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Hiroshima: Breaking the Silence

Howard Zinn with an introduction by Yuki Tanaka

Introduction to *The Bomb* by Howard Zinn

In January 2010, Howard Zinn passed away at the age of 87. His new book, The Bomb, *will soon be published in the U.S. by City Lights Books. The Japanese edition will be published simultaneously by Iwanami Publishing House. This small book consists of two chapters – Chapter One, "Hiroshima: Breaking the Silence" and Chapter Two, "The Bombing of Royan." The texts of both chapters, which have previously been published separately elsewhere, are now combined in one book with a new introduction by the author. In Chapter One, which is excerpted here, Zinn lucidly analyzes the causes of the Pacific War and deals with important issues related to responsibility for the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in a comprehensive yet concise manner. In Chapter Two, he describes the tragic consequences of the unnecessary bombing mission over Royan, a small French coastal town, conducted by U.S. Forces only a few weeks before the end of World War II in Europe, a mission in which Zinn himself participated as a bombardier. Zinn passed away without seeing a final published copy of this compelling book, with its profound criticism of the inhumanity of indiscriminate bombing.*

In June 1966, Howard Zinn, together with Ralph Featherstone, visited Japan at the invitation of Beheiren (the Japan Peace-for-Vietnam Citizen's Alliance), a major grassroots movement against the Vietnam War, led by Oda Makoto. Featherstone was a leading member of SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), The following year, Featherstone became program director of SNCC. He was assassinated on March 9, 1970 when a car bomb exploded in Maryland outside the courthouse where H. Rap Brown, SNCC chairman, was to stand trial.

This was the first time that Zinn, a former bombardier of the U.S. Army Air Force, met Oda Makoto, a survivor of the fire bombings of Osaka City conducted by U.S. Forces in nearly 50 raids between 19 December 1944 and 14 August 1945. In total, U.S. Forces dropped 168,000 tons of bombs, including napalm bombs, on more than 100 cities throughout Japan. Ninety percent of these were dropped by B-29 bombers in the last five months of the Asia-Pacific War. According to statistical data compiled by the Center of the Tokyo Raid and War Damages, the estimated casualties of these bombings, including those of the two atomic bombings, come to 1,020,000, including 560,000 deaths.

Napalm bombs were first used experimentally in Europe towards the end of World War II, before being widely employed in aerial attacks against Japanese civilians. One such initial experiment with these new bombs containing "jellied gasoline," was conducted by more than 1,200 bombers of the U.S. Eighth Air Force, for which Zinn was a bombardier, over a beautiful beach town called Royan near Bordeaux in mid-April 1945, three weeks before Germany's surrender. The target of this bombing mission was some 30,000 to 40,000 Nazi soldiers who were ready to surrender, and were merely awaiting the end of the war, as their commander, Vice-Admiral Ernst Schirlitz, negotiated an accommodation with Admiral Hubert Meyer, French commander in the region, preparatory to surrender. The result was the total destruction not only of the German base but also of this charming seaside resort town and its ancient chateaux. The Germans lost several hundred men, but the number of civilian deaths resulting from this attack is unknown. In the forthcoming book, The Bomb, Zinn describes this mission in the following words: "I remember distinctly seeing the bombs explode in the town, flaring like matches struck in fog. I was completely unaware of the human chaos below."

Oda Makoto, on the other hand, personally experienced many of the bombings of Osaka City. In total, about 15,000 people were killed, 340,000 houses were destroyed, and an estimated 1.2 million people lost their homes and were driven from the second largest city in Japan. Oda had vivid memories not only of hiding in a shabby and fragile air raid shelter in his backyard, trembling with fear from the horrific noise and vibration, but also of the distinctive smell of corpses under the rubble caused by the bombings. This terrifying experience as a teenage victim of aerial bombardment remained a vital source of energy for Oda's prolific writing as well as for his political activities and involvement in civil movements, which continued until his death in 2007, at the age of 75. These experiences also allowed him to extend his imagination to empathize with the victims of similar indiscriminate bombings, such as the Chinese civilians attacked by Japanese Imperial Forces, and later Vietnamese victims of American bombings. Undoubtedly the bombing was the experiential foundation for his lifelong search for peace and justice.

