

Young People and Nuclear War

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Although no bombs have yet exploded in World War III, there are already victims - not physically, but psychologically. Worse yet, these victims are often those most precious to us, our children. This paper examines the impact of the nuclear threat on the human psyche with particular emphasis on the mental state of young people and children.

While a few farsighted individuals from the psychological community, notably D. Krech, E. Hilgard, R. Lifton, and J. Frank, took the threat to heart early in the nuclear era, it took almost forty years for the community in general to realize the danger. Now we may have very little time left. Hence the need to understand and overcome the psychological barriers that prevent people from responding adequately to this life-and-death struggle.

Nuclear Victims

In an American study of the 1960s, M. Schwebel surveyed 3,000 children and adolescents of school age. The survey showed that even then nuclear war figured prominently in the thoughts and feelings of the younger generation. Of those asked, 95 percent expressed a serious concern about the danger of war and 44 percent lived in fear, waiting for war. (1) In similar work, S. Escalona surveyed more than 300 subjects, from age four

to teenagers. (2) When asked how they saw the world in the time of their adulthood, over 70 percent spontaneously mentioned the possibility of nuclear war.

Large scale research into the reactions of children and adolescents to the threat of war was initiated in the United States in 1978, when the American Association of Psychiatrists set up a special task force. In the course of two years, from 1978 to 1980, J. Mack and W. Beardslee surveyed 1,151 secondary school students, including both boys and girls. The questionnaires asked about the subjects' attitudes to the future; how the threat of war affected their plans, including family planning; chances for survival in the event of war, among other topics.

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Writing about the results of their survey, Mack stated: "The questionnaires showed that these adolescents are deeply disturbed by the threat of nuclear war, have doubt about the future, and about their own survival. There is also cynicism, sadness, bitterness, and a sense of helplessness. They feel unprotected. Some have doubts about planning families or are unable to think ahead in any long-term sense." (3)

Here are some illustrative answers to the question: "Have thermonuclear advances affected your way of thinking (about the future, your view of the world, time)?"

I am constantly aware that at any second the world might blow up in my face.

I think that a nuclear war which could break out in a relatively short period of time in the far future could nearly destroy the world.

I think that unless we do something about nuclear weapons, the world and the human race may not have much time left. Corny, huh?

Even the more neutral question, "What does the word 'nuclear' bring to mind?" produced the following responses:

Danger, death, sadness, corruption, explosion, cancer, children, waste, bombs, pollution, terror, terrible devaluing of human life.

In psychology, this method of questioning is called association technique. It helps bring out people's emotional experiences and their fears without asking them too directly. That typical answers to such a neutral question produced few associations with peaceful uses of nuclear power

reflects how strongly the emotional experiences associated with the threat of nuclear war suppresses all other ideas. Most of the answers were of the kind described.

The data collected by American psychiatrists show that deep anxiety stemming from the fear of war can appear in children at an early age and that often they are unaware of it. In answer to the question: "When did you first begin to be aware of the threat of nuclear war?" a seventeen-year-old boy from Boston wrote:

When I was very young, seven or eight. It was in a dream. I didn't know what the dream was at the time. I first felt intense fear, then complete and utter destruction. This dream came back throughout my childhood, and it wasn't until five or six years ago that I figured out that this dream was a nuclear holocaust. The idea of this scares me more than anything I've known yet." (4)

An eleven-year-old girl complained to her psychiatrist that she was afraid of not having enough time to commit suicide if war started. (5) A ten-year-old boy was taken to a doctor to be cured of insomnia and nightmares caused by fear of nuclear war. Similar symptoms were found in the fifth-grade students of a private school. Many children treated by psychiatrists and psychotherapists have dreams of being lost after their parents and family have been killed. Scientists who have studied the problem are almost unanimous in their opinion that doubts about the future, fear, and helplessness have a severely adverse effect. Escalona refers to the effect as "malignant," Schwebel as "corrosive," and Mack as "terrifying."

