

In Issue 37 we carried an interview with Peter Kuznick, the author of The Untold History of the United States and co-writer (with Oliver Stone) of the television series of the same name. Inspired by this piece, Işıl Tipioğlu of Bilkent University, Ankara reports on a visit to Tokyo in the summer of 2013 where she encountered Kuznick:

Impressions on “The Splendor of the Mighty One”: The Atomic Bomb and its Legacy

Işıl Tipioğlu

When one thinks of Japan these days, the first thing that will come to their minds might be fast cars on Tokyo lanes, skyscrapers, geishas, or cherry blossoms, or the atomic bombs dropped on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. When I went to Japan, the last-named of these was first on my list of thoughts. Having the good fortune to meet Peter Kuznick, Professor of History at American University, Washington DC., and co-writer of the documentary series *The Untold History of the United States*, I participated in a two-week study tour entitled “Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Beyond” designed to look into and explore the atrocities in war-time Japan; the physical and psychological devastation wrought upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the atomic bomb; how both the Japanese and the Americans perceive this event in hindsight; and the efforts from both sides to reduce nuclear armaments. To have a chance to listen to first-hand accounts of the experiences of *the hibakusha* – the atomic bomb survivors – and visit the peace museums in Kyoto, Hiroshima and Nagasaki; to attend the memorial ceremonies on the anniversaries of the atomic bombings; and to hear what my Japanese and American peers thought of the entire event were all memories that made this tour a precious one.

The museums in Hiroshima and Nagasaki helped me grasp historical realities more thoroughly. However detailed and close to life books might be they fall short, omitting the brutal face of reality. Located in Hiroshima Peace Park, the Hiroshima Memorial Museum, and the Nagasaki Atomic

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Bomb Museum offer visual experiences that I had never thought of before. The divided sections of the museums trace a pre-bomb history of Japan during World War II, the development and decision to drop the bomb, post-bomb life in Japan, and lastly a section dedicated to the nuclear age with traces in the modern world of today. Two models of Hiroshima City, displaying the city panoramically before and after the bomb are one of the strongest symbols of the calamity of the A-bomb; in the first model everything looks perfectly fine, but in the second model, Hiroshima is wiped off the face of the earth, leaving virtually nothing behind. You cannot help but think this must be as close as we can get to the apocalypse. In the museum in Nagasaki, the materials affected by the bomb are a testament to naked physical damage. Melted bottles, the bones of a human hand stuck to a melted glass, a soldier's helmet with the remains of a skull inside and many more blood-curdling things are on display.

We were a congenial group of students - forty Japanese, ten Americans, and one Turk. We listened to the *hibakusha* who were all children when the first atomic bomb was dropped. They remember the day sometimes vaguely with some vivid moments. However small they might have been when the event happened, it was possible to see what had happened through on their faces. Images passed in front their eyes, evoking bitter memories. Desperation and perplexity were the first emotions they had experienced, for they had no idea what the atomic bomb was at the time. They called it *pika-don* in Japanese; a brilliant lightning (*pika*) followed by a huge thunderous blast (*don*). What was really surprising was their attitude towards the US, the country that dropped the atomic bomb on their city, Hiroshima. There was no sign of hatred, abhorrence or resentment, which might be expected of a people who experienced such horrendous memories caused by another country.

As a Turk, I have grown up witnessing my country holding a grudge against Greece, both explicitly and inexplicitly at times, for the history those two countries share is full of social and military conflicts. However, the Japanese are far from having such resentments toward the States. A bomb that had been tried for the first time ever in history caught the Japanese people off-guard. People were face to face with an experience unlike any other, the dire consequences of which they could not anticipate. However, when one brings up the subject of the atomic bomb, the remarks

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are often ambiguous, just like the cenotaph at Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park which reads: 安らかに眠って下さい 過ちは 繰返しませぬから (“please rest in peace, for [we/they] shall not repeat the error.”) The subject of the sentence is omitted in Japanese, leaving whoever reads the cenotaph in confusion as to whom the Japanese attribute this catastrophe (Davies and Ikeno 9-16). The element of uncertainty was also evident in the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s speech on the 68th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. “A single bomb deprived well more than 100,000 people of their precious lives,” stated Abe, blaming the bomb itself for the atrocity without attributing its origins to any particular country (Abe). Japan has been renowned for tolerance, avoiding politicizing the disastrous historical event. Having heard the accounts of the *hibakusha*, one notices how the focus is generally on their sufferings caused by the bomb and world peace, rather than criticizing the US for plunging the world into the nuclear era.

