

Scienza e Pace

Science & Peace

ISSN 2039-1749

VOL. XV, N. 2 (2024)

Be a Peace Historian, Save the World, Galtung-Style

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Rivista online del Centro Interdisciplinare
"Scienze per la Pace" - Università di Pisa



Il presente lavoro, essendo il frutto di una testimonianza personale di una persona che ha avuto l'opportunità di conoscere Galtung e lavorare direttamente con lui non è stato sottoposto a revisione.

Ricevuto: 15 dicembre 2024.

Accettato: 15 aprile 2025.

Pubblicato: 31 luglio 2025.

Per citare l'articolo:

Braatz, T. (2024), "Be a Peace Historian, Save the World, Galtung-Style", *Scienza e Pace*, XV (2), pp. 115-123.

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Be a Peace Historian, Save the World, Galtung-Style

Timothy Braatz*

"The past has to be taken seriously: it is too serious to be left to historians." Peace scholar Johan Galtung wrote that because he understood how intellectuals in the West "are trained to abstain from criticism, constructivism, and action unless they happen to be in certified applied sciences." For historians, this means writing as if unbiased and disinterested. There is no socio-political agenda allowed. Stay neutral (on a moving train).

Peace Studies, though, as conceived by Galtung, is "an applied social science, with an explicit value orientation" — against violence. "Critical Peace studies takes explicit stands."

Peace scholars get to care. A Peace historian, then, is one who writes with the transparent intent of reducing violence. In that sense, a historian can be a Peace worker, understanding that an immense Peace is made of lots of little Peaces, including little Peaces of culture.

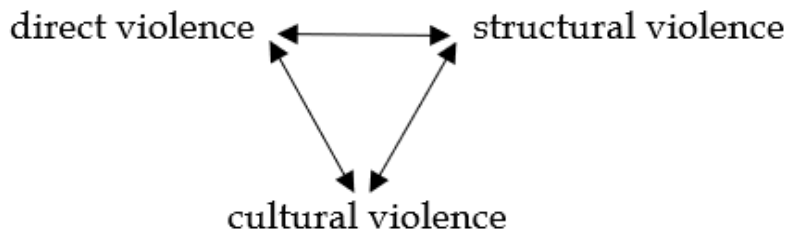
Peace Studies presume violence studies and Galtung defined *violence* as harm to life or an "avoidable insult to basic human needs." He postulated three categories:

- Direct violence is what most people think of as violence: an observable action that causes or threatens immediate harm to a living organism.
- Structural or indirect violence is the gradual harm built into an economic system (exploitation) or political system (repression).

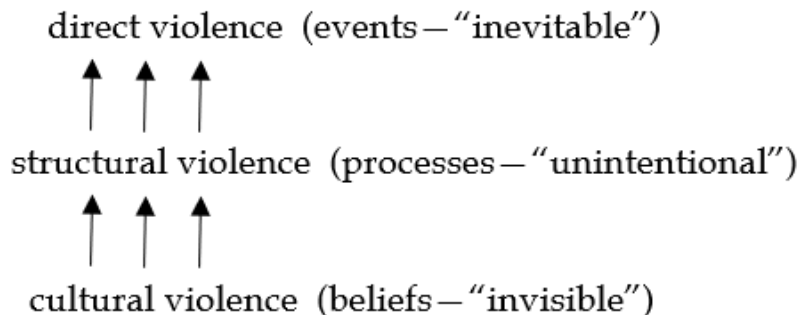
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- Cultural violence is the language, belief systems, and other aspects of culture that legitimize and encourage direct and structural violence.

Galtung imagined a triangle of mutually reinforcing violence, with causality flowing in six directions. Violence begets violence.

