

MARTYNA SZOJA*

LOCAL MEMORY, GLOBAL NORMS
HIROSHIMA PEACE PROMOTION DIVISION
AND 80 YEARS OF ADVOCACY
FOR A NUCLEAR-FREE WORLD

1. Introduction

The year 2025 marked the 80th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – an event that continues to shape global consciousness around nuclear disarmament and peace. Since 1945, the City of Hiroshima has undertaken extensive efforts to commemorate this tragedy and advocate for a world free from nuclear weapons. This interview offers a detailed look into Hiroshima's Peace Promotion Division, highlighting its priorities, history, and ongoing initiatives. It explores the city's leadership in nuclear non-proliferation, its collaboration with both domestic and international partners, and the evolving role of "peace tourism" in engaging younger generations, and includes reflections on the 2024 Nihon Hidankyō Nobel Peace Prize. In a time of rising nuclear tensions and uncertainty around global disarmament, this contribution highlights the continued importance of Hiroshima's message and the need to support survivor voices and local efforts for peace.

As both a symbol of resilience and a living advocate for disarmament, Hiroshima continues to transform memory into political agency. The Hiroshima Peace Promotion Division plays a crucial role in advancing these efforts, both within Japan and on the international stage.

Marking the 80th anniversary of the atomic bombings, the following interview provides a detailed institutional overview of Hiroshima's contemporary peace efforts from legacy preservation and peace tourism to international advocacy and digital innovation. This perspective complements existing studies of how cities navigate collective trauma and engage in transnational norm-building, and the conversation

<https://doi.org/10.26881/gkaw.2026.29.01>

* ORCID: 0009-0008-4547-5014

itself resonates with the literature on memory politics and the topic of traumatized cities and their recovery – influential in shaping transnational norms.¹

Hiroshima is not merely a passive symbol of past violence. It is an active agent in the global discourse on nuclear weapons, engaging in what scholars like Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink term “norm entrepreneurship.”² The term *hibakusha* includes all people affected by nuclear radiation, victims of nuclear testing (like in the Marshall Islands), accidents (Chernobyl, Fukushima), and production, recognizing their often-overlooked suffering and promoting a broader understanding of nuclear harm beyond the original bombings. It is a call for international recognition of these “invisible victims.”³ This broader framing of nuclear victimhood reinforces Hiroshima’s shift from local memory to global moral leadership. The city’s Peace Promotion Division, through programs like Mayors for Peace, exemplifies how subnational actors participate in international norm-building and diplomacy, a trend increasingly recognized in global governance studies.⁴

Moreover, Hiroshima’s emphasis on intergenerational memory transmission and the development of tools such as virtual *hibakusha* testimonies contribute to debates on digital memory and the future of historical witnessing in post-survivor societies.⁵ These initiatives intersect with scholarship on peace education, especially in post-conflict or memory-laden contexts, where the preservation of narrative authenticity and emotional engagement remains crucial, e.g. in the museums.⁶

¹ See: *The Politics of Memory: Transitional Justice in Democratizing Societies*, eds. A.B. de Brito, C.G. Enríquez, P. Aguilar, Oxford University Press, New York 2001; J. Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003; J. Kubik, M. Bernhard, *A Theory of the Politics of Memory* [in:] *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, eds. J. Kubik, M. Bernhard, Oxford University Press, New York 2014, pp. 7–37; L.E. Hein, M. Selden, *Living with the Bomb: American and Japanese Cultural Conflicts in the Nuclear Age*, Routledge, New York 2015; *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster*, eds. L.J. Vale, T.J. Campanella, Oxford University Press, New York 2005; J. Corburn, *Cities for Life: How Communities Can Recover from Trauma and Rebuild for Health*, Island Press, Washington 2021.

² See: M. Finnemore, K. Sikkink, *International Norm Dynamics and Political Change*, “International Organization” 1998, vol. 52(4), pp. 887–917.

³ See: R.A. Jacobs, *Nuclear Bodies: The Global Hibakusha*, Yale University Press, New Haven, London 2022.

⁴ See: M. Acuto, *Global Cities, Governance and Diplomacy: The Urban Link*, Routledge, New York 2013; R. Tavares, *Paradiplomacy: Cities and States as Global Players*, Oxford University Press, New York 2016.

⁵ The topic has been explored by Andrew Hoskins: *Digital Memory Studies: Media Past in Transition*, Routledge, New York 2018, and by Ellen Rutten, Julie Fedor, and Vera Zvereva, who focused their research on post-Soviet states, *Memory, Conflict and New Media: Web Wars in Post-Socialist States*, Routledge, New York 2013.