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The authors of the present article have conducted a related study of Soviet youth. Our study, conducted from 1984 through 1986, covered over nine hundred high school and college students. Particular attention was given to the techniques employed. Many people are reticent to talk about their thoughts and innermost feelings, especially when part of a public opinion poll. In addition, some emotions or the reasons behind them are not always perceived and, therefore, may not be properly articulated.

Our American colleagues have used mostly direct questioning. Since our study was intended to identify the respondents' feelings, their depth, and even hidden thoughts, we also used projective and semiprojective methods. In such methods, the subject is given a stimulus that is neutral and specifically designed not to "lead" the answers. Our choice of this

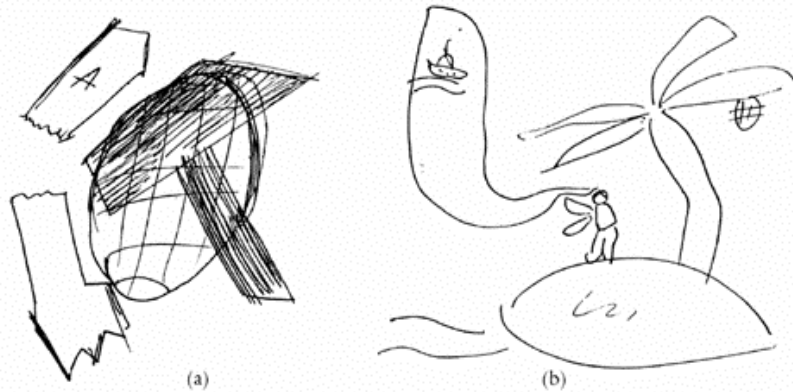


Figure 1. The subjects were asked to make simple drawings in response to certain words. The drawings reflect an emotional association of the word with something which was personally important to the subject. a) A drawing in response to the word "Hope," reflecting emotional concern about the nuclear danger. (A boy age 13.) b) A drawing to the same word, manifesting the absence of any concern about war. (Also a boy age 13.)

technique coincides with empirical conclusions reached by some American researchers who pointed out that direct questions about the nuclear threat can be "leading" and create a mental set which can affect the respondents' answers. Our study used both direct and projective questions, but the projective were asked prior to the direct in order not to bias the subjects' answers to the projective questions.

Our projective questions asked subjects about their appraisal of the present and future, their plans, and things that might interfere with their intention to start a family. The use of such level-of-optimism and attitude-to-the-future indicators helps avoid the leading nature of direct questions.

In our 1984 series of tests, 37 percent of the respondents thought nuclear war to be "probable" or "highly probable," 48 percent thought it "hardly probable," 12 percent "improbable," and 3 percent thought it "inevitable." Averaged over the entire set of tests, there were 5 percent in this last group.

As to the consequences of nuclear war, 46 percent of our subjects believed that it would result in the complete annihilation of humankind, 41 percent thought that 10 percent of the Earth's population would survive, and the remaining subjects estimated possible survival rates at 20 percent to 50 percent.

Optimism

In spite of their awareness of the danger, our subjects held a predominantly optimistic attitude concerning the future. This was demonstrated not