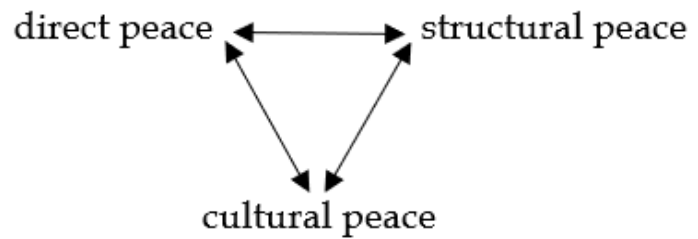
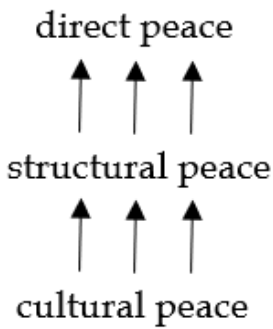


However, he believed "the major causal direction for violence is from cultural via structural to direct violence." Thus, a verticality: at the bottom there is cultural violence, which is slow to change, seemingly permanent, and thus unnoticed. This creates a legitimizing basis for the structural violence, which appears to have evolved "naturally" - with no one being held accountable. At the top, breaking through the surface for all to see, are events of direct violence.



In Galtung's peace pedagogy, identifying which kind of violence is necessary but not sufficient. The goal is reducing violence, which requires addressing all points on the triangle to interrupt or transform all directions of causality.

The antidote to direct violence is *direct Peace*, which means creative, nonviolent conflict resolution based on refusal to cause harm. Reducing structural violence requires increasing *structural Peace* and expanding political and economic institutions that provide for, rather than violate basic human needs. *Cultural Peace* is the language, belief systems, and other aspects of culture that legitimize and encourage direct and structural Peace.



History-telling is a universal element of culture. It can be cultural violence, cultural Peace or irrelevant to questions of violence, depending on the storyteller's choices regarding content, language, perspective, emphasis, and analysis. However, historians, like everyone, are prisoners of beliefs and language. Achieving complete freedom from cultural violence may be impossible. However, critical self-reflection can help loosen the shackles and shrink the blinders once one notices they are wearing them. Objectivity, Galtung wrote, is "awareness of own assumptions."

Consider: *America won World War II*. This simple assertion would raise no objections at a conference of professional U.S. historians. Yet, it carries dangerous implications and, left unchallenged, is cultural violence.

As explicated by Galtung, part of U.S. cosmology is being a Chosen People obliged to defeat God's enemies. This deep assumption is traced back to Old Testament scribes and 17th-century Puritan ministers in Massachusetts. *America won World War II* stories, beloved by Hollywood producers and famous U.S. historians, provide modern, secular reinforcement. Their comforting message is a perennial bestseller: U.S. armed forces defeated Hitler, the personification of wickedness, so U.S. war-making is Good. (The crucial role of Soviet forces is omitted.) U.S. forces must police the world; that is the divine mission, and antiwar sentiment is "appeasement" of Evil.

To dismantle "*America won World War II*", examine the terminology. *America* brings vagueness that cannot be corrected simply by replacing it with *the United States of America* or, as Galtung suggested, the United States *in* America. Nations and countries,

Galtung explained, are abstractions, not life forms, and thus cannot have goals, thus cannot achieve goals, and cannot "win."

In the USA, the abstraction America is typically equated with a historical-nationalist we, as in "We won the war." This lazy vernacular implies that the USA is a united entity, a timeless family sharing the same goals and values, with fatherly leaders looking out for the best interests of all.

"America = we" represents cultural violence as it reinforces structural violence by obscuring intranational conflicts (race, class, gender, nationality, ideology) and discouraging scrutiny of power systems and elite decision-makers. It also underlies the *we-versus-them* nationalist propaganda used to validate U.S. imperialism.

Rejection of the historical nationalist *we* may seem trivial, a tiny piece of the puzzle, but it prompts a critical question: *Who* actually wins a war? Who truly benefits? Not the dead soldiers and dead civilians, not the traumatized survivors, not their families. Not the general population, who endure environmental degradation, freedom loss, and national treasure squandering. Not an imagined *we*. The blessings are reserved for military profiteers and a few top officials on the supposedly triumphant side.

