

# Racism, Colonialism, and Nuclear Weapons

## Introduction

Systemic racism plagues all levels of society, and the international level is certainly no exception. National and international security priorities have been dominated by white Western elite, at the expense of peoples of colour around the world. While indigenous people and peoples of colour have borne the brunt of Western militarism, their contributions to international peace and security are too often overlooked.

This is clearly the case with nuclear weapons. Indian author and activist Arundhati Roy said nuclear weapons were at ‘the very heart of whiteness’.<sup>1</sup> Racism is embedded in history and doctrine of nuclear weapons. Indigenous peoples and communities of colour across the world have been disproportionately harmed by these weapons. While Indigenous peoples and peoples of colour have played a key role in nuclear resistance movements for decades, established nuclear weapons teachings too often ignore their contributions and perspectives.

## Racism is ingrained in nuclear weapons history and doctrine

Racism is at the core of fundamental assumptions about nuclear weapons policy: who is permitted to develop nuclear weapons, who is listened to and on whom the United States has considered dropping its nuclear weapons.

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) codified what has been described as a “nuclear apartheid” which divides states parties into nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear weapons states. The five nuclear-armed states – China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States position themselves as responsible nuclear powers, while deeming other countries, including countries predominantly of colour and former colonies, as irresponsible and illegitimate, including North Korea, India and Pakistan.

The non-nuclear majority of states are too often sidelined in conversations about nuclear weapons dominated by the five nuclear-weapon states recognised by the NPT. At the United Nations, the majority of countries who do not have nuclear weapons are often deemed irrelevant and less serious than the permanent five members of the UN Security Council in international fora. A pertinent example of this was the 2017 negotiations of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), where non-western negotiating states were often portrayed as “irrational”, “emotional” and somehow “less capable” of negotiating a Treaty than Western governments.

U.S. presidents have contemplated a nuclear first strike on predominantly populations of colour: the Taiwan Straits, North Korea, North Vietnam and China.<sup>2</sup> In the only place where the United States did use nuclear weapons in wartime, the public widely supported the bombing partly due

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<sup>1</sup> Arundhati Roy, *The End of Imagination*, 2016. (Chicago: Haymarket Books) p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Elaine Scarry, “The Racist Foundation of Nuclear Architecture,” *Boston Review*, August 5, 2020, <http://bostonreview.net/war-security-global-justice/elaine-scarry-racist-foundation-nuclear-architecture>

to anti-Japanese racism, depicting Japanese people in ‘subhuman terms, in some cases fit for extermination’.<sup>3</sup>

## Nuclear weapons have disproportionately harmed Indigenous communities and communities of colour

Nuclear-armed states consistently tested their nuclear weapons in spaces they wrongly deemed ‘distant’ and ‘empty’, that were away from national metropolises where decision-makers lived.<sup>4</sup> This led to many nuclear nations testing their weapons in their dependent territories or colonies in which Indigenous peoples were situated with ancestral connections to their lands and waters, such as in New Mexico, Nevada, the Marshall Islands, Montebello Island, Maralinga and Emu Field in Australia, Kiribati (formerly the Gilbert and Ellice Island Colony), Kazakhstan, Xinjiang, Algeria and French Polynesia. For decades, Indigenous peoples were displaced and relocated, suffering devastating humanitarian consequences, including cancers and mental illness, irradiated environments and food sources. This has also dramatically impacted how Indigenous peoples have been able to tread the road to independence.

In the Pacific, over 315 nuclear tests were held across the region, many of which were many times larger than the ones used in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The U.S. government purposefully allowed a cloud of radioactive fallout to descend upon Rongelap atoll with its peoples present to later conduct human experiments on the impacts of testing.<sup>5</sup>

In Kazakhstan, Soviet elites chose the “uninhabited” land around Semipalatinsk, which was the source of livelihood for thousands of people, who grazed livestock in the area and sold meat thought the Soviet Union, as well as culturally significant for the Kazak people.<sup>6</sup> The disproportionate impact of nuclear-weapon activities on indigenous peoples is recognised in the preamble of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.<sup>7</sup>

## Indigenous peoples and peoples of colour have resisted nuclear weapons for decades

But Indigenous Peoples and people of colour have not just been affected by nuclear weapons use and testing, they have also affected nuclear policy through their activism at the forefront of the nuclear disarmament movement.

There is a powerful and underappreciated history of global south resistance to colonialism, militarism and nuclear weapons. Famously, the Bandung conference of 1955 with representatives from across Asia and Africa called for disarmament and an end to the nuclear

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Jones, *After Hiroshima: The US, Race and Nuclear Weapons in Asia 1945-1965*, 2010. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Nic Maclellan, The Nuclear Age in the Pacific Islands, *The Contemporary Pacific*, 17 (2006): p. 263-372.