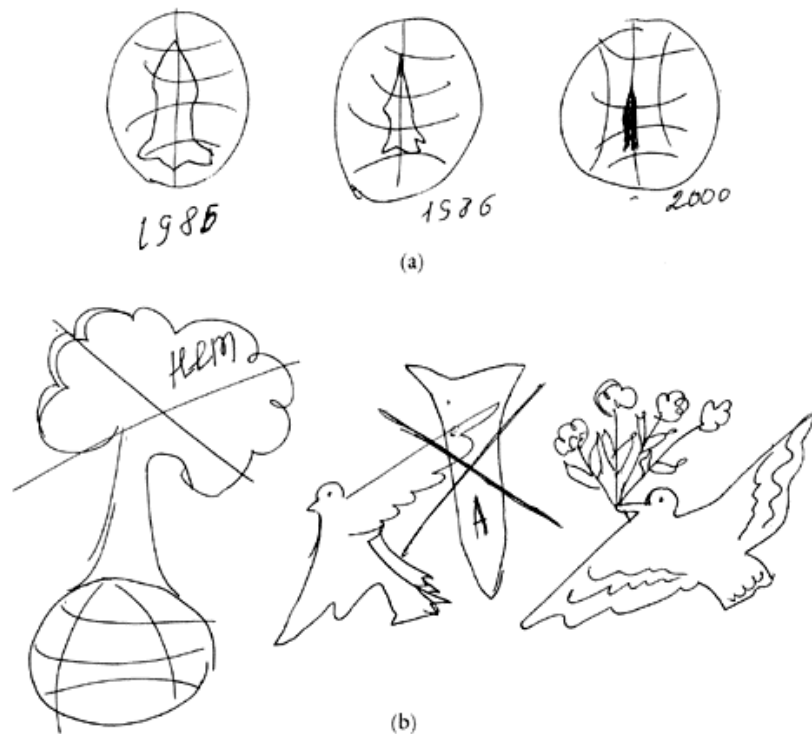


Figure 2. Examples of consistent reactions of the subjects. a) An unusual image of the "Future" reflecting gradual elimination of the nuclear threat. War was "improbable" in the opinion of this subject. (A boy age 13.) b) Reflection of a serious doubt about the future. From left to right, the pictures were in response to the words "Fear," "Peace," and "Hope." The subject believed war to be inevitable. (A girl age 14.)

only in their answers to direct questions, but also in their drawings (the "pictogram" technique), and in their assessments of the future elicited by the technique of semantic differentials.

In answer to the question, "How do you see yourself in the year 2000?" more than 95 percent of the subjects made projections without any reference to the threat of nuclear war. Some pictured themselves as actively involved in public life, others banked on professional excellence, some hoped to achieve high moral standards, and some dreamed of love and family happiness. Only a very few answered that they had no personal plans because those plans were useless considering the threat of nuclear catastrophe.

We also included a "control" question in which the subjects were asked how many children they thought that a modern family should have and what might interfere with starting a family. In most cases, the reasons given

as possible obstacles for starting a family were of the most common kind: lack of financial independence, unsatisfactory housing, and poor health. However, 12 percent of the respondents mentioned the threat of war as one of the reasons interfering with family planning. But, it turned out that some of these young adults were already married and had children, which raises a question about the depth of their personal concern.

In their views of the future, 46 percent believed that the threat of war would be eradicated by the year 2000; 10 percent described the world of the year 2000 as “bright,” “joyous,” or “cloudless”; 4 percent forecast moral improvement of society as a whole; 13 percent viewed the future in terms of the scientific and technological advances; 10 percent thought the world will change little; 8 percent predicted complications in world development and in the life of society; and 5 percent associated these complications with the threat of war (most of these also thought nuclear war to be “inevitable,” showing a consistency of concern).

Effect of World Events

Our study found a correlation between the mood of the subjects and the state of Soviet-American relations. The first series of tests was completed before the summit meeting between General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and President Ronald Reagan in November 1985. The second was conducted after that summit meeting, the third in the tense international atmosphere following the US raid on Libya, and the fourth after the summit in Reykjavik.

In the two series of tests conducted twelve months and one month prior to the Geneva Summit, about 40 percent of our subjects thought nuclear war to be “probable” or “highly probable,” while after the summit only 29 percent held that view. Similarly, after the summit, 68 percent thought nuclear war to be “hardly probable” or “improbable,” as contrasted to 60 percent recorded earlier.

In the tests conducted after the raid on Libya, the number who thought nuclear war to be “probable” or “highly probable” increased to 53 percent and the share who thought it “hardly probable” or “improbable” decreased to 41 percent. After the Reykjavik summit there also was a shift toward pessimism.

Questions about the possibility of accidental nuclear war also were telling. The share of those who thought that chance might have a fatal role to play rose after the Geneva summit from 66 to 84 percent. While this may at first seem paradoxical, the result may be interpreted in the following way: When people have confidence in the goodwill of political leaders in matters of war and peace, their apprehension concerning intentional nuclear

war decreases, but their fear of an accident becomes more pronounced. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that, after the military action against Libya, the importance of accidental nuclear war decreased to 70 percent, while the perceived probability of an intentional war increased.

