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First into Nagasaki: George Weller's Censored Eyewitness Dispatches on the atomic bombing and Japan's POWs

By Anthony Weller

Japan Focus is pleased to present an introduction to, and excerpts from, First Into Nagasaki: The Censored Eyewitness Dispatches on Post-Atomic Japan and Its Prisoners of War, by George Weller and Anthony Weller, with a foreword by Walter Cronkite. The story presented here explores MacArthur's censorship of Weller's reportage as the first journalist to enter Nagasaki, where he interviewed military and medical personnel, and the first to write at length on Japan's POW camps, where he interviewed hundreds of allied prisoners. Weller brings direct experience to bear on questions of US censorship of the atomic bomb, and particularly issues of radiation. Extraordinarily, not only were his Nagasaki dispatches censored, but his detailed interviews with POWs were also censored. Weller's reports, censored for sixty years, have only now become available.

Every great war correspondent has an important story that got away—that was banned by someone in authority, censored into silence, and never appeared.

For my father, it was linked to one of the cataclysmic events of the century.

George Weller (1907-2002), was among the eminent American reporters of his era, winner of a 1954 George Polk Award and a 1943 Pulitzer Prize. He made his name as a courageous foreign correspondent during World War II, and was one of the few to cover every principal theater of war—Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific.

As the first outsider to reach Nagasaki, on September 6, 1945, exactly four weeks after the Japanese city was torched by the atomic bomb and still under a news blackout, he defied the orders of General MacArthur forbidding reporters from entering either of the nuclear cities. After sneaking in by boat and train and brazenly telling the Japanese military he was not a newspaperman but a U.S. colonel, he wrote dispatch after dispatch only to see it all killed by MacArthur's censors. His stories never reached his editors back at the Chicago Daily News, and until recently, were believed lost.

George Weller. This photo graced his 1944 book *Bases Overseas,* one year before he entered Nagasaki

After a week in Nagasaki, touring the ruins and makeshift hospitals, and interviewing the doomed and the Japanese doctors who had already catalogued the effects of radiation, my father left to visit several Allied POW camps thirty miles away—most of whose prisoners still didn't know the war was over, though they'd seen the mushroom clouds. He wrote story after story from the camps, taking down each tortured man's saga, detailing years of slave labor in coal mines. Astonishingly, the POW dispatches were suppressed, too.

Nagasaki survivors

Thwarted by the censors, my father finally gave up on Nagasaki and moved on. His own copy of the dispatches (MacArthur's officials destroyed the originals) soon went astray in a life of covering wars around the world. It was one of the frustrations of his later years that these stories, among the most important of his career, were lost not only to posterity but to him.

The following passages are taken from my essay, which concludes the book.

VI

"All censored information is fundamentally propaganda," Weller wrote in 1944. He was speaking from deep experience, and with nuclear prescience. In a never-published, 1947 satirical article called "How To Become A Censor" that he managed through gritted teeth, he points out censorship's disastrous effect on the public understanding of an event:

> The moment when it could have been understood politically is missed, suppressed. The possibility of comprehension will never return again . . . And the porcelain men of history will pose forever in these lying attitudes.
>
> The aim of well-timed censorship is to instill this simple idea: *it probably never happened.*

He adds that one of the most effective censors he knew spent the whole war perfecting a flawless sense of timing to be used only after Japan had surrendered. He was "trained in the MacArthur school of censorship":

> . . . a tall lean lieutenant-colonel, greyfaced and greyhaired, who smoothed out his swing on a whole series of stories of mine about Nagasaki. I went to the atomized port while the ruins were still smoking . . . I fed my stories by special messenger to the grey lieutenant-colonel in Tokyo. With one ashen shot after another he holed them into obscurity. . . The war was over, but he . . . kept right on playing my Nagasakis into the upper drawer of the "file and forget" until all were wasted. That was timing.
>
> Twenty thousand skulls pulverized in an hour beside Nagasaki's dour creek—who would believe them censorable today?

