



A worker in the Shinkolobwe mine the source of the uranium for the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. AP Schalk Van Zuydam 2004

Before Hiroshima & Nagasaki there was Shinkolobwe

By Kelly Lundeen

On August 6..., people around the world commemorated ... the first atomic bombs ... dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. People gathered with flags and flowers to remember the effects and destruction caused by the thermal and nuclear radiation from the bombs. No such ceremony took place in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

— Dr. Jean Bele, Congolese Nuclear Physicist at the MIT Laboratories

Before that uranium could destroy life in Japan, it first started by destroying life in Shinkolobwe.

— Joe-Yves Salankang Sa Ngol, Vice-Chairperson, Congolese Civil Society in South Africa

Roughly 80 percent of the uranium used for the world's first atomic bombs came from the Shinkolobwe mine in the Belgian Congo, now known as Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). As the name implies, the Belgian Congo was a colony. Forced labor was the norm for colonizers to exploit the rich natural resources, leaving the indigenous Congolese workers impoverished, sick, or dead from radiation exposure, working conditions, or murder.

One of the original stories of nuclear colonialism began in DRC after nuclear fission was discovered in 1938. Suddenly the high-grade Congolese uranium acquired new economic value. The Belgian company that managed the Shinkolobwe mine sold its first 4,200 metric tons of uranium to the U.S. to supply the Manhattan Project, and U.S. Army engineers were deployed to Shinkolobwe to deplete the uranium from the land.

Ironically, mine director Belgian Edgar Sengier, whose brutal working conditions led to the murder and irradiation of the Congolese, was rewarded: He was given the U.S. president's Medal for Merit, despite a U.S. intelligence finding that he sold 1.5 million pounds of Congolese uranium to the Nazis.

While no records were kept of radiation-induced diseases or workers dying in the mines, some stories have been passed on — of genetically inherited malformations, and cancer. A deceased uranium miner's granddaughter, Sylvie Bambemba Mwela, spoke of her grandfather at one of the Missing Link events. He died with his brain coming out of his mouth.

Overcoming inhumane conditions, miners at Shinkolobwe organized for an increase in wages, then equivalent to 20 cents a day. Around 1,000 workers went on strike in 1941 and won an agreement with management. Instead of signing the contract as strike leader Léonard Mpoyi demanded, the colonial governor shot and killed him. After that, 70 more workers were killed by soldiers. Resistance was met with the most severe repression, but the strike succeeded in a 40% raise.

In the eyes of Western colonizers, the lives of the Congolese workers were considered completely expendable, and they have never been recognized, much less compensated for their suffering. — *Wired*, Aug. 21, 2023; BBC, Aug. 3, 2020; Talking Humanities, Aug. 18, 2016; Tom Zoellner, *Uranium*, 2009.

The Missing Link Event

A battle for justice and reparations for Shinkolobwe's negative uranium legacy

By Isaiah Mombilo

Edited by Leona Morgan with permission

Editor's note: The Congolese Civil Society of South Africa (CCSSA) is a non-governmental organization based in Cape Town, South Africa with a mission of "Uniting all Congolese and all African[s] living in South Africa under one umbrella regardless of their ethnic, religious or political origin, country and views." This summer, CCSSA held its annual event called "The Missing Link" which is aimed at telling the world the story of Shinkolobwe uranium mine, a deliberately erased but essential part of the Manhattan Project. This year's hybrid event featured local speakers, music and dance as well as presenters from around the world, including Haruko Moritaki from Hiroshima.

The CCSSA commemorated the 78th anniversary of the tragic end of the Second World War on Sunday, July 30, 2023.

This end was happy in that it marked the culmination of five years of combat and hostility; however, the victory of one camp shocked the collective human conscience following the disastrous bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan.

Everything seems to have been said about this atrocious war and the start of the nuclear arms race, and yet, nearly eight decades later, an important part of the story still remains unknown, if not hidden. This is what the CCSSA has been fighting to reveal and enshrine in the official narrative for eight years now through an annual event titled, "The Missing Link." This year's event consisted of several parts starting with paying tribute to the memory of all the Japanese victims of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A candle was lit and a minute of silence was held in their memory.

There were talks about the bomb and its impacts, testimonies from victims and descendants of victims who survived and became anti-nuclear activists. There were presentations about the Shinkolobwe

uranium mine with its uniquely rich uranium ore deposit of 65 percent [today, mines are often 2 percent or less], and about the route this uranium took throughout the Manhattan Project.