⁶ See: M. Bajaj, “Critical” Peace Education [in:] *Encyclopedia of Peace Education*, ed. M. Bajaj, Information Age Publishing, Charlotte 2008, pp. 135–147; M. Bajaj, E.J. Brantmeier, *The Politics, Praxis, and Possibilities of Critical Peace Education*, “Journal of Peace Education” 2011, vol. 8(3),

The following interview with Mr. Hasebe also enriches our understanding of how local-level peacebuilding can intersect with national and international nuclear policy. Hiroshima's persistent calls for Japan to engage more fully with the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) underscore ongoing tensions between national security paradigms and humanitarian disarmament logics,⁷ present especially now, with Sanae Takaichi as the new Prime Minister of Japan.

In capturing the work of a municipal peace office, this interview demonstrates how subnational diplomacy, memory preservation, and civic activism converge to sustain nuclear disarmament norms. In doing so, it provides a rich empirical case for research on cities as normative agents, the politics of memory, and the cultural foundations of global nuclear disarmament efforts.

2. Interview

Ryoji HASEBE (RH) is currently the assistant director of the Peace Promotion Division at Hiroshima City. Mr. Hasebe worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan from 2020 to 2022, on secondment from Hiroshima City.

Martyna SZOJA (MS) is a PhD candidate at the University of Duisburg-Essen. From January until March 2025 she was a visiting researcher at the Hiroshima Peace Institute, conducting comparative research on Chinese and Japanese nuclear non-proliferation policies.

The interview was conducted in Hiroshima on 26th February 2025.

MS: The Peace Promotion Division is a powerful institution in the City of Hiroshima. What are its priorities and milestones, and how do you perceive your role in promoting peace within Japan and internationally?

RH: There are three pillars of the main goals for the Peace Promotion Division in Hiroshima City. First, we promote initiatives for the abolition of nuclear weapons, such as our Promoting Peace through Welcoming Visitors program and the activities of Mayors for Peace. Second, we raise peace awareness through events, such as those held during the Culture of Peace Month to promote the Culture of Peace.

pp. 221–224; S. Sugimoto, *Digital Archives and Metadata as Critical Infrastructure to Keep Community Memory Safe for the Future: Lessons from Japanese Activities*, “Archives and Manuscripts” 2014, vol. 42(1), pp. 61–72; P. van den Dungen, K. Yamane, *Peace Education Through Peace Museums*, “Journal of Peace Education” 2015, vol. 12(3), pp. 213–222; M. Zembylas, Z. Bekerman, *Peace Education in the Present: Dismantling and Reconstructing Some Fundamental Theoretical Premises*, “Journal of Peace Education” 2013, vol. 10(2), pp. 197–214.

⁷ See: A. Kmentt, *The Humanitarian Initiative and the TPNW* 1, “Policy Brief” 2021, no. 104, pp. 15–24; T. Sauer, J. Pretorius, *Nuclear Weapons and the Humanitarian Approach*, “Global Change, Peace & Security” 2014, vol. 26(3), pp. 233–250.

Third, we convey the realities of an atomic bombing to future generations through policies, such as training official A-bomb Legacy Successors and preserving atomic-bombed buildings and trees.

When it comes to milestones, we call on people around the world, including political leaders of nuclear-weapon states, to visit our city, experience the realities of an atomic bombing, and share in the wish for peace, thus urging them to work for the abolition of nuclear weapons. We also invite international conferences to be held here in Hiroshima. Many policymakers, national government representatives, and officials of international organizations have visited our city, including then-sitting US President Barack Obama in 2016 and Pope Francis in 2019, who spread powerful messages of peace from the atomic-bombed city, exerting great influence around the world. In May 2023, the G7 Hiroshima Summit was held in our city. The visits of these leaders may be said to be the milestones for our division.

And about our role – the City of Hiroshima is the first city in the world to experience an atomic bombing in war. Our *hibakusha* – atomic bomb survivors – experienced horrors of the bombing, and their will for peace is why our city continues to strive for the peaceful coexistence and prosperity of all humanity, as well as the realization of a truly peaceful world. The mayor of Hiroshima, as the president of Mayors for Peace – an international non-governmental organization, attends meetings of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons as well as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. In these meetings, the mayor conveys the realities of an atomic bombing, the plea of the *hibakusha*, and calls for tangible measures to advance nuclear disarmament, to representatives and political leaders of various countries.