While we are at it, even the term *war* can be problematic. For the average U.S. citizen, *war* refers to something that happens to someone else, somewhere else. Alternatively, it means a large-scale effort to decrease some unwanted phenomenon, such as the "war on drugs" or "war on poverty." In that sense, *war* has become a euphemism, casually employed without reflecting on the horrors. I recommend a harsher word, one lacking positive implications, to clarify what war actually is: *slaughter* (Braatz 2015).

Consider: *Leaders of the U.S. militarized state and private military industries benefited from widespread slaughter in 1940-45, and almost everyone else sacrificed and suffered.* More precisely, it is still problematic.

Galtung defined cosmology or "deep culture" as "the collectively held subconscious ideas about what constitutes normal and natural reality." He identified Occidental (Western)

civilization as "the region characterized by the Semitic-Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam)." He was more sympathetic to Oriental (Eastern) civilizations, namely Buddhic (Buddhism), Indic (Hinduism), Sinic (Chinese), and Nipponic (Japanese).

In Western cosmology, Time flows from a beginning point to an end, with Progress toward the will of the Divine. The end will solve all problems, so live for today. In Eastern cosmology, Time is unbounded, infinite, a perpetually flowing river. With no end coming, communities must seek harmonious existence, internally and externally, including with nature.

The Conceptions of Time shape the conceptions of war and Peace. From a finite Time perspective, a war has a beginning and end. The *World War II* formulation implies two discrete events: I and II. In this view, Peace is simply the period between wars, the absence of slaughter, and what Galtung called "negative Peace." By conquering German forces in 1945, the U.S. military brought Peace to Europe. Thus, the way to Peace is through military superiority—an illogic that guarantees a next war.

An infinite Time mindset does not frame wars as discrete events. War is like a chronic illness. It may go into remission (negative Peace), but the germs (cultural and structural violence) remain, and the noxious symptoms (direct violence) will reappear. Militarism is not the solution; it is the problem. Treating the war disease requires "positive Peace," defined not as a temporary state of less violence but as an activity, a constant task, at all points on the triangle.

From this perspective, U.S. (and Soviet) troops did not bring Peace to Europe in 1945. The five preceding years of massive direct violence intensified cultural and structural violence, and with no significant peace therapy, World War II became the Cold War (1945-89). An alert historian can trace the malignancy forward and backwards in time and laterally in geographic space, interconnecting Europe and the Pacific.

Leaders of the U.S. militarized state and private military industries benefited from widespread slaughter in 1940-45; almost everyone else in Europe, Asia, the USA, and the Mediterranean region sacrificed and suffered; and the process continues eighty years later with U.S.-funded slaughters in Ukraine, Palestine/Israel, and elsewhere.

As an exercise in cultural Peace, apply these lessons to the history of the U.S.-Japanese slaughter. The purpose is to mitigate the cultural violence of the traditional U.S. version.

That version, of course, reflects the deep culture. First, a precise beginning: "surprise" attack on Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941). "Our interests are in grave danger," President Franklin Roosevelt proclaimed, but "the American people, in their righteous might, will win through to absolute victory."

"Infamy" must be quashed, even at the cost of more U.S. lives, so Roosevelt ordered a slaughter campaign across the northern Pacific Ocean. In the retelling, Japanese aggressors are void of rational motivations or respect for life, not even for their own. U.S. "defenders" are heroic "boys."

Then, a distinct ending, with atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki (August 6 and 9, 1945) and Japanese unconditional surrender (September 2). A triumph of Western ingenuity (Manhattan Project), the two bombs brought "Peace." They also "saved lives on both sides" because otherwise, the Japanese would have "fought to the last man." U.S. forces then occupied Japan to direct a magnanimous reconstruction.

Dig deeper: Galtung identified Western and Nipponic civilizations as "danger zones," as they both harbour ideologies conducive to imperialism. Similar to the West, the patriarchal Japanese assume themselves divinely Chosen and view others as lesser beings to be exploited.

Go back in time: In the 19th century, U.S. armies conquered Native tribes "from sea to shining sea," then, bolstered by the Industrial Revolution, set sail (by shovelling coal). Hawaii and the Philippines were stepping stones toward China. Meanwhile, beginning in 1868, the Meiji government in Japan adopted industrial capitalism to compete with Western imperialists. Japanese armies conquered in all directions: Manchuria, Korea, coastal China, Okinawa, Taiwan, and beyond.