Though it may be difficult, in our era of instantaneous electronic transmission, to conceive of any blockage interrupting the channel of news from reporter to editor—save by a more cunning censorship on the part of a government—it is illuminating to remind ourselves that the correspondents' version of World War II was, in a sense, only what the censors failed to stop.

And there was always the threat of dire punishment: the withdrawal, in a war zone, of accreditation, without which a reporter could not function, leaving his news organization without a berth in an important dateline. As Weller wrote in *Singapore Is Silent* (1943):

> Military censorship always ends by being political . . . A censorship is supposed to keep political criticism under control. . . the American and British peoples were fighting to be informed. They did not want to be fooled. They wanted to hear the truth. They could take it.
>
> It is through knowing the truth that the people discover their hidden will.

Throughout the war, then, there was another war going on, all along, and it did not end with any treaty of surrender.

So why were virtually all of Weller's 1945 dispatches from Japan censored? Surely the prison camp stories would've played well back home, building the case against a brutal enemy—even if the Nagasaki reports each contained a dangerous radiation all their own, the unpredictable half-life of truth. Difficult as it may be to parse MacArthur's motivations, it's also hard to think of one good reason why the U.S. government might've wanted to encourage any correspondents outside their guidance to venture into the nuclear sites. After Wilfred Burchett's one-day foray into Hiroshima, Weller was unknowingly sending his dispatches into a hornets' nest in Tokyo, where he hadn't a prayer of success. And after Truman's confidential memorandum demanding silence about the bomb from all U.S. media, one week into Weller's odyssey, anything that got through the censors would've still probably been silenced back home.

Photo # 80-G-490446 Released POWs at Aomori, Japan, 29-30 Aug. '45

Photo # 80-G-490444 Released POWs at Aomori, 29 Aug. '45

Allied POWs following release in Aomori, August 1945

Weller always maintained that since MacArthur was determined to be known as the vanquisher of Japan (despite denials of presidential ambition), he did not want to promote the bombs' success at the cost of his own, having already been upstaged by a troupe of scientists

in New Mexico.

Likewise, a candid report on the radiation suffering in the Nagasaki hospitals, contradicting U.S. government assurances, could only embarrass MacArthur before the American people, since even a month after the bomb he had failed, as Supreme Commander, to provide medical assistance to the devastated. Nor would there be any such aid in Nagasaki until six weeks had passed; and it would come via the Navy, not thanks to MacArthur. That, for Weller, remained the great shame of the whole event, and the largest humiliation of all buried in the killed dispatches.

Besides the public relations headache that there had been American and Allied POWs directly beneath the Nagasaki bomb, the fact that most of them avoided atomic incineration simply by ducking into a shallow trench was not a military secret anyone wanted exposed. The bomb was an all-powerful, divine weapon; the science reporter for the New York Times, W. L. Laurence, had said so.

There was yet another reason. Weller had been MacArthur's nemesis ever since the correspondent escaped from Singapore and Java to Australia in early 1942, and came under the iron hand of censorship while reporting the struggle up the Pacific islands. The general would have taken Weller's entry into Nagasaki as a personal affront as much as a defiance of his authority.

Gen. Douglas MacArthur

In 1984, at age 77, Weller wrote:

> Jealous of the fact that "his war" of four years had been won by two bombs prepared without his knowledge and dropped without his command, MacArthur determined to do his best to erase from history—or at least blur as well as censorship could—the important human lessons of radiation's effect on civil populations.

VII

Very little of this book has ever seen the light of day. Apart from his 1966 memoir and my present essay, this entire book was written between September 6th and October 21st, 1945, totalling about 80,000 words of material in unedited form.

All Weller's dispatches have been "expanded" from a ready-for-telegram language which reporters of the day were accustomed to writing in directly. Due to the costs of sending stories back home—rates were calculated by the word—this compressed "cablese" removed all obvious words. Numbers, acronyms, and punctuations were spelled out.

