he heard his grandfather's memories of removing maggots from the burned, melted skin of his relatives after surviving the atomic bomb. Listening to these accounts, the young participant expected to hear stronger emotions like anger or madness, but his grandfather remained calm, narrating a history "without feelings. . . bullet point by bullet point." Despite the lack of strong emotions, his grandfather's story sparked a novel interest in peace education materials that previously seemed to have no familial or personal connection to him. But while such accounts were "horrible" and "should not be repeated," atomic bomb history was conceived as unlikely to reoccur. He "couldn't find any immediate threats" and did not feel that "actually it could happen to me."[12] Other participants echoed perceptions that atomic bomb educational materials were "just [a] historical thing" – and not "my own business."[13]

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Conversely, other participants did not become interested in peace education even after learning that their ancestors were A-bomb survivors, partly because hibakusha testimony "doesn't mean anything at the time."[14] During fieldwork for this study, several hibakusha testimonies and university lectures on the atomic bomb were attended, where one could spot a few drowsy youth and students nodding off, suggesting that they were, if not 'bored with peace,'[15] tired or uninterested. One participant recalled hibakusha testimonies in elementary school as follows: "some of the time I was sleeping in front of the survivors. I really regret of it, but I did that."[16] Some youth explained their initial lack of interest was due to testimonial standardisation: "whenever I listen to the A-bomb survivors at school, it seems to be the same every time."[17] Others referred to overexposure as the likely cause: "probably some Nagasaki students are a bit tired of receiving an education based on, on the atomic bomb because they, they continuously do."[18]

Overall, early encounters with the concept of 'nuclear weapons' – including survivor testimonies delivered in person – were recalled as having been unrelated to the present and repetitive. Overexposure to peace-related materials made its contents seem monotonous, rather than concerning, engaging, or meaningful. Combined, these factors were recalled as hindering a more genuine interest in nuclear weapons.

Raised outside A-bombed cities: "not my stuff at the time."

Youth who grew up outside Hiroshima and Nagasaki similarly recalled struggling to understand why atomic bomb history mattered when they first encountered the concept of 'nuclear weapons'. However, they felt their understanding was overall more superficial and, in some cases, had the opposite of the intended

effect, discouraging them from seeking further information on the topic.

From Okayama, one participant recalled visiting Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Museum on an elementary school trip and thinking, "okay the bomb was dropped here [in] 1945, but it's not anymore. So, why do I have to care about this history?" Entering the museum, its contents "just traumatised me. I don't want to learn more about this." Exiting the museum, it was "easy to forget" what he had seen, finding himself under a nice blue sky, with convenience stores and shopping malls nearby. He explained that in contrast to climate change where "we feel the temperature differences every single year, that's very urgent," atomic bomb history made it "hard for me to draw the connection for the current foreign affairs."[19]

Several participants similarly described being 'traumatised' by the museum contents they saw as children, sometimes developing enduring nightmares that continue to this day. Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Museum had a permanent exhibit since 1974, which displayed wax dolls with charred and burned bodies depicting 'real' hibakusha experiences. Since 2013, however, the mannequins are no longer part of the public exhibit that was seen by most participants as children (Zwigenberg 2017). In retrospect, participants believed that the shocking images they saw were an important and necessary negative impression of nuclear weapons, which influenced their political views today. Many referred to the shock as a reality that needed to be confronted. Therefore, some participants lamented the decreasing presence of these shocking images in schools and museums.

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Not all out-of-prefecture youth have scheduled visits in A-bombed cities and museums as children. Many are enrolled in schools that offer minimal, if any, peace education, and are only able to learn about nuclear weapons through national commemorative activities. One participant from Fukuoka recalled she derived a very limited understanding from TV livestreams of Memorial Days of 6th and 9th of August, "just a few words: Hiroshima, nuclear weapons, Nagasaki, or something like that," but did not learn much in-depth about nuclear politics, opportunities, historical controversies, technical definitions, and so forth. Instead, she developed a perception that antinuclear activities were spaces reserved for older generations:

"when I saw news or something for working for nuclear abolition, they're old [laughs]. Like, my grandmother, grandfather's generation people working for it. And the hibakusha is also those age, right? … from my recognition, it's a movement for people who experienced [the bomb] or people who are around those ages." [20]