Shortly after the war Zinn, became acutely aware of the horror experienced by the victims of indiscriminate bombing, as he began imagining the experiences of victims of his own indiscriminate attacks. His humane sense of personal guilt impelled him to critically examine the history of his nation in a bid to discover how the U.S. had become capable of committing atrocities like indiscriminate bombing. After studying at New York University on the GI Bill, he earned a Columbia history M.A. in 1952 and a Ph.D. in 1958. Together with his achievements as an historian, he became a leading anti-war, peace, and civil rights activist. In his best selling book, A People's History of the United States, originally published in 1980, he re-examined American history from the "bottom up," i.e., from the viewpoint of the working and often disadvantaged members of society rather than that of the political and economic elite.

Zinn and Oda, who started their careers from opposite directions – one a perpetrator, the other a victim of indiscriminate bombing – were united as anti-war campaigners in Japan in mid 1966. Together with Ralph Featherstone, they traveled all across Japan including Hiroshima, conducting "teach-ins" and attracting a large audience in each city they visited. Everywhere they talked passionately about the Vietnam War as well as many issues related to peace and justice, in particular civil rights issues.

To my regret, I never had the chance to meet Howard Zinn, though Oda Makoto was a close friend of mine for almost 30 years. In March 2003, less than a month before the Bush administration launched the Iraq War, the Japanese edition of Zinn's book, Terrorism and War, which I translated, was published. I wanted Zinn to come to Japan to promote his book, conducting "teach-ins" again with Oda in several cities. I e-mailed him and proposed this plan. Zinn replied immediately, informing me that regrettably, his schedule was booked for several months and it would not be possible to travel overseas for a while. This was not surprising, considering his constant and active involvement in anti-war campaigns in his home country.

Zinn, in this new book, The Bomb, tried to provide more than a simple historical account of indiscriminate bombings conducted during World War

Howard Zinn speaking in Colorado, 2004

II. As stated in his introduction, "To this day, the vicious reality of aerial bombing is lost to most people in the United States, a military operation devoid of human feeling, a news event, a statistic, a fact to be taken in quickly and forgotten." He wanted to warn us that indiscriminate aerial attacks on civilians, a military strategy with a long history, are still part of the harsh reality of many peoples' lives in countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Palestine, and that we as civilians ought to do our utmost to prevent this carnage of our fellow human beings.

In remembering Zinn, one of his former students, Henry Maar, tells of a piece of advice Zinn once gave him: "Don't get buried in the profession. Stay at the edge, keep half of your self outside the academy, outside the library, in the real world of social conflict. Don't write for your colleagues but for your fellow citizens." It is true that academic work can be stimulated by involvement in civil movements, and that the significance of academic work is constantly challenged by social movements, above all by those that one participates in. Yet, I am acutely aware of how difficult it is to keep the balance between academic work and civil movements, and to produce outstanding results in both. Zinn demonstrated magnificently how to accomplish this difficult task. In this sense, he was my hero and remains so now that he is no longer with us.

Let me conclude this introduction to Zinn's work with one of my favorite passages from his You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train:

"If we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory."

The following are extracts from Chapter One, on atomic bombing, from *The Bomb*.

The bomb dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, turned into powder and ash, in a few moments, the flesh and bones of 140,000 men, women, and children. Three days later, a second atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki killed perhaps 70,000 instantly. In the next five years, another 130,000 in- habitants of those two cities died of radiation poisoning.

No one will ever know the exact figures, but these come from the most exhaustive report available, Hiroshima and Nagasaki: *The Physical, Medical, and Social Effects of the Atomic Bombings*, put together by a team of thirty-four Japanese scientists and physicians, then translated and published in this country in 1981. Those statistics do not include countless other people who were left alive, but maimed, poisoned, disfigured, blinded.

The sociologist Kai Erikson, reviewing the report by the Japanese team of scientists, wrote: "The question is: What kind of mood does a fundamentally decent people have to be in, what kind of moral arrangements must it make, before it is willing to annihilate as many as a quarter of a million human beings for the sake of making a point."

Let's examine the question properly raised by Kai Erikson, a question enormously important precisely because it does not permit us to dismiss horrors as acts inevitably committed by horrible people. It forces us to ask: what "kind of mood," what "moral arrangements" would cause us, in whatever society we live, with whatever "fundamental decency" we possess, to either perpetrate (as bombardiers, or atomic scientists, or political leaders), or to just accept (as obedient citizens), the burning of children in vast numbers.