To illustrate, here is the beginning of the eighth dispatch as typed in its original version, written at 1 a.m. on the morning of September 9th:

> nagasaki 90100 article to follow nagasakis hospitals stop atomic bombs peculiar quote disease unquote comma uncured because untreated and untreated because undiagnosed comma is still snatching away lives here stop men women children with no outward marks injury are dying daily in hospitals some after having walked around three or four weeks minimum thinking theyve escaped stop doctors here have every modern medicament but candidly confessed in talking to writer dash first allied observer reach nagasaki since surrender undash that answer to malady is beyond them stop their patients though skins whole are simply passing away under their eyes

This becomes:

> The atomic bomb's peculiar "disease", uncured because it is untreated and untreated because it is undiagnosed, is still snatching away lives here. Men, women and children with no outward marks of injury are dying daily in hospitals, some after having walked around for three or four weeks thinking they have escaped. The doctors here have every modern medicament, but candidly confessed in talking to the writer—the first Allied observer to reach Nagasaki since the surrender—that the answer to the malady is beyond them. Their patients, though their skins are whole, are simply passing away under their eyes.

XIII

As a subject, the atomic bomb searches out a writer's weaknesses and has no mercy. My father's attitude to what he experienced in Nagasaki was complicated, and did not grow less so over the years—I lost my war in Nagasaki, he used to say. It is necessary to keep in mind exactly when Weller was writing—what year, what month—to assess whether he was recording faithfully, with a critical eye, what he saw. It is no use reading a reporter's words from the past and trying to frog-march them into the present. The goal, while remembering what you know that he did not, is also to ask yourself if he knew anything that you do not.

Weller was careful not to let himself be trapped in polemics on whether the atomic bomb was "wrong". To say that he hoped it would never be used again is an understatement; by 1945 he had seen enough death for one lifetime, and he still had many wars left to run. When I was a boy he always refused to tell me about Nagasaki apart from the adventure of making his way in. Later, he described it as the most horrible human destruction he'd ever witnessed—but he was careful to point out that it had to be evaluated alongside, for example, the fire-bombings of Tokyo and Dresden. And each belonged within its much larger military and political context.

He was frustrated, as we have seen, that the issue of radiation was so deliberately silenced at the time. But he also felt strongly that, because the atomic bomb was so dramatic, it was not clear-mindedly assessed as a military weapon compared to others, and that its

newness inevitably led to a tendency in the public to misremember or ignore the destruction of which our other weapons were capable.

Not only were there no straightforward answers, there were no non-complex questions. In interviews, or casual conversation, he could wind along these paths for hours and you would never be sure where he stood. You would only realize how few of the problem's dimensions you had considered.

When pointing out that Nagasaki should be spoken of in the same terms as those two famously fire-bombed cities, he was not diminishing the nuclear deaths so much as trying to put them in perspective. He usually reminded an interviewer that one single night of the Tokyo incendiary-bomb air raids was more costly than Nagasaki in human lives as well as buildings destroyed. His point was not that people should not critically analyze Nagasaki, but that they had failed to analyze Tokyo. (The effectiveness of those raids—the colossal number of dead Japanese—was poorly understood in the USA at the time of the atomic bombs.)

He was careful, in public and in private, not to take a position on the decision to drop the atomic bomb—to the degree that I'm not sure he ever made up his mind. He felt the reporter's task was not to follow the blind trails of what-might-have-happened (referred to by him as "condition contrary to fact") but to unearth the hidden, important truths of what actually did happen. The American instinct to simplify all politics, to look for an unpolitical, emotional right or wrong no matter what, stymied him. He believed profoundly that it was the reporter's duty not to simplify.

He was dismissive of Japanese propaganda putting the atomic bomb in its own separate shrine, turning an apparent plea for world peace and nuclear disarmament into a moral condemnation for the USA using the bomb in the first place. He felt there were, to be sure, arguments to be made against either bomb—but most did not suffice. If the victims of Nagasaki were civilians, who had placed the arms factories in its heart? Were the majority of dead American servicemen not likewise civilians yanked out of civilian lives to defend themselves in a war not of their own making? Was the USA uniquely reprehensible for using a weapon that Japan would have been morally quite content to use first, had they invented it first?

Because he was so critical of Japanese conduct both during the war and afterward, it has been easy to conclude that he "endorsed the bomb". But to criticize the Japanese for being eager propagandists with a bad case of amnesia is not an endorsement of the bomb, only a characterization of how they managed to curve the discussion.

