

Twisted Narratives of Hiroshima: “Atomic Warfare Became Noble Even to the Victims”

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Hiroshima signalled a breach in war, radical in its annihilating scope, and merciless in its existential fury. At the time, there was an almost desperate attempt on the part of the military establishment to normalise its use – in truth, the world war had hollowed out the very meaning of civilian protection. Total war also meant total death, and even if tens of thousands perished in the month of August in the two atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, tens of thousands had done so previously in fire bombing. Charred remains were the order of the day.

Hardened to war, the hardliners in the Japanese military regime did not feel much for those civilians who had perished as the fodder of mass modern war. Even on the morning of August 15, some 1,000 soldiers embroiled themselves in a foiled coup attempt to prevent the surrender broadcast of Emperor Hirohito from being sent out.

Hiroshima’s destruction took place amidst a numbers game, a crude battle of hypotheticals and arithmetic astrology. How many American soldiers, for instance, might have perished in an invasion of the southern Japanese island of Kyushu? Operation Olympic’s projections varied, from 40,000 to 300,000. General George C. Marshall, as Admiral Leahy noted, told a White House meeting that American casualties would not exceed 63,000 for the Operation against southern Kyushu. But doubts remained – it might be much higher.

Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal explained the calculus operating in his mind at the time: “We cannot go from Iwo to Iwo. We must find a formula to gain peace without this frightful bloodshed.” The sentiment was repeated in a June 18 meeting at the White House between the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Secretaries of War and Navy and President Harry S. Truman. Truman had a pressing nightmare he wanted to avoid – that of “an Okinawa from one end of Japan to another.”

Truman would subsequently vary the number of potential American losses in such an invasion. This inflation, evidenced by the drafts of his evolving memoirs, had a curious effect of not merely sanitising the use of the atomic weapons, but of humanising it. (Even then, he was happy to point the finger of inspiration to Marshall, who “told me that it might cost half-a-million American lives to force the enemy’s surrender.”)

The salvaging qualities of the weapon were extolled; the victims were effectively silenced. Even former Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, would bandy about a figure as high as a million. This was the confetti of justification cast after the fact.

Such a history, which is, in a sense, an anti-history, is by its nature selfish. The

historiography of the noble atomic bomb reads like sentimental kitsch and acceptable pornographic violence. Bullies know best. In 1981 historian Paul Fussell urged a narrowing of the bomb's global consequences with a studied yet emotional myopia which insisted on the military significance of saving American lives. He shifted the focus to the soldier, the American private away from home whose life could be spared by the use of the weapon.

Other narratives were submerged. The overall strategic dimension of the bomb's use to stem Soviet influence in the region, to fire a robustly lethal shot across the bows to signal Washington's power in a post-war world, would only start to come through with the New Left push in the 1960s. Within Japan, the cult of the survivor was also developing, drawing upon something of a false innocence. Victimhood does have its political advantages, and militarists found themselves transformed into profiteers of that legacy. Having lost the war, they would busy themselves winning the peace.

The great casualties remained, as ever, the civilians. The survivors, or the hibakusha, suffered a double exclusion: from their own communities, where they had become scarred freaks of circumstance, casualties of war's merciless toll; and, at least initially, from the historical record which proved assiduously selective.

Even after the use of the weapons, the US administration in occupation refused to disseminate information about the effects of atomic warfare. Japanese doctors were left in the dark of a military medical nightmare. John Hersey's descriptions of the Hiroshima bomb in the *New Yorker* were censored by the occupation sentinels. As Ian Buruma notes, "Films and photographs of the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as medical data, were confiscated by American authorities" (*New York Times*, Jul 28).

The salvaging credentials of atomic warfare became noble even to victims. In using such weapons, the military industrial establishment would be doing its bit for merciful killing. General Leslie Groves, the director of the Manhattan Project which had been instrumental in putting together the atomic weapon, told the US Senate that death from radiation occurred "without undue suffering" being, in fact, "a very pleasant way to die." Even today, this reads like the grandest of apologies for mass murder, inflicted with appropriate pleasantness.

From Rotterdam to Nagasaki, the Second World War was characterised by the collusive mass criminality of aerial bombing. The most fascinating feature of it was that it evaded the prosecutor's books at Nuremberg and Tokyo. All sides had dabbled, if not happily engaged in it, levelling entire cities, often gratuitously. It was the single most overt effort of employing the technological means of military forces against urban populations. The lenses of Hiroshima, for that reason, are broad, and its impact, cast over the decades, permanent.

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