That is a question not just about some past and irretrievable event involving someone else, but about all of us, living today in the midst of outrages different in detail but morally equivalent, to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is about the continued accumulation by nations (ours being first) of atomic weapons a thousand times more deadly, ten thousand times more numerous, than those first bombs. It is about the expenditure each year of a trillion dollars for these and what are soberly called "conventional" weapons, while fourteen million children die each year for lack of food or medical care.

We would need, then, to examine the psychological and political environment in which the atomic bombs could be dropped and defended as legitimate, as necessary. That is, the climate of World War II.

It was a climate of unquestioned moral righteousness. The enemy was Fascism. The brutalities of Fascism were undisguised by pretense: the concentration camps, the murder of opponents, the tortures by secret police, the burning of books, the total control of information, the roving gangs of thugs in the streets, the designation of "inferior" races deserving extermination, the infallible leader, the mass hysteria, the glorification of war, the invasion of other countries, the bombing of civilians. No literary work of imagination could create a more monstrous evil. There was, indeed, no reason to question that the enemy in World War II was monstrous and had to be stopped before it enveloped more victims.

But it is precisely that situation—where the enemy is undebatably evil—that produces a righteousness dangerous not only to the enemy but to ourselves, to countless innocent bystanders, and to future generations.

We could judge the enemy with some clarity. But not ourselves. If we did, we might have noted some facts clouding the simple judgment that since they were unquestionably evil, we were unquestionably good.

The pronoun "we" is the first deception, because it merges the individual consciences of the citizenry with the motives of the state. If our (the citizens') moral intent in making war is clear—in this case the defeat of Fascism, the halt to international aggression—we assume the same intent on the part of "our" government. Indeed, it is the government that has proclaimed the moral issues in order to better mobilize the population for war, and encouraged us to assume that we, government and citizens, have the same objectives.

There is a long history to that deception, from the Peloponnesian wars of the fifth century before Christ through the Crusades and other "religious" wars, into modern times, when larger sections of population must be mobilized, and the technology of modern communication is used to advance more sophisticated slogans of moral purity.

As for our country, we recall expelling Spain from Cuba, ostensibly to liberate the Cubans, actually to open Cuba to our banks, railroads, fruit corporations, and army. We conscripted our young men and sent them into the slaughterhouse of Europe in 1917 to "make the world safe for democracy." (Note how difficult it is to avoid the "we," the "our," that assimilates government and people into an indistinguishable body, but it may be useful to remind us that we're responsible for what the government does.)

In World War II, the assumption of a common motive for government and citizen was easier to accept because of the obvious barbarity of Fascism. But can we accept the idea that England, France, the United States, with their long history of imperial domination in Asia, in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, were fighting against international aggression? Against German, Italian, Japanese aggression certainly. But against their own?

Indeed, although the desperate need for support in the war brought forth the idealistic language of the Atlantic Charter with its promise of self-determination, when the war ended, the colonized people of Indochina had to fight against the French, the Indonesians against the Dutch, the Malaysians against the British, the Africans against the European powers, and the Filipinos against the United States in order to fulfill that promise.

There were pious statements about self-determination, noble words in the Atlantic Charter that the Allies "seek no aggrandizement, territorial or other." However, two weeks before the Charter, U.S. Acting Secretary of State Sumner Welles was assuring the French government: "This Government, mindful of its traditional friendship for France, has deeply sympathized with the desire of the French people to maintain their territories and to preserve them intact."

It is understandable that the pages of the Defense Department's official history of the Vietnam War (The Pentagon Papers) were marked "TOP SECRET—Sensitive," because they revealed that in late 1942 President Roosevelt's personal representative assured French General Henri Giraud: "It is thoroughly understood that French sovereignty will be re-established as soon as possible throughout all the territory, metropolitan or colonial, over which flew the French flag in 1939."

As for the motives of Stalin and the Soviet Union—it is absurd to even ask if they were fighting against the police state, against dictatorship. Yes, against German dictatorship, the Nazi police state, but not their own. Before, during, and after the war against Fascism, the fascism of the gulag persisted, and expanded.

And if the world might be deluded into thinking that the war was fought to end military intervention by great powers in the affairs of weaker countries, the post-war years quickly countered that delusion, as the two important victors—the United States and the Soviet Union—sent their armies, or surrogate armed forces, into countries in Central America and Eastern Europe.

Did the Allied powers go to war to save the Jews from persecution, imprisonment, extermination? In the years before the war, when the Nazis had already begun their brutal attacks on the Jews, the United States, England, and France maintained silence. President Roosevelt and Secretary of State Hull were reluctant to put the United States on record against the anti-Jewish measures in Germany.