MS: I've attended lectures of the A-bomb Legacy Successors at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. The *hibakusha* testimonies I heard there impressed me greatly. Is the A-bomb Legacy Successors training provided by the Hiroshima Peace Promotion Division?

RH: Yes, our Peace Promotion Division offers a two-year training program to those who want to become Successors. After they complete their training, our Office certifies them as official Successors.

MS: Is Hiroshima advancing national policy on nuclear disarmament as well?

RH: Yes. The City of Hiroshima maintains that the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons is complementary with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which the Japanese government takes as a cornerstone of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. Therefore, each year we make a request to the Japanese government, urging it to participate in meetings of the State Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons as an observer, and ratify the treaty as soon as possible.

Hiroshima City opposes any nuclear tests leading to the development of nuclear weapons and makes protest to any country that conducts any kind of nuclear testing, including subcritical nuclear tests. We started protesting in response to the French hydrogen bomb test on 9th November 1968, and there have been 615 protests against nuclear tests to date. Although banning nuclear tests does not directly lead to nuclear disarmament, it will make a development of new nuclear weapons and improving their performance more difficult. As such, it is a starting point for nuclear disarmament. Japan also supports the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty coming into force.

Since the United States conducted the first atomic bomb test in history on 16th July 1945, more than 2,000 nuclear tests have been conducted. So far, we have made protests to the United States 248 times, Russia 188 times, France 118 times, China 30 times, the UK 19 times, India 3 times, Pakistan twice, and North Korea – 7 times.

The US plans to conduct a subcritical nuclear test this April.⁸ We must protest against it.

MS: Could you elaborate on the collaboration of your division with both Japanese and international partners?

RH: Through the initiatives of the Mayors for Peace program, the city collaborates with other local governments in Japan and other countries as well as with international organizations to promote the culture of peace. For example, we distribute seeds or seedlings from atomic-bombed trees to our member cities which show interest. The trees survived the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and although

⁸ As of 7th December 2025, no public information had been released regarding the execution of the planned subcritical nuclear test. According to Sarah Salem, the test – code-named Nob Hill – was scheduled to take place in April 2025. It is the second in the three-part Nimble series. The first experiment, code-named Twin Peaks, was conducted on 14th May 2024 by the U.S. Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) at the Principal Underground Laboratory for Subcritical Experimentation (PULSE), located at the Nevada National Security Site (NNSS). PULSE is the only facility in the United States where scientists conduct subcritical and physics experiments using weapons-grade plutonium to gather technical data about the nuclear weapons stockpile. According to Tim Beller, the subcritical experiments test director for Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and director for Nob Hill, Mission Hills, the third and final planned experiment in the Nimble series, is scheduled to take place a "couple years out." For more, see: S. Salem, *Next Subcritical Experiment at PULSE Slated for Spring 2025, Test Site Officials Says*, "Exchange Monitor," 20.12.2024, <https://www.exchangemonitor.com/next-subcritical-experiment-at-pulse-slated-for-spring-2025-test-site-officials-says-2/> (access: 5.05.2025); *Principal Underground Laboratory for Subcritical Experimentation (PULSE)*, NNSS, <https://nnss.gov/mission/stockpile-stewardship-program/u1a-complex/> (access: 6.02.2026); *NNSA Completes Subcritical Experiment at PULSE Facility in Nevada*, U.S. Department of Energy, 16.05.2024, <https://www.energy.gov/nnsa/articles/nnsa-completes-subcritical-experiment-pulse-facility-nevada> (access: 6.02.2026).

they lost their branches and leaves, they sprouted again the following year and gave hope for living to the people of these two cities. The aim of this initiative is to have these trees planted in public places and cared for by the community as a symbol of peace, conveying the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and contributing to the promotion of peace. Another example is the Children's Art Competition "Peaceful Towns." This competition aims to encourage children aged 6 to 15 to think about what peace means to them.

MS: How does the mission of Hiroshima resonate with the peace-promotion efforts of other cities in Japan, and how do you see Hiroshima uniquely positioned in this context?

RH: Every year, hundreds of thousands of visitors from Japan and overseas come to visit Hiroshima, to learn the realities of an atomic bombing. Among them, there are many students from all over Japan. Their visit to Hiroshima will deepen the understanding of what they have learned in school on peace and atomic bombings.