Notably, for some interviewed youth raised outside A-bombed cities, more embodied commemorative activities can nonetheless be meaningful introduction to nuclear concepts and subjects. A participant from Saga recalled learning to sing a song about folding paper cranes as a child, which made her want to learn more:

"in the lyrics, there is a word term of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I didn't know about what exactly happened there, but since I repeatedly sang the song, I feel like I want to go to Hiroshima and Nagasaki one day to know what happened there and to sing the song." [21]

For others, the same commemorative activities were perfunctory tasks performed annually with little reflection. One participant from Fukuyama City said, "we folded some paper cranes, but that was really the extent of my public-school education and learning about the atomic bombing... to be entirely honest, I don't remember anything."[22] In many cases, the extent to which teachers cared about peace activities was seen as a proxy to how much they, as students, came to care and understand about nuclear weapons. In other words, youth perceived their teachers as a central component to their antinuclear socialisation (or lack thereof). When teachers lacked either the ability or the commitment to make the relevance of these activities clear to students, the impact was seen as much less likely. As another participant explained:

"[teachers] forced us to sing a song about the August 9th, and also we just fold a paper crane but without telling us what's the purpose… so as an average stupid student, I couldn't get the linkage of the holding paper crane, singing song, and touch upon the atomic bombing of history in the atomic bomb museum, and listen to the voices of hibakusha." [23]

Due to the greying effect of the antinuclear movement, peace and nuclear disarmament spaces risk becoming gerontocratic – dominated by older generations whose authority and visibility shape the norms, expectations, and narratives regarding young people's involvement. As noted by Bidadanure (2021), uneven distribution of goods at a given moment in time across age groups can result in discrepancies that, in turn, reproduce false perceptions of people. Young people may be perceived as politically apathetic when they, instead, lack appropriate distribution of knowledge, resources, visibility, and access to spaces to become politically active. Moreover, pre-assigned roles based on age may reinforce young people's marginalisation into narrow spaces for social action. In the context of nuclear disarmament, younger generations are frequently expected to 'pass down' survivor memories precisely because youth are assumed to lack the lived experience of nuclear violence, techno-scientific literacy, nuanced historical perspectives, and institutional access to resources and decision-makers. While younger generations are unlikely ever to be treated as equal to hibakusha, whose atomic bomb experience has made them the ultimate source of moral authority on nuclear disarmament (Yuasa 2024; Zwigenberg 2014), some educational models position young people differently.

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In Japan, some local organisations train young people as *Kataribe* ('storytellers'), entrusting them with the task of publicly recounting hibakusha testimonies to audiences of all ages. A ten-year-old recently became the youngest *Kataribe,* conveying testimonies from an 83-year-old hibakusha (Takashi 2025). Internationally, there are initiatives preparing young people "to participate expertly in social debates" on issues related to peace and nuclear

disarmament (e.g. Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations 2025: 4), recognising their value despite lacking lived experience of nuclear harm or official *hibakusha* status.[24] Educational models like those cast young people as visible producers of knowledge, political action, and valued members of their communities, rather than passive recipients of information whose political participation is to be deferred.

Without memories of the atomic bomb, residence in atomic-bombed cities, or blood ancestry from hibakusha in one's family tree, young people can feel disconnected from nuclear subjects.

In addition to references to not being appropriately provisioned with knowledge, interviewed participants in this study referred to an absence of youth visibility in disarmament spaces, such as the lack of young tour guides in A-bombed cities. As one participant explained, "all the volunteers I met were elderly people."[25] While many hibakusha offer guided tours and give lectures to children on school trips around A-bombed cities, aiming to engage younger people, many participants felt these spaces and activities were not for them. Even participants who were raised in Hiroshima and Nagasaki agreed with this perception. As one of them expressed, "the younger generation thinks that [the antinuclear] community is elder people and people who have connection to the uh, blood connection with the survivors."[26] Without memories of the atomic bomb, residence in atomic-bombed cities, or blood ancestry from hibakusha in one's family tree, young people can feel disconnected from nuclear subjects. In Japan, while youth are encouraged to think about the importance of peace and the atomic bomb, participants in this study felt that nuclear politics were far removed. As one participant put it, nuclear disarmament was "not my stuff at the time."[27]