Shortly after we were at war, reports began to arrive that Hitler was planning the annihilation of the Jews. Roosevelt's administration failed to act again and again when there were opportunities to save Jews. There is no way of knowing how many Jews could have been saved in various ways that were not pursued. What is clear is that saving Jewish lives was not the highest priority.

Hitler's racism was brutally clear. The racism of the Allies, with their long history of the subjugation of colored people around the world, seemed forgotten, except by the people themselves. Many of them, like India's Gandhi, had difficulty being enthusiastic about a war fought by the white imperial powers they knew so well.

In the United States, despite powerful attempts to mobilize the African American population for the war, there was distinct resistance. Racial segregation was not just a Southern fact, but a national policy. That is, the Supreme Court of the United States, in 1896, had declared such segregation to be lawful, and that was still the law of the land during World War II. It was not a Confederate army but the armed forces of the United States that segregated black from white all through the war.

A student at a black college told his teacher: "The Army Jim Crows us. The Navy lets us serve only as mess-men. The Red Cross refuses our blood. Employers and labor unions shut us out. Lynchings continue. We are disenfranchised, Jim Crowed, spat upon. What more could Hitler do than that?"

When NAACP leader Walter White repeated that statement to an audience of several thousand in the Mid-west, expecting they would disapprove, instead: "To my surprise and dismay the audience burst into such applause that it took me some thirty or forty seconds to quiet it."

Large numbers of blacks did go along with Joe Louis's famous statement that "There's lots of things wrong here, but Hitler won't cure them." And many were anxious to show their courage in combat. But the long history of American racism cast a cloud over the idealism of the war against Fascism.

There was another test of the proposition that the war against the Axis powers was in good part a war against racism. That came in the treatment of Japanese Americans on the West Coast. There was contempt for the Nazis, but with the Japanese there was a special factor, that of race. After Pearl Harbor, Congressman John Rankin of Mississippi said: "I'm for catching every Japanese in America, Alaska, and Hawaii now and putting them in concentration camps. . . . Damn them! Let's get rid of them now!"

Anti-Japanese hysteria grew. Racists, military and civilian, persuaded President Roosevelt that the Japanese on the West Coast constituted a threat to the security of the country, and in February of 1942 he signed Executive Order 9066. This empowered the army, without warrants or indictments or hearings, to arrest every Japanese American on the West Coast, most of them born in the United States—120,000 men, women, and children—to take them from their homes, and transport them to "detention camps," which were really concentration camps.

John Dower, in *War Without Mercy*, documents the racist atmosphere that developed quickly, both in Japan and in the United States. Time magazine said: "The ordinary unreasoning Jap is ignorant. Perhaps he is human. Nothing ... indicates it."

Indeed, the Japanese army had committed terrible atrocities in China, in the Philippines. So did all armies, everywhere, but Americans were not considered subhuman, although as Pacific war correspondent Edgar Jones reported, U.S. forces "shot prisoners, wiped out hospitals, strafed lifeboats."

We did do indiscriminate bombing—not atomic, but with enormous civilian casualties—of German cities. Yet, we know that racism is insidious, intensifying all other factors. And the persistent notion that the Japanese were less than human probably played some role in the willingness to wipe out two cities populated by people of color.

In any case, the American people were prepared, psychologically, to accept and even applaud the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One reason was that although some mysterious new science was involved, it seemed like a continuation of the massive bombing of European cities that had already taken place.

No one seemed conscious of the irony—that one of the reasons for general indignation against the Fascist powers was their history of indiscriminate bombing of civilian populations. Italy had bombed civilians in Ethiopia in its conquest of that country in 1935. Japan had bombed Shanghai, Nanking, other Chinese cities. Germany and Italy had bombed Madrid, Guernica, and other Spanish cities in that country's civil war. At the start of World War II, Nazi planes dropped bombs on the civilian populations of Rotterdam in Holland, and Coventry in England.

Franklin D. Roosevelt described these bombings as "inhuman barbarism that has profoundly shocked the conscience of humanity." But very soon, the United States and Britain were doing the same thing, and on a far larger scale. The Allied leaders met in Casablanca in January 1943 and agreed on massive air attacks to achieve "the destruction and dislocation of the German military, industrial and economic system and the undermining of the morale of the German people to the point where their capacity for armed resistance is fatally weakened."