One account of a *hibakusha* that was particularly touching as well as insightful was Professor Shoji Sawada’s. He was thirteen years old at the time when “the Little Boy” - the first atomic bomb –was dropped on Hiroshima. He was sleeping at home, around 1,400 meters away from the bomb’s epicenter. So, he did not see the explosion itself, for it was instantaneous. Having been blown across his house, he came to amidst the ruins of wood and plaster. He had absolutely no idea what had happened and he could only see that Hiroshima city had been entirely flattened. Then he heard the voice of his mother coming from under the ruins. Her mother was unable to move for her legs got caught under the huge pillars. Young Shoji tried to lift those pillars but all in vain. Everything around them was on fire, but his mother told him: “Go, you are more important! Never mind your mother, you should survive!” “Her voice was faint,” commented Sawada, “I shouted ‘forgive me, mother’ as I escaped from the fire approaching what was left of our house.” People on the streets were unable to help since they were wounded with burnt skins hanging from their fingernails and chins. The question that still haunts Professor Shoji Sawada to this day is “Could I have saved her?” He became a physicist, as well as strong advocate of the anti-nuclear movement with a particular interest in studying the after-effects of the atomic bomb radiation on the human body. He sees what he does as a responsibility both to his mother and to himself as a survivor.

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During the tour, it was startling to see that many Japanese university students were uncertain about who was to blame for the atomic bomb. As Kuznick explained, this could have been due to the American ban on the publication of any bomb-related material, as well as the signing of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan in 1952, which legitimated US intervention in Japanese domestic policy. This forced the *hibakusha* into silence: since then many of them have experienced discrimination in marriage and employment. Kuznick also showed how the atomic bombs were militarily unnecessary. Japan had already been defeated by 1945, heavily destroyed by American B-29 “Superfortress” bombers during the Pacific War. The Japanese Imperial Navy along with its air force was totally in tatters (Mellinger). USAF General Curtis LeMay boasted at the time that American bombers were “driving them [Japanese] back to the stone age;” but despite this attitude, in 1964 he was given the First Order of Merit with the Grand Cordon of the Order of the Rising Sun by the Japanese government. Kuznick also reminded us about the brutality that the Japanese Imperial Army brought to Manchuria and China. As a result many people, especially Japanese youth, find themselves questioning the controversial decision of using the atomic bomb, blaming both sides for the atrocity.

On the other hand, many American students were shocked by the horrors experienced by the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. “We did this” was the most common sentence they uttered, with an obvious sense of guilt on their faces. Most agreed with Oliver Stone’s opinion that it is a myth that the atomic bombings were essential to the US triumph in World War II (Boserio). Several textbooks present the atomic bomb as just, necessary and unavoidable to use, though, today students dig in so as to find the reality behind it. Every person of every nation in our small group made efforts to sympathize with the *hibakusha*, being fully aware that we are the last generation to hear their voices firsthand. The tireless quest the *hibakusha* have embarked upon, fighting for nuclear abolition for the sake of future generations influenced each and every one of us. They asked us to talk to our families and friends about this matter, for their voices will not last much longer.

The efforts of the *hibakusha* make for the Japanese people, as well as people of every nation to attract attention to the evil of atomic bombs are worth remembering. Japan today appears to be in favor of nuclear non-

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proliferation, emphasizing the importance of a world without nuclear arms. On August 6 what the Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said in his speech was no different. He promised to maintain Japan’s three non-nuclear principles of not producing, possessing and allowing nuclear weapons into the territory of Japan. However there is some support within the Japanese government for restarting nuclear power plants - even after the Fukushima nuclear disaster – to increase the export of Japanese nuclear technology abroad and change Article 9 of the Constitution, a clause outlawing war as a means of settling international disputes. Tomihisa Taue, the Mayor of Nagasaki drew attention to this problem on 9 August, the 68th anniversary of the Nagasaki bombing. He voiced concern about the fact that Japan did not support and sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, for which 80 countries expressed their support. Politics aside, the general public strongly opposes any amendment of the article, which is a proof that although wartime memories are long past, the people of Japan are determined to be on the safe side regardless of the motive of current politics.

On the other side of the Pacific, the United States has put great effort into reducing the “deployed” nuclear warheads to 1,000, the lowest level during President Barack Obama’s administration. The Nuclear Posture Review (2010) signaled an unprecedented shift in US foreign policy from using nuclear weapons as a deterrent to championing nuclear non-proliferation (*Nuclear Posture*). The diminution of their nuclear arsenal to a small fraction of that of Cold War era seems promising –not only to the United States but also to the rest of the world.

One bomb with myriad consequences that continues to affect and alter our lives. Its legacy may not be something to have pride in, but the memories of what happened should be intrinsic to our future endeavors to create a better future by learning from the lessons of history.

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