Bias in education

Decisions regarding what the Japanese Ministry of Education includes or excludes from children's education have been subject to several controversies. Some critics posit that "the entire Japanese education system suffers from selective amnesia" (Chang 2014: 205), arguing that the "ugliest aspects of Japanese military behavior during the Sino-Japanese War…" remains hidden under a "carefully cultivated myth that Japanese were the victims, not the instigators, of World War II" (Chang 2025: 15).[28] Other scholars point out that schools, museums, and government institutions have preferred 'non-political' *hibakusha* storytellers over those who are more emotional, critical of the United States' act of dropping the atomic bomb, nuanced upon Japan's colonial past, and those who ask students how they feel (Yuasa 2024; Zwigenberg 2014). Therefore, youth disengagement with nuclear disarmament may, in part, be attributed to how educational programmes are deliberately designed as an instrument of 'mind engineering' whereby the government produces collective ignorance over issues that do not benefit its most urgent nation-building interests, "selectively instilling certain typified knowledge about the non-immediate world" (Tada 2024: 389). In other words, young people may not learn about aspects of the atomic bomb that do not currently benefit Japan's political, economic, and security goals. Conversely, youth disengagement from mass grassroots antinuclear activism reflects a global trend of widespread complacency that took hold after the end of the Cold War and branched over the realms of education, funding, popular culture, diplomacy, and others (Acheson 2021). The lack of mass youth mobilisation in Japan is thus part of a broader shift in perceptions of nuclear risk as non-immediate.

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One common element of today's youth early encounters with the concept of nuclear weapons was the manga *Barefoot Gen.* For many young people, this comic series was a meaningful introduction to the nuances of Japan's wartime past in relation to nuclear weapons. The manga was positively regarded as it employed autobiographical images drawn by hibakusha Keiji Nakazawa. Recently, some authorities requested moving the manga to 'closed shelves,' questioning its accuracy, age appropriateness, and educational value (Norihito 2015).[29] Participants generally believed the manga should be kept in open shelves, as it had taught them about the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons use, survivor discrimination, access to medical care, in addition to contested issues of wartime nationalism, poverty, class, race, crime and others. Many participants first read this manga following recommendations from their parents. However, interviewed participants remained critical of their textbooks, including the manga *Barefoot Gen* itself. As one participant pointed out, "[as the] manga is monochrome, the shock [is] transmitted as a monochrome."[30] The fact that the comic series' images were in black and white made its accounts feel less real and historically inaccurate, as recalled by some participants.

Other participants believed, "the government was trying to control the education that we received,"[31] and therefore claimed that bias in their peace education was evidenced by the absence of critical perspectives on Japan's discourse of atomic victimhood. Some described this as a "peaceful brainwash."[32] And many felt they could not learn about controversial aspects of Japan's wartime past and colonial history unless they travelled overseas, given that the dropping of the atomic bombs is seen as a symbol of liberation from Japan's colonial rule in other East Asian countries, and that related teaching materials contain no single 'shared view of the past' across nations (Szczepanska 2017).

Nuclear allergy or antinuclear minority

In Japan, decades of national polling across demographics indicate that most citizens oppose nuclear weapons and would support a ban treaty, reflecting the country's 'nuclear allergy' (Baron et al. 2020; Tanaka 1970).[33] According to a 2015 survey nationwide, 80% of respondents think the use or possession of nuclear weapons is unacceptable. However, the same survey finds that 77% are pessimistic about the likelihood of nuclear disarmament; 78% say they 'never' or 'seldom' discuss atomic-bomb-related-subjects with family, work colleagues, neighbours or friends; and only 30% could correctly date the atomic bombings (Masaki 2016).[34] The survey shows that Japan's 'nuclear allergy' did not necessarily entail favourable attitudes towards disarmament nor widespread circulation of knowledge about the nuclear world at a time when interviewed youth were likely still forming their initial understanding of nuclear weapons.