This euphemism—"undermining of the morale"— was another way of saying that the mass killing of ordinary civilians by carpet-bombing was now an important strategy of the war. Once used in World War II, it would become generally accepted after the war, even as nations were dutifully signing on to the U.N. Charter pledging to end "the scourge of war." It would become American policy in Korea, in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

There was huge self-deception, not among the political leaders who consciously made the decisions, but on the part of the lower-level military who carried them out. We had been angered when the Germans bombed cities and killed several hundred or a thousand people. But now the British and Americans were killing tens of thousands in a single air strike. Michael Sherry, in his classic study, *The Rise of American Air Power*, notes, "so few in the air force asked questions." (I certainly did not, participating in a napalm bombing of the French town of Royan a few weeks before the end of the war in Europe.)

One month after the Dresden bombing, on March 10, 1945, three hundred B-29's flew over Tokyo at low altitude, with cylinders of napalm and 500-pound clusters of magnesium incendiaries. It was after midnight. Over one million people had evacuated Tokyo, but six million remained. Fire swept with incredible speed through the flimsy dwellings of the poor. The atmosphere became superheated to 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit. People jumped into the river for protection and were boiled alive. The estimates were of 85,000 to 100,000 dead. They died of oxygen deficiency, carbon monoxide poisoning, radiant heat, direct flames, flying debris, or were trampled to death (Masuo Kato, *The Lost War: A Japanese Reporter's Inside Story*).

That spring there were more such raids on Kobe, Nagoya, Osaka, and in late May another huge bombing of what remained of Tokyo. This was accompanied in the press by continued dehumanization of the enemy. *LIFE* magazine showed a picture of a Japanese person burning to death and commented: "This is the only way."

By the time the decision was made to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, our minds had been prepared. Their side was vicious beyond description. Therefore, whatever we did was morally right. Hitler, Mussolini, Tojo, and their general staffs became indistinguishable from German civilians, or Japanese school children. The U.S. Air Force General Curtis LeMay (the same one who, during the Vietnam war, said: "We will bomb them back to the Stone Age") asserted: "There is no such thing as an innocent civilian."

President Truman's secret diaries were not revealed until 1978. In them Truman referred to one of the messages intercepted by American Intelligence as "the telegram from Jap Emperor asking for peace." And, after Stalin confirmed that the Red Army would march against Japan, Truman wrote: "Fini Japs when that comes about." It seems he did not want the Japs to be "fini" through Russian intervention but through American bombs. This explains the obvious rush to use the bomb in August, days before the Russians were scheduled to enter the war, and months before any planned invasion of Japan.

The British scientist P M S Blackett, one of Churchill's advisers, wrote (*Fear, War, and the Bomb*) that the dropping of the bomb was "the first major operation of the cold diplomatic war with Russia."

There has been endless discussion about how many American lives would be lost in an invasion of Japan. Truman said "half a million." Churchill said "a million." These figures were pulled out of the air. Historian Barton Bernstein's research could not find any projection for invasion casualties higher than 46,000.

The whole discussion about casualty figures is pointless. It is based on the premise that there would have to be an American invasion of Japan in order to end the war. But the evidence is clear that the Japanese were on the verge of surrender, that a simple declaration on keeping the position of the Emperor would have brought the war to an end, and no invasion was necessary.

Indeed, much of the argument defending the atomic bombings has been based on a mood of retaliation, as if the children of Hiroshima had bombed Pearl Harbor, as if the civilian refugees crowding into Dresden had been in charge of the gas chambers. Did American children deserve to die because of the massacre of Vietnamese children at My Lai?

If silence and passivity in the presence of evil committed by political leaders is deserving of a death sentence, then the populations of all the great powers do not deserve to live. But only in those ordinary people, rethinking their role, is there a possibility for redemption and change.

Down to the present day, the massive bombing of civilians is justified, by intellectuals putting into respectable words the crude and brutish argument: "Sure we committed mass murder. But they started it. Our conscience is clear."

That argument aims the slogan "Never Again" only at them, never at ourselves. It is a prescription for the endless cycle of violence and counter violence, terrorism and counterterrorism, that has plagued our times, for which the only response is: "No more wars or bombings, of retaliation. Someone, no, we, must stop that cycle, now."

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Yuki Tanaka is Research Professor, Hiroshima Peace Institute, and a coordinator of The Asia-Pacific Journal. He is the author most recently of Yuki Tanaka and Marilyn Young, eds., Bombing Civilians: A Twentieth Century History. *He wrote this article for The Asia-Pacific Journal.*

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