<sup>5</sup> Holly Barker, *Bravo for the Marshallese: Regaining Control in a Post-Nuclear, Post-Colonial World*. 2013. (Belmont: Wadsworth).

<sup>6</sup> <https://inkstickmedia.com/nuclear-shades-of-red-racism/>

<sup>7</sup> UNGA. Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. *UN Documents*. 2017. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N17/209/73/PDF/N1720973.pdf?OpenElement>

arms race.<sup>8</sup> Since the 1960s, Indigenous peoples have stood staunchly against nuclear testing, as well as military presence and colonialism. This history is deeply intertwined with the call for self-determination from colonial oppression. The phrase ‘radioactive colonialism’ for example, was initially coined by Indigenous activist Winona LaDuke and activist Ward Churchill in 1982 to describe a ‘system of domination through which governments and corporations disproportionately target and devastate indigenous peoples and their lands to maintain the nuclear production process’.<sup>9</sup> The links between affected communities, including through the Nevada- Semipalatinsk movement, has been referenced by the CTBTO as a powerful stimulus in supporting the full scale nuclear testing moratorium. In the Pacific, the network known as the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement stood in solidarity against colonial exploitation and rapidly developing nuclear military complex across the islands during this time.

In Japan, the hibakusha, nuclear weapon survivors, have also been a major force to be reckoned with and fomented global networks particularly with the Pacific to shed light upon the health impacts of nuclear weapons and make a call for financial reparations.<sup>10</sup> In the United States, scholar Vincent J Intondi in *African Americans Against the Bomb* described the links between the civil rights movement and nuclear disarmament activism from the 1960s onwards.<sup>11</sup> Black leaders such as Malcolm X, WEB DuBois and Martin Luther King called for nuclear abolition and linked the ideas to racial harmony and acted in solidarity in the Japanese hibakusha.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, non-white states are powerfully committed to nuclear abolition, with the majority party to established regional nuclear-weapon-free zones such as Latin America in the Treaty of Tlatelolco (1967), the Pacific in the Treaty of Rarotonga (1985), South East Asia in the Treaty of Bangkok (1995) and Africa in the Treaty of Pelindaba (1996). At the United Nations, smaller states have continually resisted and attempted to change the nuclear norm in multilateral nuclear disarmament diplomacy.

The most recent example is the negotiations and adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in 2017, where civil society impacted by nuclear weapon use and testing played a key role, as did impacted states. The resulting treaty recognises the disproportionate impact of nuclear weapons on indigenous communities, also for the first time in an international treaty requires assistance for victims of nuclear weapons use and testing and requires the remediation of contaminated environments.

## Conclusion

Clearly, notions of white supremacy and racism have deep ties to the history and culture of nuclear weapons. These racist conceptions have resulted in concrete and disproportionate impacts on Indigenous and communities of colour, who in turn rose up in resistance with anti-

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<sup>8</sup> Jiwon Amy Yoo, Bandung Conference, 1955, *Black Past*, August 8 2009, <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/bandung-conference-1955/>

<sup>9</sup> Danielle Endres. “The Rhetoric of Nuclear Colonialism: Rhetorical Exclusion of American Indian Arguments in the Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Siting Decision,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*. 6(2009): p. 39–60.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Avenell. *Transnational Japan in the Global Environment Movement*. 2017. (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press).

<sup>11</sup> Vincent J. Intondi. *African Americans Against the Bomb: Nuclear Weapons, Colonialism, and the Black Freedom Movement*, 2015. (Stanford Nuclear Age: Stanford University Press).

<sup>12</sup> Erika Hayasaki. *Daughters of the bomb: my reckoning with Hiroshima, 75 years later*. 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/04/hiroshima-bombing-75th-anniversary-racism-atomic>

nuclear movements. The TPNW is a critical intervention for nuclear justice for Indigenous and communities of colour particularly to help provide victim assistance and environmental remediation to impacted communities. Challenging racism in nuclear weapons policy requires centring impacted community voices and rejecting white supremacist structures in international and national security.

## Further reading

Amundsen, Fiona and Frain, Sylvia C., "[The Politics of Invisibility: Visualizing Legacies of Nuclear Imperialisms](#)," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 11, no. 2 (2020): 125–151

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<https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/bandung-conference-1955/>

See also: Princeton University's [Curriculum Resources Project](#): *Countering Racism and Other Structures of Exclusion and Domination in Teaching and Research on Nuclear Issues*