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Ground Zero 1945: Pictures by Atomic Bomb Survivors

by John W. Dower

These drawings and paintings by Japanese survivors of the atomic bomb were created more than a quarter century after the bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. They are provided courtesy of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and form part of a much larger archive of more than 2,000 images and annotations. Posted at Japan Focus on April 27, 2005.

INTRODUCTION by John W. Dower.

For most Americans today, the words "Ground Zero" immediately call to mind the horror of September 11, 2001, when terrorists crashed hijacked airplanes into the World Trade Center in New York City, destroying two skyscrapers and killing some three-thousand individuals. As a place, Ground Zero thus refers to the dead center of an explosive act of violence. As a concept, these ominous words are inseparable from the terrifying vision of WMD—Weapons of Mass Destruction. What if the next Ground Zero involves nuclear weapons?

Prior to "9-11," Ground Zero did in fact have a concrete, historical, explicitly nuclear meaning. The phrase was coined in reference to the first nuclear weapons tested and used by the United States in 1945—the top-secret "Trinity" test in the desert of Alamagordo, New Mexico, in mid July 1945, and the atomic bombs dropped with devastating effect a few weeks later on Hiroshima (August 6) and Nagasaki (August 9).

The historical monument that used to mark the epicenter of the Trinity test bore the simple legend *Ground Zero*. It is possible that the "zero" designation had its actual origin here, before the bombs were deployed against the two Japanese cities. By 1946, in any case, "ground zero" had become a media catch phrase referring to the epicenter of a nuclear explosion. Hiroshima and Nagasaki stood before the world as stark examples of what this really meant.

Japan surrendered on August 14 (August 15 Japan time)—eight days after Hiroshima, six days after the Soviet Union declared war on Japan, five days after Nagasaki. These were the first atomic bombs ever actually used against an enemy population. To date, they are the last.

Most of this history—this genesis of an awesome, horrifying catch phrase—has been forgotten.

The American decision to deploy the new technology of nuclear destruction against densely populated cities will always remain controversial. Supporters of this decision—and, to the present day, this includes the great majority of Americans—argue that the bombs were necessary to end the war against a fanatical enemy quickly and save untold numbers of American lives. A well-known essay by the distinguished historian Paul Fussell succinctly captures this position in its title: "Thank God for the Atomic Bomb."

Critics of the decision to use the bombs argue that the Japanese government could have been persuaded to surrender by other policies—most notably, by (1) clarifying the U.S. terms of surrender (to make clear that Japan's imperial dynasty would be maintained), and (2) waiting for the imminent declaration of war against Japan by the Soviet Union (which the Japanese were known to be desperately trying to prevent).

This controversy will never be resolved but should never be ignored, for it raises practical and moral issues of the highest order. The debate over the use of the bombs in 1945 is inseparable from present-day controversies concerning just and unjust war. It involves an issue that has been with us since World War II and was abruptly thrown to the forefront of popular consciousness by 9-11: when, if ever, is it appropriate to identify civilians as a legitimate target of war?

That, however, is a subject in itself. This present treatment of "Ground Zero 1945" is more narrowly focused. It addresses what it was like to be present, on the ground, when nuclear weapons were actually used.

It is impossible to give precise figures for the victims of mass slaughter. We can only venture plausible estimates, for example, concerning how many tens of millions of people died worldwide in the course of World War II. This imprecision of numbers is also true with Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

By the final year of the war, Japan was disintegrating. Malnutrition was widespread. City residents made constant trips to the countryside to barter for basic foodstuffs. Many urban women and children relocated with rural kin to escape terror bombing by the U.S. Army Air Force, which followed a massive air raid on Tokyo in March 1945 with a policy of systematically targeting urban centers. Troops and labor forces (often schoolboys and schoolgirls mobilized for factory work) were moved from place to place. Populations were in flux.

By the time Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed in August 1945, over sixty Japanese cities had been targeted with "conventional" napalm fire-bombing. The nuclear destruction in the two cities was so extensive that entire neighborhoods were obliterated, often with few survivors (or paper records) to recall them.

The most careful and persuasive estimates suggest that somewhere in the neighborhood of 140,000 individuals probably died as a result of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima. In Nagasaki, where the bomb exploded off-target, fatalities probably numbered around 70,000. (Both of these figures are roughly double the estimates commonly cited shortly after the war.)