The excavation reveals two ideologies of superiority (cultural violence), two centralized states overseeing capitalist economies demanding ever more resources and markets

(structural violence), and two national militaries slaughtering "inferiors" for control of the western Pacific Rim (direct violence). A U.S.-Japanese slaughter was not inevitable but likely, as Japanese and U.S. officials understood.

In the USA, a few specialists tell a complex story of 1941. As U.S. and Japanese imperialist goals became incompatible - *Who gets China?*- inability to compromise doomed attempts at diplomacy. Coercive U.S. trade sanctions, denying metals and fuel to Japan, encouraged more expansive Japanese forays, including the December 7 "surprise." In popular U.S. culture, though, a celebration of victimization - National Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day, Pearl Harbor National Memorial, the usual films and classroom lessons - keeps the story neat.

Also, not well known, historians have debunked the atomic bomb apologetics. By July 1945, U.S. ships had blockaded Japan; U.S. planes were fire-bombing cities; Japanese society was in disarray; Japanese leaders had indicated a willingness to surrender. Perhaps President Harry Truman would have accepted their offer if he had not been anxious about giving nuclear fission a chance. Ultimately, Soviet ground advances in Manchuria, not U.S. airborne destruction, were the proximate cause of Japanese capitulation. Thus, the atomic bombs did not "save lives."

In Galtung's terms, the atomic bombings were "near-divine punishment" for the original sin, as required by Western cosmology. Indeed, Truman considered Japan "a terribly cruel and uncivilized nation" and insisted that "the whole world must be cleansed of the evil." After punishment came forgiveness and redemption, the savages were rehabilitated, and moral order was restored.

But that did not end the Pacific slaughter, did not cure the disease, did not heal. The absorption of Japan into the U.S. empire - triumph over Evil - reinforced U.S. cultural violence. The economic boost of U.S. wartime spending - triumph over the Depression- inspired the intense structural violence of a permanent military state. So, after a brief remission, the horrific slaughter recurred in Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, East Timor - and, as Galtung postulated, perhaps one day a U.S.-Chinese conflagration.

It may be worse than all that. The atomic bombings were tests conducted on Japanese civilians intended to intimidate Soviet leaders in the contest for German territories. The last acts of World War II were the first acts of the U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms race, and the insanity of nuclear arsenals *still threatens the survival of all earthly species*. Thus, Peace historians have a role in... saving human civilization!

Consider: *Reagan won the Cold War*. The Soviet Union collapsed because the U.S. government, in the 1980s, spent billions of dollars to create a "missile defence" system. This fanciful causality - easily debunked but widely believed in the USA - seems to justify massive military budgets. It also promises that technological advances and the fear of "mutually assured destruction" will keep everyone safe.

One remedy for this cultural violence is accurately describing the peril. U.S.-Soviet posturing almost brought nuclear annihilation in October 1962 (Missile Crisis) and twice in autumn 1983 (false alarm on September 26; Able Archer in November). Unbeknownst to almost everyone, then and now, a few coolheaded military officers prevented the ultimate disaster. Next time, humanity might not get so lucky.

Historical accounts that suggest ways to address the dangers are also critical. In the 1950s, scientists and Gandhian activists started an anti-nukes movement in the USA and Europe, which led to mass nonviolent resistance and disarmament treaties. By asserting the sacredness of all people and all life, the movement challenged the assumptions of a Chosen People. Direct Peace → Cultural Peace.

So many empowering antiwar stories, collectively a model for survival, wait to be told, retold, and amplified. Here is one: In 1959, Galtung founded the Peace Research Institute in Oslo (PRIO). Similar think tanks followed in Stockholm, Frankfurt, and Hamburg. Galtung and fellow Peace theorists advocated for "common security" and "defensive defence." This new thinking allowed Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, in the late 1980s, to quit the Cold War, giving humanity a temporary reprieve, a chance to save ourselves. Cultural Peace → Direct Peace.

Reference

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