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Living With the Bomb: The Atomic Bomb in Japanese Consciousness

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Until the last six months of World War Two, the home islands of Japan were virtually untouched by the ravages of war. That changed definitively on the night of March 9 1945, as the full fury of U.S. firebombing was unleashed on Tokyo. The raid turned a fifteen square mile area of Tokyo into an inferno. Police Cameraman Ishikawa Koyo described the streets as "rivers of fire. Everywhere one could see flaming pieces of furniture exploding in the heat, while the people themselves blazed like match sticks. . . . Immense vortices rose in a number of places, swirling, flattening, sucking whole blocks of houses into their maelstrom of fire." 100,000 civilians died. More than one million homes were destroyed. Yet this was but a prelude of the hell that was to come.

At 8:15 a.m. on August 6, 1945 a fireball with a temperature of several million degrees centigrade formed in the sky above Hiroshima. On the ground, the temperature at the hypocenter rose to 3,000-4,000 degrees centigrade -- far higher than the temperature at which iron melts. The Enola Gay had dropped the world's first atomic bomb over Hiroshima.

Victims in Hiroshima, and three days later on August 9 in Nagasaki, provided vivid personal descriptions of the hellfire unleashed by the bomb. A young sociologist described "a park covered with dead bodies waiting to be cremated. . . . some girls, very young girls, not only with their clothes torn off but with their skin peeled off as well." The force of the blast and the heat of the thermal flash tore away the clothing and peeled away the skin from many of the victims. A Hiroshima girl who was five at the time of the blast recalled, "I had a terrible lonely feeling that everybody else in the world was dead and only we were still alive." A twenty-year old entering Hiroshima two hours after the blast encountered "a painting of hell."

The devastation was cataclysmic. In both Hiroshima and Nagasaki, half of all those within three quarters of a mile of Ground Zero died on the day of the explosion; more than 80 percent eventually died from wounds or radiation inflicted by the bomb. By the end of 1945, the atomic bomb had claimed the lives of 140,000 Hiroshima people and 70,000 in Nagasaki. The legacy of the bomb in the form of blast injuries, burns, and radiation continues to inflict death and suffering on its victims to the present day.

Although 64 Japanese cities were firebombed, with immense destruction and loss of life, Hiroshima and Nagasaki became the central symbols of war, overshadowing the events elsewhere. This was a product not only of the special features of the bomb, its power and radioactivity, but also of parallel efforts by Japanese and American rulers, reinforced by their respective media, to highlight the power of the bomb. In the case of the US, the goal was to convey awe at the unique power the US possessed and was prepared to use. The Japanese state sought to foster victim consciousness centered on the inhumanity of the bomb, thereby shifting attention away from Japan's criminal aggressive acts. The worldwide anti-nuclear movement similarly dramatized the effects of the atomic bomb, but in hope of abolishing nuclear weapons.

The depth and nuance of feeling of the victims is well conveyed in the poetry, stories and art created by citizens of the two cities in the wake of the atomic bombing.

Sakamoto Hatsumi, a primary school student, wrote in 1952:

"When the atomic bomb drops day turns into night people turn into ghosts."

Nakamura On, a survivor, also remembered

"Under a pale blue glow, the black sun, dead sunflowers, and a collapsed roof, people lifted their faces voicelessly: bloody eyes that exchanged looks then loosely peeling skin lips swollen like eggplants heads impaled with shards of glass -- 'how can this be a human face' everyone thought at the sight of another yet each who so thought had the same face. . . . Without even uttering a cry of horror toward a place without flames from the west and from the east naked figures their skin loosely peeling you couldn't tell men from women a procession of ghosts continued; in the middle of all this suddenly an old woman in the process stopped pulling in something like a sash that was coming off when the flames had already come so close!

Someone, unable to take it any longer, said 'come, throw that away, let's hurry'; then she answered 'these are my intestines.'"

The memories of that day were literally burned into the consciousness of survivors.

Writing about the bomb was strictly censored during the U.S. occupation of Japan as bigger bombs were stockpiled and readied for use. The literature and art that has emerged since that time helped to fuel a worldwide anti-nuclear movement that has been among the most important Japanese responses to the war and the bomb. And, as part of a broader anti-nuclear movement, may have contributed to the prevention of nuclear war.

The torment inflicted by the bomb -- together with deep anger at the Japanese state for embarking on a brutal and senseless war and callously failing to protect its soldiers and citizens -- nurtured a widely shared pacifism and hatred of war among Japanese. That sentiment was in harmony with the U.S.-imposed Constitution whose Article Nine goes further than does any other constitutional provision in committing a nation to a peaceful future. "Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order," it states, "the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes."

Memories of the carnage that Japanese armies had wrought throughout China and Asia, and of war crimes associated with the Nanjing Massacre and the enslavement of the comfort women, were long suppressed by the postwar Japanese state. Since the 1980s, however, they have reemerged through efforts by researchers and activists, and been reinforced by court cases and demonstrations by the victims. Textbook treatment of these issues has generated sharp debate in Japanese domestic politics and has given rise to continuing disagreements between Japan and its victims in the era of colonialism and war, particularly China and Korea.

Reflecting on Japanese atrocities and war crimes committed during the colonial era and the Pacific War can provide the occasion for Americans, whose government vigorously criticized earlier Japanese and German bombing of cities, to reflect on our own war crimes in firebombing 64 Japanese cities and using nuclear weapons to destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as subsequent deployment of weapons of mass destruction targeting civilian victims.

For Japan, an epoch of perpetual war from 1895-1945 gave way to half a century in which that nation at peace achieved unprecedented economic growth and prosperity. In the new millennium this course is being challenged by a leadership that has sent Japanese military forces to Iraq in support of U.S. war aims. Japan's leaders are also pressing to revise the peace provisions of the constitution at a time of mounting tensions with North Korea and China. Yet memories of war, and particularly of the bomb, and its relevance to the contemporary age, continue to surface, particularly among older generations. Hiroshima Mayor Tadatoshi Akiba warns that "Worship of nuclear weapons is rapidly leading us toward a crisis. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the primary international agreement for the abolition of nuclear weapons, is on the verge of collapse. The United States, the nuclear superpower, has publicly reserved the option of a preemptive first strike with nuclear weapons. It has openly stated its intention to develop small "useable" nuclear weapons and is seeking to resume production of plutonium pits, the atomic bomb triggers for hydrogen bombs."

At a time when Japanese neonationalists and American neoconservatives are on the offensive, and when new nations seek to acquire nuclear power, and more sophisticated nuclear weapons are being developed by the powers, the surviving victims of the bomb, the hibakusha, are among the most powerful symbols of the belief in a vision of peace predicated on the abolition of nuclear weapons. They hold out the hope that reconciliation can prevail over retaliation in human affairs.

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