Despite Japan's 'nuclear allergy', some youth in this study struggled to publicly express antinuclear views comfortably. As they gained an interest in nuclear-related subjects, many felt they had to be careful about what they said because "the nuclear problem is strongly associated with the political aspect."[35] For some, being publicly antinuclear seemed to entail a stigma, potentially detrimental to their career prospects. Upon receiving my invitation for interview, one participant replied explaining that they were not 'out' as 'antinuclear activists' yet, letting me know they wanted to be careful when discussing their stance at such an early point in their career.[36]

Another participant recalled being nine years old when her parents took her to her first and last antinuclear protest. Her parents belonged to activist circles where slogans like 'no nukes', 'no more Hiroshima,' 'no more Nagasaki' were common. However, she recalls never having heard about possible paths to achieve nuclear abolition, technical definitions of radiation, or critical perspectives on why the atomic bomb was dropped. Rather than feeling empowered, attending the protest made her feel part of a minority that was subject to discrimination:

"I felt so embarrassed, screaming on the street. People looked at us as kind of weird person and I didn't know why we were saying against nuclear power plants, or no power plants, or something. So, I got some negative image against the kind of demonstrations. Like I don't feel comfortable to be there. But I had to be there because my parents took me… I could feel that our activity is not majority. So, if it's really important, and people really agree, we should have more people who join this activity. But what I saw is people who ignore what my fathers are doing. People who never showed any interest on our activities. And me, myself, could not share what my parents are doing to my friends because I was afraid of being criticised. Because when I go to the other friend's house, I never saw any political books or historical books or something. Their parents are just a doctor, officer, just a company employees, mothers are just home, house workers. But my parents were different. So, I couldn't share that much with my friends…"[37]

These accounts show that despite Japan's nuclear allergy, being active in nuclear politics, displaying antinuclear values, was deemed culturally inappropriate or not socially sanctioned by a nine-year-old. Fears of discrimination for being publicly antinuclear stem from a continuum where antinuclear activism has been prohibited or otherwise qualified as socially undesirable, too radical, or violent. In Japan, opposition to nuclear weapons began in 1945 with *hibakusha* writing, painting, and speaking about their survivor experiences (Minear 1990), but public criticism of the atomic bomb was heavily censored and suppressed by the U.S. occupation authorities. In 1954, the first ban-the-bomb mass grassroots movement emerged when middle-class Tokyo housewives, concerned about feeding radioactive tuna to their families, mobilised approximately a third of the nation's population in protest to nuclear tests being carried in the Pacific, responding to one of the first global environmental crises (Higuchi 2008). Subsequent youth participation in antinuclear groups peaked in the late 1950s, when student activist groups such as the *Zengakuren* rallied hundreds of thousands in protests and direct action over the next two decades (Wittner 2009; 2003; 1997; 1993). After this peak of activity, employers began to deny or withdraw job offers to candidates who were found to have had membership in antinuclear groups: "being a student activist meant automatic exclusion from full-time recruitment rounds for major corporations" (Andrews 2016: 69).[38] This might be one reason why the movement fractioned, dwindled and greyed, despite significant efforts to mobilise across generations (Acheson 2021).

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Concerns about negative repercussions for expressing antinuclear views that seem old-fashioned are not exclusive to Japan. Globally, after the Cold War ended, public opposition to nuclear weapons began to be described as a mental no-fly zone resulting from mass self-censorship. For instance, some diplomats feared risking their careers if expressing antinuclear opinions, while the peace movement seemed to attract mostly "an older crowd" (Acheson 2021: 138). This study suggests that youth who grow up in Japan may hesitate before voicing antinuclear sentiments openly, concerned about potential backlash or marginalisation despite the country's so-called 'nuclear allergy'. While participants were taught to adopt a national discourse of atomic victimhood that favours the desirability for a world without nuclear weapons, some felt they had to walk on eggshells when expressing opinions against nuclear weapons publicly that may be harmful to their social standing or their professional prospects.