Every year, the City of Hiroshima holds the Peace Memorial Ceremony to console the souls of those lost to the atomic bombing, as well as to pray for the realization of lasting world peace. In order to encourage more students from other areas to attend the ceremony, starting from next fiscal year, our city will offer support for traveling expenses to the municipalities sending students to attend the ceremony. Aside from attending the Peace Memorial Ceremony, students will also talk with atomic bomb survivors, and gather with other students from all over Japan to have discussions and presentations about peace.

Furthermore, our city currently sends survivors of atomic bombings or A-bomb Legacy Successors to schools in other areas to give testimonies on the atomic bombing to their students, and pass the memories to the next generation. We also facilitate cities in Japan to hold special exhibitions concerning atomic bombings.

As the first city in the world to experience an atomic bombing in war, Hiroshima bears the mission of conveying the consequences of the use of nuclear weapons. By working with other cities, we will continue our efforts to appeal for the abolition of nuclear weapons and realization of lasting world peace through preserving, disseminating, and conveying the realities of an atomic bombing.

MS: Is there a city Hiroshima collaborates with the most in this aspect? Nagasaki, perhaps?

RH: Yes. And besides Nagasaki, every year we hold a conference of Mayors for Peace member cities in Japan. This year it was held in the Musashino City in the Tokyo Metropolis. Of course, Nagasaki and Hiroshima collaborate, as they both suffered as a result of atomic bombings. However, there are other cities in Japan which suffered from conventional air raids. They also make many efforts for peace.

MS: The 2024 Nobel Peace Prize was given to Nihon Hidankyō – a Japanese grass-roots organization of atomic bomb survivors from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, dedicated to nuclear abolition. Now, in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, there is a special exhibition devoted to Hidankyō. What are the engagements between this organization and the Hiroshima Peace Promotion Division?

RH: The Mayors for Peace program contributes to Nihon Hidankyō's work by collecting signatures and calling for the signing of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, among other things. That's one of the examples of our collaboration. Next week, a member of Nihon Hidankyō will come to Hiroshima to meet with the mayor. We also organized a public viewing of the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony this year.

MS: We mentioned that millions of tourists come to Hiroshima to better understand the consequences of the atomic bombing and to hear the stories of the *hibakusha*. "Peace tourism" is certainly well-developed in the city. But perhaps it is challenging to keep it engaging for the younger generations?

RH: Our city is promoting "peace tourism" to encourage people to visit the bombing remnants around Hiroshima, to deepen their understanding of people's life before the bombing and of the process of rebuilding, as well as to inspire them to think about the meaning of peace. The secretariat located in the city hall promotes "peace tourism" by holding a photo contest on Instagram, where users can submit photos of sites relevant to peace or of scenes from everyday life when they feel at peace. So far, every stage of the contest has had approximately 4,000 submissions. This contest spreads the message about "peace tourism" especially among the young generation, and offers an opportunity to ponder what peace means for them.

In the near future, there will no longer be any *hibakusha* left. With this future in mind, establishing a new way to pass down their experiences in their absence, as well as accurately and reliably conveying the words of the *hibakusha* and their will for peace to the next generation, is our city's responsibility. As we are aware that this is a pressing issue, we carry out initiatives to pass down the *hibakusha* experience using digital technology, including AI and virtual reality, as part of our program for the 80th anniversary of the atomic bombing.

Specifically, we are developing a *Hibakusha* Testimony Simulator that will allow users to have a virtual conversation with the *hibakusha* by making use of their actual voices and video footage. We are also promoting the use of VR goggles that allow users to virtually experience the horrors of the bombing, as well as the beauty of Hiroshima today.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no competing interests.

