

Hiroshima: The First Use of Nuclear Weapons*

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In Hiroshima, Japan, the morning of August 6, 1945, was a clear one. Shortly after eight o'clock, people on their way to work heard an airplane flying overhead and many paused to watch it. These people later said they saw something drop from the aircraft. What they saw was an atomic bomb, which exploded over Hiroshima a few seconds later. Seventy thousand people died instantly; fifty thousand others were later killed by the firestorms that raged through the city and by the radiation that rained down on them. The survivors left gruesome accounts of that terrible day:

As I looked up at the sky from the backyard of my house, I heard the faint buzzing of a B-29 but the plane was not visible. The sun was glaring in the cloudless summer sky. Suddenly, I saw a strange thing. There was a fireball like a baseball growing larger . . . and then something fell on my head. I was 14 years old. How many seconds or minutes had passed, I could not tell, but regaining consciousness I found myself lying on the ground covered with pieces of wood. When I stood up in a frantic effort to look around there was darkness. Terribly frightened, I thought I was alone in a world of death. . . . When the darkness began to fade I found that there was nothing around me. My house, the next-door neighbor's house, and the next had all vanished. . . . I found my mother . . . and my mother began to shout madly for my sister. . . . Children were calling their parents' names, and parents were calling the names of their children. Suddenly mother cried. . . . Four or five meters away my sister's head was sticking out. . . . She was crushed under the collapsed house. . . . Mother and I . . . pulled her out. . . . Night came and I could hear many voices crying and groaning with pain and begging for water. Someone cried, "Damn it! War tortures so many people who are innocent!" The sky was red with flames. . . .¹

A girl was standing in the middle of the road staring vacantly. . . . She was eight years old. The wound on her head looked like a cracked pomegranate. Silently I carried her on my back. . . . Then I heard a girl's voice clearly from behind a tree, "Help me,

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¹ From *Unforgettable Fire: Pictures Drawn by Atomic Bomb Survivors*, edited by the Japan Broadcasting Association (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), pp. 43–44. Copyright © 1977 by NHK. Reprinted by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

² Ibid., p. 13.

³ Ibid., p. 69.

please." Her back was completely burned and the skin peeled off and was hanging down from her hips. . . .²

Most of the A-bomb survivors were burned all over their bodies. They were not only naked, but also their skin came off. Suffering from the severe pain of the burns, they were wandering around looking for their parents, husbands, wives, and children.³

I was walking along the Hijiyama Bridge. . . . A woman, who looked like an expectant mother, was dead. At her side, a girl of about three years of age brought some water in an empty can she had found. She was trying to let her mother drink from it. . . .⁴

A high school student asked me to give him some water. I heard that if people who had been exposed to the A-bomb drank water, they would die. So I would not give him water. The next day when I passed by the place, he was lying on the ground dead. I wished then that I had let him drink some water, even if he would have died sooner. . . .⁵

We were walking along the streetcar line. Wherever we went we saw dead horses and bodies. . . . When I crossed Miyuki Bridge I saw Professor Takenaka standing at the foot of the bridge. He was almost naked, wearing nothing but shorts and he had a rice ball in his right hand. Beyond, the northern area was covered by red fire burning against the sky. Far away, Ote-machi was also a sea of fire. That day Professor Takenaka had not gone to Hiroshima University and the A-bomb exploded when he was at home. He tried to rescue his wife who was trapped under a roofbeam but all his efforts were in vain. The fire was threatening him also. His wife pleaded, "Run away, dear!" He was forced to desert his wife and escape from the fire. So he was now at the foot of Miyuki Bridge. But I wonder how he came to hold that rice ball in his hand? His naked figure, standing there before the flames with that rice ball looked to me as a symbol of the modest hope of human beings.⁶

The decision to drop the bomb on the people of Hiroshima was made while the United States was at war with Japan. Henry L. Stimson, the American secretary of war, later wrote:

The ultimate responsibility for the recommendation to the President [concerning the A-bomb] rested upon me, and I have no desire to veil it. . . . I felt that to extract a genuine surrender from the [Japanese] Emperor and his military advisers, they must be administered a tremendous shock which would carry convincing proof of our power to destroy the Empire. Such an effective shock would save many times the number of lives, both American and Japanese, that it would cost. . . . Our enemy, Japan, commanded forces of somewhat over 5,000,000 armed men. Men of these armies had already inflicted upon us . . . over 300,000 battle casualties. [They] . . . had the strength to cost us a million more. . . . Additional large losses might be expected among our allies and . . . enemy casualties would be much larger than our own. . . . My chief purpose was to end the war in victory with the least possible cost in lives. . . . The face of war is the face of death; death is an inevitable part of every order that a wartime leader gives. The decision to use the atomic bomb was a decision that brought death to over a hundred thousand Japanese . . . But this deliberate, premeditated destruction was our least abhorrent choice.*

⁴ Ibid., p. 75.

⁵ Ibid., p. 68.

⁶ Ibid., p. 46.

*Henry L. Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," *Harper's Magazine*, vol. 194, no. 1161 (February 1947), pp. 101, 102, 106, 107.