Most of these deaths occurred immediately or by the end of 1945. By one standard calculation, 60 percent of the deaths came from burns, 20 percent from trauma from the blast, and 20 percent from radiation sickness. Many deaths, however, also took place between 1946 and 1950. Over the decades that followed, small numbers of survivors continued to die from bomb-related injuries or illnesses.

Despite the scale of these casualties, the visual record of them is comparatively sparse. The major U.S. survey team sent to assess the effects of the air war (the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey) produced thousands of photographs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that focused almost obsessively on damage to physical structures. Other American military and civilian photographers who worked in Japan in the immediate wake of the war also, as a general rule, shied away from human suffering.

Where the Japanese themselves were concerned, censorship by U.S. occupation authorities, who exercised control over defeated Japan from August 1945 to April 1952, resulted in a remarkable occurrence: the public had virtually no access to graphic images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki until seven years after the bombs were dropped. The magazine *Asahi Gurafu* broke the ice by publishing a portfolio of photographs in August 1952. That same year also saw belated publication of a somber record of the destruction in Nagasaki, taken on August 10, 1945, by Yamahata YÅ□suke.

Although Japanese filmmakers produced several hours of black-and-white footage of the nuclear destruction in the weeks that followed, only a surprisingly small portion of this focused on human suffering. This footage was confiscated by the U.S. government and remained censored until the mid-1960s. (After being declassified, the most dramatic frames were privately edited as a short documentary titled *Hiroshima Nagasaki, 1945*.)

This averted gaze was as psychological as it was political. Few Japanese wished to dwell on the madness and misery of the war, and the *hibakusha*—the survivors of the atomic bombs—were essentially stigmatized or ignored until the late 1950s and early 1960s. It took two famous photographers to draw serious public attention and sympathy to them. DÅ□mon Ken published an influential study of Hiroshima *hibakusha* in 1957. Four years later he and TÅmatsu ShÅmei collaborated on a volume depicting the nuclear legacy in the two stricken cities, and in 1966 TÅmatsu followed this with a truly distinguished collection of photographs titled *Nagasaki "11:02 a.m."* (the time the bomb exploded).

This time-warp is worth keeping in mind. It took until the 1960s before people in Japan (as well as outside) really began to see the human face of nuclear devastation. Even then, it was all too easy to avert one's gaze: these images were almost unbearable to look at.

Beginning in 1974—over a quarter century after the bombs were dropped—an entirely new window on the atomic-bomb experience was opened. This took the form of drawings and paintings by survivors.

Every August, it is customary for the Japanese media to observe the anniversary of the end of World War II with retrospective pieces. These include television documentaries and personal reminiscences in magazines and newspapers. The tone is somber, commonly focusing on the suffering and horror of war. More than is appreciated outside Japan, some of these observances also address Japanese atrocities and war crimes (there are numerous private institutions and organizations devoted to such "peace" activity in Japan). Unlike in the nations that emerged victorious in World War II, there is nothing to celebrate on this anniversary occasion. There is, on the contrary, a great deal of a cautionary nature to pass on to ever-younger generations.

In Hiroshima (more than in Nagasaki), August becomes an occasion for intensified reflection on the atomic bombs and agitation for nuclear disarmament—a tradition that dates back to the mid-1950s. The Peace Memorial Museum opened its doors in 1955, and the first Japanese anti-nuclear organizations emerged around the same time, initially on the political left. By the 1970s, the "peace movement" had become not only politicized but also highly factionalized.

This was the setting in which the *hibakusha* moved toward center stage to tell their personal stories by drawing or painting what they had experienced and witnessed in August 1945.

This was an unplanned development. It began in 1974, when a survivor visited the Hiroshima office of the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) to give them a picture he had drawn of a scene from 1945 that still haunted him. This prompted NHK to solicit other such graphic recollections, and these became the basis for a television program and exhibition in Hiroshima in August 1975. Eventually, several thousand such pictures were collected and exhibited throughout the country.

These are the intimate images that have been drawn upon for this site. There is nothing like them. John Hersey, who introduced Americans to atomic-bomb survivors in a celebrated long essay in 1946 (issued in book form as *Hiroshima*), put his finger on the difference between these visuals and the more familiar photographs and film footage from Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The pictures by *hibakusha*, he observed, are "more moving than any book of photographs of the horror could be, because what is registered is what has been burned into the minds of the survivors."

Link to John Dower's Visualizing Cultures website for a selection of survivor drawings and class units.

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See also Takahashi Akihiro Ground Zero 1945: A Schoolboy's Story.

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