References

- Acuto M., *Global Cities, Governance and Diplomacy: The Urban Link*, Routledge, New York 2013.
- Bajaj M., "Critical" Peace Education [in:] *Encyclopedia of Peace Education*, ed. M. Bajaj, Information Age Publishing, Charlotte 2008, pp. 135–147.
- Bajaj M., Brantmeier E.J., *The Politics, Praxis, and Possibilities of Critical Peace Education*, "Journal of Peace Education" 2011, vol. 8(3), pp. 221–224.
- Brito A.B. de, Enríquez C.G., Aguilar P. (eds.), *The Politics of Memory: Transitional Justice in Democratizing Societies*, Oxford University Press, New York 2001.
- Corburn J., *Cities for Life: How Communities Can Recover from Trauma and Rebuild for Health*, Island Press, Washington 2021.
- Edkins J., *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003.
- Finnemore M., Sikkink K., *International Norm Dynamics and Political Change*, "International Organization" 1998, vol. 52(4), pp. 887–917.
- Hein L.E., Selden M., *Living with the Bomb: American and Japanese Cultural Conflicts in the Nuclear Age*, Routledge, New York 2015.
- Hoskins A., *Digital Memory Studies: Media Pasts in Transition*, Routledge, New York 2018.
- Jacobs R.A., *Nuclear Bodies: The Global Hibakusha*, Yale University Press, New Haven, London 2022.
- Kmentt A., *The Humanitarian Initiative and the TPNW 1*, "Policy Brief" 2021, no. 104, pp. 15–24.
- Kubik J., Bernhard M., *A Theory of the Politics of Memory* [in:] *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, eds. J. Kubik, M. Bernhard, Oxford University Press, New York 2014, pp. 7–37.
- NNSA Completes Subcritical Experiment at PULSE Facility in Nevada, U.S. Department of Energy, 16.05.2024, <https://www.energy.gov/nnsa/articles/nnsa-completes-subcritical-experiment-pulse-facility-nevada> (access: 6.02.2026).
- Principal Underground Laboratory for Subcritical Experimentation (PULSE), NNSS, <https://nnss.gov/mission/stockpile-stewardship-program/u1a-complex/> (access: 6.02.2026).
- Rutten E., Fedor J., Zvereva V., *Memory, Conflict and New Media: Web Wars in Post-Socialist States*, Routledge, New York 2013.
- Saito H., *Reiterated Commemoration: Hiroshima as National Trauma*, "Sociological Theory" 2006, vol. 24(4), pp. 353–376.
- Salem S., *Next Subcritical Experiment at PULSE Slated for Spring 2025, Test Site Officials Says*, "Exchange Monitor," 20.12.2024, <https://www.exchangemonitor.com/next-subcritical-experiment-at-pulse-slated-for-spring-2025-test-site-officials-says-2/> (access: 5.05.2025).
- Sauer T., Pretorius J., *Nuclear Weapons and the Humanitarian Approach*, "Global Change, Peace & Security" 2014, vol. 26(3), pp. 233–250.
- Sugimoto S., *Digital Archives and Metadata as Critical Infrastructure to Keep Community Memory Safe for the Future: Lessons from Japanese Activities*, "Archives and Manuscripts" 2014, vol. 42(1), pp. 61–72.
- Tavares R., *Paradiplomacy: Cities and States as Global Players*, Oxford University Press, New York 2016.
- Vale L.J., Campanella T.J. (eds.), *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster*, Oxford University Press, New York 2005.
- Van den Dungen P., Yamane K., *Peace Education Through Peace Museums*, "Journal of Peace Education" 2015, vol. 12(3), pp. 213–222.
- Zembylas M., Bekerman Z., *Peace Education in the Present: Dismantling and Reconstructing Some Fundamental Theoretical Premises*, "Journal of Peace Education" 2013, vol. 10(2), pp. 197–214.

STRESZCZENIE

LOKALNA PAMIĘĆ, GLOBALNE NORMY. DZIAŁ PROMOCJI POKOJU W HIROSZIMIE I 80 LAT DZIAŁALNOŚCI NA RZECZ ŚWIATA BEZ BRONI NUKLEARNEJ

Niniejszy artykuł powstał w związku 80. rocznicą bombardowania atomowego. Przedstawiono w nim rolę Działu Promocji Pokoju w Hiroszynie jako kluczowego aktora samorządowego w globalnym ruchu na rzecz rozbrojenia nuklearnego. Na podstawie pogłębionego wywiadu z wysokim rangą urzędnikiem Działu przeanalizowano instytucjonalne strategie Hiroszimy dotyczące zachowywania pamięci, promowania idei eliminacji broni nuklearnej oraz uczestnictwa w ponadnarodowym procesie kształtowania norm. Zwrócono uwagę na inicjatywy takie jak Mayors for Peace, turystyka pokojowa, przekazywanie świadectw ocalałych oraz tworzenie nowych rozwiązań cyfrowych skierowanych do młodszych pokoleń. Przyjmując perspektywę z pogranicza polityki pamięci, dyplomacji regionalnej i przedsiębiorczości normatywnej, pokazano, w jaki sposób w obliczu zaognionej sytuacji międzynarodowej lokalne doświadczenia traumy przekuwane są w Hiroszynie w trwałą globalną działalność na rzecz świata wolnego od broni nuklearnej.