Lastly, there were testimonies from Indigenous Peoples fighting nuclear impacts in the United States and India, followed by a message from CCSSA Vice-chairperson Joe-Yves Salankang Sa Ngol entitled "Shinkolobwe: A City That Doesn't Exist." Salankang Sa Ngol explained why the name "Shinkolobwe" does not appear anywhere in the official World War II narrative.

First, the U.S. Americans and Belgians had this small village removed not only from the narrative, but also from the map of the Congo to prevent their German adversaries from knowing where the precious uranium was located. Secondly, these two countries did not want to be held responsible for the mass crimes committed during the extraction of the uranium. Congolese were sent into the depths of the mine to extract this dangerous ore without any appropriate protective equipment. They extracted, sorted, transported and loaded it without protection, and its highly radioactive waste was abandoned in the open air for years. No concrete action has been taken to dismantle the mine's remaining infrastructure, to clean up the site, or even to complete an assessment of the radiation risks to surrounding populations.

This year, the gathering of voices from several continents, from both the point of origin of the Shinkolobwe uranium and its final resting place, is proof that gradually the world is learning of this missing link.

Together, let's work for a denuclearized and healthy world.

For full reflection by Isaiah Mombilo, visit: congolesecivilsocietysa.org/resources. To see the 2023 Missing Link event: facebook.com/congolesecivilsocietyofsouthafrica.

Above and Below the Mushroom Cloud

Letter by Yukiyo Kawano, edited by Lindsay Potter

"We are all agents of history, regardless of our consciousness or intentions."

— Joseph Gerson, *With Hiroshima Eyes*

Yukiyo Kawano, a U.S.-based visual artist, born and raised in Hiroshima, circulated a letter earlier this year to engender critical analysis in the anti-nuclear movement. Seventy-eight years after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Kawano's letter questions the perspective and portrayal of the dominant U.S. historical narrative, which isolates U.S. atomic policy from those it victimizes. Kawano's letter concerns an inflatable mushroom cloud artistically rendered by Pedro Reyes and exhibited in several U.S. cities in 2022. Excerpts from her letter appear in italics below.

[Reyes's] image...coincides with the image taken by a U.S. military aircraft from the sky of the mushroom cloud rising from the Nagasaki atomic bomb. Is it an image that instantly offers viewers a space to safely assume that the photographer/military personnel has all the possible means to escape to minimize their exposure to radiation? Such a view was never offered for people who were at the ground level in Nagasaki (or Hiroshima) ... I worry about the normalization of such an image.

Without asking critical questions we remain subjected to a state-sponsored historical record. Why does the official U.S. narrative surrounding the 9/11 attacks focus on "ground zero" and on images of victims' families, but the U.S. government portrayal of the atomic bombings presents the military victors' perspective? Similarly, we have a vast library of books, films, and museum archives to preserve the perspective of victims of Nazi Germany. This is

an important history, but it stands in contrast to the lack of such memorialization for those who suffered under U.S. militarism. It is clear: when the U.S. can be portrayed as the victor and savior, or if U.S. lives are lost, the suffering of victims is essential to the story. When the U.S. perpetrates genocide and human rights atrocities, the faces of victims go unseen.

The U.S. bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki instantaneously took the lives of every living being in their proximity. The mushroom shaped cloud that arose from the detonation was an accumulation of ash from the city itself. That Cloud contains our grandparents' flesh and bones ... How do we address the issue ... so as to avoid reinstating the violence... engage in a discussion of ways we can ensure equity around artwork that deals with historical trauma ... we all react with different degrees of intensity to potent images depending on our frames of reference...whether we know anyone who has been impacted."

The disarmament movement must resist criminal policy while also advocating a more accurate public understanding, one that debunks the propaganda of nationalism and lifts up the voices it seeks to silence. Howard Zinn famously said that controlling people's sense of history can make them believe anything. Kawano and others elevating hibakusha voices are reminders that stories and images make up the foundation of our history and cultural identity.

Yukiyo Kawano received a response from the Union of Concerned Scientists including concrete steps organizations can take to shift this paradigm. Please visit the Nukewatch website, under the Fall 2023 *Quarterly*, to see Yukiyo's original letter, the response from the UCS, and links to related stories.