Contemporary stereotypes often characterise Japanese citizens as innately prone to homogeneity and social harmony, assuming citizens to be more prone to group-think, and ignoring a long history of rebellion, dissent, and activism (Andrews 2016). While stereotypes about Japanese youth suggest they are politically apathetic or unconcerned with social change, recent youth activism led by SEALDs (Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy) mobilised large numbers of young people between 2015–2016 by appealing to youth normality, rather than subversiveness, in efforts to differentiate themselves from the stigma associated with student antinuclear activism from the 1950–60s and to simultaneously challenge perceptions of youth political apathy (Gonon / Galan 2023). But rather than seeking social change, SEALDs aimed to restore the status quo before the Abe administration sought reinterpretations of Japan's peace constitution's Article 9 to expand the role of the country's self-defence forces. SEALDs succeeded in making participation in politics and protest more palatable and attractive to ordinary young people. However, the fact that many members came from private universities in Tokyo made SEALDs seem elitist, "a bourgeois movement, a bunch of rich kids playing at politics" (O'Day 2015: 6). The movement was short-lived, lasting a little over a year, and it remained mostly based in Tokyo, likely due to the strong student presence in the capital.

Youth are rarely considered significant political or historical agents, and nuclear weapons' history is no exception. Historians in the field have mostly focused on the lives of prominent scientists who made them and politicians who made decisions about them. Few studies document the lives of non-elite local workers and their descendants affected by them.

In addition, the 2011 Fukushima disaster is said to have politicised a new generation of young people, who now fear seeing a world organised where nuclear energy is increasingly deemed

essential to its development in response to climate change (Gonon 2018). None of the participants interviewed in this study participated in SEALDs. For some, SEALDs seemed to be 'cool', but too far from the geographical and social realities of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, or the other cities where they grew up. As we enter a post-hibakusha world (Starr 2022), such dynamics raise critical questions about the durability and effectiveness of disarmament activism, and about how responsibility for nuclear justice and disarmament can be best distributed, and not deferred (Bidadanure 2021), across geographical and temporal lines.

Conclusion

According to interviewed youth who became antinuclear organisers in Japan, their early encounters failed to instil a sense of existential urgency, collective efficacy, or subjective interpretations of the political environment which would warrant political action such as movement participation. While Japan's peace education explicitly aims to contribute to a world free from nuclear weapons by socialising young people with information, values, and tools for peace and disarmament, none of the youth interviewed in this study reported it as a reason why they joined antinuclear groups, which brings about important contradictions.

Firstly, although participants felt their early encounters were decoupled from today's social realities, Japan's peace education successfully involves a dense network of parents, hibakusha, government officials, civil society, and teachers who collectively produce and mobilise an extraordinary variety of tangible and intangible resources (e.g. peace curricula, museum exhibits, urban design, school trips, survivor testimonies, a national discourse of atomic victimhood, etc.). Although few antinuclear protesters are taking onto the streets, survivor memory is being preserved and kept alive across generations, providing a humanitarian perspective in early encounters with the concept of 'nuclear weapons', even if these encounters seem repetitive or uncritical to some (albeit certainly not all) young students in Japan.

Secondly, even if the atomic bomb was taught with a fixation on the past, perceived by students as a historical event that was unlikely to reoccur, early encounters took place through narratives that favoured values of peace and disarmament. At a minimum, the youth in this study were encouraged to oppose war, aspire toward nuclear disarmament, and cultivate a culture of peace. They met atomic bomb survivors, explored preserved buildings and artifacts from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and reflected on the limits of their own education in relation to the nuclear world as taught in other countries. In contrast, youth raised in other countries (not discussed in this study) may be socialised to normalise nuclear risk, where preparing for nuclear war is seen as more desirable than pursuing disarmament, never meeting survivors, or never seeing the 'scars of war' left by 'nuclear weapons' use.[39]

These observed divergences offer relevant insights for policy makers, activists, and educators aiming to engage young people in response to renewed nuclear perils. While education should address historic events in curricula across nations, this study cautions against a 'pure' fixation on the past. To reverse the 'greying effect' in antinuclear groups, practitioners may need to move beyond commemoration and seek ways to connect disarmament education with forms of political participation (e.g. equipping students with tools to demand accountability, seek representation, assess responsibility, and monitor competent governance of nuclear technologies in light of contemporary global risks associated with climate change and accidents). In addition, practitioners may need to address social stigmas associated with being publicly antinuclear in the workplace and in relation to one's social standing, as well as perceptions of legitimacy to participate in nuclear politics when lacking hibakusha's bloodline ancestry, Japanese nationality, residence in Hiroshima/Nagasaki, a certain age, and so forth.