He was not looking for a national apology; but he was looking for signs of self-understanding from the Japanese, an acknowledgment of their militaristic role across Asia and in waging war against a longtime ally. He was perpetually annoyed (though never surprised) at the pressure he would get, whenever Japanese journalists came to interview him, to apologize on behalf of the USA for having won the war, said apology to be delivered in the guise of guilt for having used such a terrible weapon, or in the guise of vows never to loose such a barbaric evil on the world again. He spoke with admiration of how astute the Japanese were as propagandists, and with dismay at how ready Americans were to feel sorry, even guilty, for not losing.

That said, he was never reluctant to connect his censorship to the fact that Americans—who as a people were generous both by conviction, and whenever they could think of nothing else to be—would not have forgiven either MacArthur or the U.S. government had they known we were doing nothing to offer people in Nagasaki all medical assistance. The weeks dragged on, and people perished, he felt, who might not have had to.

A key phrase in his thinking crops up in "First Into Nagasaki", when he states, having seen those dying of radiation in the hospital: "I felt pity, but no remorse. The Japanese military had cured me of that." Another came up in a 1990 radio interview conducted by the Swedish journalist Bertil Wedin— "the worst crime of any war is to begin it."

Weller:

> MacArthur didn't want anybody to go there because this would lead to a lot of compassionate stories about what had happened to the people. I wanted to get these stories. Most of the deaths had already occurred.
>
> Even though MacArthur tried to stop the story by not having anyone see Nagasaki, I wanted to be completely straightforward toward him once I got there. The war was over for a month; he had no military right at all to stop the story, in my judgment. But I was going to treat him as a gentleman, and have him see the dispatches first. If he were an intelligent officer, now in a peacemaking situation, he would allow them to pass, because they were extremely valuable.
>
> Why were they valuable? The excellent Japanese doctors had examined the cadavers, and found out fascinating things about the effect of the ray on all the organs of the body. That was the scientific preciousness, in my mind, of my whole mission. Everybody in the outside world thought that all the people were fried to death immediately by the bomb, cooked like a piece of meat. That wasn't the case at all. For some it was a slow death.
>
> One of the first places I went was to the hospitals. . . I made the point of being not a conquering visitor but an inquiring visitor. People were still dying. They were sitting in pathetic circles, with families trying to comfort them in their last hours.
>
> I had a strong sense that everything written about this bomb had been wrong. These people were dying with an intact machine of life, and the first thing to do to fight the effects of the bomb was to find a way to pump platelets into them. I didn't know whether one could, and the Japanese doctors didn't know yet whether they could. It was like a leak in a boat, there was no way to stop it.

Wedin:

> Was it difficult not to become too emotionally involved?

Weller:

> I became involved in every way. I reached instantly the level of compassion that still obtains throughout the world. But I also had a checking machine working on me, so that I could have a different story than simply a compassionate story—so I could analyze the atomic bomb as a new weapon of war that would be used throughout the world unless it was outlawed. People thought it was a super-bomb, that more people had died than ever before at any one time. In fact this was not true. More people had died earlier in the heavy incendiary bombardment of Tokyo itself. Here, as a result of the bomb, Nagasaki's wooden houses caught fire from each other; streets were blocked; people were trapped in their homes. There was a medical story in these exotic platelets, but most of the dead had burned. It was a Dresden.

And what to make of all that George Weller saw and heard and wrote down? Beyond any human impulse to take sides, beyond an overwhelming sense of regret, lies—I hope—a healthy outrage that in a free society it can still take sixty years for some of the missing pieces to come together. At least this book adds another sliver to the mosaic of what happened, what was witnessed. For me it is a small triumph that these words, the deaths and lives that were written about, and the deep determination behind them to get at the truth, were not lost forever.

Anthony Weller is the author of three novels (most recently, The Siege of Salt Cove) and a memoir of India and Pakistan. He has traveled widely for numerous magazines and is also well-known as a musician. He has a website (www.anthonyweller.com). *Posted on Japan Focus, Jan. 21, 2007.*