Children

Our study was based mostly on youth aged from 16 to 22. But children have not been without attention. Based on work with American children, a US team headed by Dr. Eric Chivian, worked cooperatively with Soviet researchers over the past eight years to obtain similar data on Soviet youth. Findings confirmed previous studies which demonstrated that fewer youths in the Soviet Union fear nuclear war. In the most recent study conducted in October and November 1986, responses to questionnaires from 3,372 Maryland teenagers (average age 14.5 years) were compared to 2,263 similarly aged (average age 13 years) Russian children from the Tambov and Rostov provinces. About three-quarters of those interviewed from each nation agreed: "There can be no winners in a nuclear war since most countries would be totally destroyed." But 56 percent of Russian teenagers thought a nuclear war would never happen, while only 14 percent of Americans thought so.

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In June 1987, we conducted another series of interviews of teenagers from eleven to fifteen years old, employing our previously described techniques. One hundred and ten boys and girls from three Soviet republics -the Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Armenia - were surveyed. Our results turned out to be somewhat different in comparison with the above described data of the Soviet-American cooperative research. To the direct question about the probability of nuclear war, only 26 percent stated that they believed it to be "improbable" and 7 percent considered it "inevitable."

However, if we take into account only the answers of those children to the question about the probability of nuclear war that were consistent with answers to the projective questions and tests, then the general results would be approximately the same as with the older youth of our previous tests (5 percent thought nuclear war to be "inevitable," and 14 to 16 percent thought it to be "impossible").

But, in general, this sort of consistency in the answers of children was significantly lower than with the older youth. In our opinion, this might be a



Figure 3. Examples of inconsistent reactions of the subjects. The children who made these drawings said that nuclear war was "improbable." But these drawings were their responses to the word "Fear." (Drawings by girls age 14.)

manifestation of some peculiarities of the child's mental processes as well as (and more importantly) a demonstration of their more sensitive emotional reactions to the threat of nuclear war. For example, in making a drawing in response to the word "fear," asked before the questions about war, 41 percent of the teenagers drew something including images connected with nuclear war (nuclear explosions, rockets) and 6 percent used different symbols of death. In a number of cases, the drawings contained the figures of children who seemed to try to stop a rocket with their hands, or to cover themselves from a nuclear explosion (see Figure 3).

Conclusions

The variations in the data from different studies indicate the need to use some caution in interpreting the results. Naturally, we cannot rely absolutely on the obtained percentages. They vary depending on the state of world events during the period of the study, and possibly on other factors as well — for example, films recently seen or books recently read which discuss the consequences of nuclear war. This is the first major psychological study of the problem in the Soviet Union and it should be continued under different conditions and with different groups of the population so that, in the end, we might have a range of more reliable data. Nevertheless, these first results might be considered as a manifestation of some very important facts.

Soviet as well as American children and youth are aware of the magnitude of the nuclear threat and this awareness has a negative impact on their feelings, their emotions, their perception of life, and their plans for the future. In short, a significant fraction of the younger generation constantly lives with consciousness of the tremendous danger and perceives it more acutely than adults. We agree with our American colleagues that fear, anxiety, helplessness, and lack of confidence in the future leave an ominous imprint on the personality of the youth in both our countries. One may say that many are already victims of a war which has not yet started.

“... fear, anxiety, helplessness, and lack of confidence in the future leave an ominous imprint on the personality of youth in both our countries. One may say that many are already victims of a war which has not yet arrived.”

Comparing the Soviet and American data, it might seem that Soviet youth are somewhat more optimistic about the problem of war and that the number of people who thought nuclear war “inevitable” is somewhat less in the Soviet Union. But the most important point is not the difference in the percentages, which as we have pointed out already, are rather changeable. The most important fact is that behind each percentage point in both countries, and in the world as a whole, there are millions of living people who are deeply disturbed by the threat of nuclear war.

There is a significant percentage (14 percent to 16 percent depending on the particular study) of people who think nuclear war to be “impossible” (we termed these “extreme optimists”), and even more who might be called “moderate optimists.” But we should acknowledge that the time for real and complete optimism will come only when the nuclear threat has been eliminated.

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