Given that youth antinuclear activism has received limited scholarly attention since the end of the Cold War, future research could explore avenues that foster more meaningful youth participation in nuclear abolition, arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation. The ways in which youth see the nuclear world in the twenty-first century – as they receive, reinterpret, preserve, and transmit the meaning of the nuclear past – remain largely uncharted in scholarly literature.

To the best of my knowledge, no other study has assessed why young people join youth-based antinuclear groups since the end of the Cold War. Approaching the themes and questions identified in this study may yield valuable insights for scholars and practitioners concerned with nuclear memory, long-term thinking, and intergenerational relationships between the nuclear ages.

Endnotes

1 Other scholars highlight the role of luck in preventing nuclear war (Pelopidas 2017b). For more widespread and conventional explanations, see Sauer (2015).

2 Other scholars point to 1973 as a key moment, following the Peace Studies Association of Japan's establishment, which aimed "to institutionalize universal peace studies from the standpoint of the victims of the atomic bombings" (Takemoto 2023: 63).

3 Any human below the age of eighteen years is considered a child under various international conventions, such as the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, currently signed and ratified by 196 countries.

4 Carson (2018) is an exception insofar as youth-based antinuclear organisations are discussed 'in practice', but the study does not engage with theoretical frameworks from social movements and youth studies.

5 Whisper is an artificial intelligence model which is used for voice recognition and transcription. The model can be used offline and locally. Data provided as input (both audio and text) is not used to train further models of artificial intelligence. The author took part in several Oral History Society training workshops before starting the transcription process. For more guidelines, see: http://ohs.org.uk/general-interest/how-intelligent-is-artificial-intelligence-oral-history-and-ai/ (viewed 21 September 2025).

6 Artificial Intelligence chatbots trained on hibakusha testimonies are also being considered (see Hoskins 2024).

7 Emphasis in italics is quoted as it appears in original book.

8 Quoted from inscriptions at Hiroshima's Memorial Cenotaph for the A-bomb Victims, the Flame of Peace, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki Peace Memorial museums.

9 Participant 05.

10 Participant 21.

11 Participant 24.

12 Participant 02.

13 Participant 13.

14 Participant 08.

15 Quoted from Italian journalist Tiziano Terzanis' statement that, "In Hiroshima... even the doves are bored with peace" (Buruma 1990).

16 Participant 23.

17 Participant 14.

18 Participant 17.

19 Participant 01. Although nuclear war and global warming are often treated as separate existential threats by both scholars and activists leading collective action, a growing body of literature understands the 'climate-nuclear nexus' as an expression of the same socio-technological and political problems (see Egeland 2025; Maurer 2024). A discussion of this nexus is not within the scope of this article.

20 Participant 06.

21 Participant 07. The song described is Umehara Shihei's Orizuru.

22 Participant 24.

23 Participant 17.

24 Like younger generations, many in-utero hibakusha lack memories of nuclear violence and do not remember having survived the atomic bomb. Their experiences and knowledge draw heavily from family accounts and available records.

25 Participant 12.

26 Participant 23.

27 Participant 06.

28 Chang (2014) notes that, unlike the German experience, Japan's education has yet to acknowledge the role of its wartime militaristic ideologies.

29 The first request for its removal was initiated by the Board of Education of the City of Matsue on 16 August 2013.

30 Participant 10.

31 Participant 24.

32 Participant 22.

33 Estimates show a baseline support of a nuclear ban treaty of approximately 75% of the Japanese public across demographic groups (age, gender, region of the country, income, or political party identification), with only 17.7% of the population is opposed, and 7.3% is undecided.

34 The survey's sample does not include respondents under 20 years old.

35 Participant 08.

36 This account remains unreferenced in all my documentation to protect the anonymity of this person.

37 Participant 07.

38 Zengakuren stands for All-Japan Leage of Student Self-Governments (in Japanese, Zen Nihon Gakusei Jichikai So Rengo). 'ANPO' was a common term referring to the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty.

39 For example, in the United States during the Cold War (Jacobs 2010). Another example is the perception of nukes as a national symbol in UK media (Crilley 2025).

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