

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Movements > Antiwar Struggles (Movements) > Nuclear Weapon, WMD (Movements) > **70 years ago, Hiroshima-Nagasaki - One of history's worst war crimes**

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Monday 30 May 2016, by [PETERSEN-SMITH Khury](#) (Date first published: 17 August 2015).

Khury Petersen-Smith punctures the mythology about the U.S. decision to use the atomic bomb at the end of the Second World War—and why the myths still endure.

IN THE spring of 2009, activists in Hiroshima, Japan, launched a project to persuade President Barack Obama to visit their city. Hiroshima and Nagasaki became known to the world in 1945 as history's first victims of nuclear attack when the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on those cities. The effort to bring Obama involved hundreds of middle- and high-school students, as well as hibakusha—survivors of the atomic bombings.

A visit by the president could have sent a message: A recognition of the horror of nuclear weapons and solidarity with the efforts of Japanese activists seeking to abolish them. Buoyed by Obama's winning of the Nobel Peace Prize, the "President Obama Invitation Project" approached former U.S. Rep. Dennis Kucinich, also a former candidate for the presidency, to extend a formal invitation to Obama to visit Hiroshima. Kucinich vowed to deliver the message.

You could be forgiven for missing this event. The story died when the White House ignored the invite. As with so many who expected a departure from policies and politics associated with the Bush administration, Obama betrayed the hopes of activists in Hiroshima.

EARLY AUGUST marked 70 years since the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

While people in those cities and elsewhere in Japan marked the occasion by remembering the catastrophic bombings and their aftermath, there was silence from the U.S. government. For its part, the *New York Times* posed the following question on its website: "Did the U.S. have to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?" The *Times* invited readers "submit their arguments" and promised to select some for publication.

The fact that the *Times* considers the U.S. decision to use nuclear weapons against cities of people an open question—70 years after the fact—speaks to the shocking extent to which the U.S. government and mainstream media apologize for one of history's greatest war crimes.

The nuclear attacks are treated very differently, especially in the U.S., than other atrocities committed by the warring powers of the Second World War. Writing in an opinion piece for the *New York Times* last year, Norihiro Kato pointed out the double standard in the way that history remembers the crimes committed by the United States, compared with those of Japan in China and Germany throughout Europe [1].

"The difference lies not in the atrocities themselves, but in the attitude the world has taken toward them. The international community has reached a consensus regarding all those other horrors: They violated international law; they never should have occurred in the first place; they must never be

permitted to happen again...

The situation is completely different with respect to the atomic bombings. Even if most people around the world privately believe the indiscriminate killing of civilians with nuclear weapons is wrong, there is no shared public consensus to this effect...The permanent members of the United Nations Security Council oppose the notion of an unconditional ban; they themselves possess nuclear weapons and want to reserve their “right” to use them."

BECAUSE TODAY’S dominant world powers have a vested interest in whitewashing America’s history of atomic warfare—combined with the fact that, as a victor of the Second World War, the U.S. government exercises tremendous power over how that war is remembered—the relative silence about Hiroshima and Nagasaki is rendered explicable.

It is not mere coincidence that the country with the most power on the world stage today is also the one that committed unforgivable crimes. Indeed, the U.S. established its superpower status at the end of the Second World War by demonstrating both its capacity to produce as well as its willingness to use the most destructive weapons ever invented.

It is ironic, to say the least, that the U.S. has used the mantle of “superpower” to regulate the war-making of other countries—in particular, the production and use of nuclear weapons. The inconvenient truth is that the very country that has appointed itself as the guardian of the world from nuclear proliferation is also the only one in history to use atomic bombs in war.

The most unmistakable reminder of this strange reality arrived in the form of an agreement—negotiated by the U.S.—to curtail Iran’s development of nuclear weapons. The deal was controversial, but not for what should be the most obvious reason: The state that brokered it produced the most extensive system in history for the production and deployment of nuclear weapons—and is still the only state to have used them in war.

The ability of the U.S. to play the role of global policeman regarding nuclear proliferation—and all other geopolitical matters—rests on a distortion of history, in addition to its actual military might.

According to the mythology of the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the U.S. actually saved lives by using the weapons—because the bombings avoided a costlier ground invasion.

This story begins with President Truman’s claim during his August 9, 1945, radio address informing the American public of the decision to use the weapons [2]. He justified the bombing of Hiroshima both as an act of revenge for the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and brutal treatment of American prisoners of war, as well as a means to “shorten the agony of war” and “save the lives of thousands and thousands of young Americans.”

President Truman said that the U.S. took on an “awful responsibility” by becoming the world’s first nuclear power. He framed his decision to use the bomb, despite its destructive power, as a calculated one. The contrast between Truman’s rational, American mind against the racist caricature of the fanatical, belligerent Japanese was obvious in 1945, after years of anti-Japanese propaganda and the detention of 100,000 Japanese-Americans in concentration camps, which was explained as a way to prevent them from becoming a fifth column bent on undermining the U.S. war effort.

Truman argued in that speech that the U.S. had selected Hiroshima, which it had designated as a “military target,” in order to save civilian lives.

All of these rationales were, of course, lies.

IN AN article for TomDispatch [3], historian Christian Appy recounts an episode whose outcome could have been a new conversation about the American decision to use the atomic bomb. In 1995, the Smithsonian Institute prepared an exhibit on the 50th anniversary of the bombings.

Originally, it planned to present the differing opinions among U.S. generals at the end of the war about the military necessity of dropping the bombs. As part of the exhibit, charred artifacts from Hiroshima and photos of dead and injured bomb victims would have been displayed.

But right-wing organizations and the U.S. Senate itself intervened to prevent this well-rounded exhibit from happening. The Senate passed a resolution affirming the use of nuclear weapons as “momentous in helping to bring World War II to a merciful end.” Appy writes:

“Merciful? Consider just this: the number of civilians killed at Hiroshima and Nagasaki alone was more than twice the number of American troops killed during the entire Pacific war. In the end, the Smithsonian displayed little but the Enola Gay itself, a gleaming relic of American victory in the ‘Good War.’”

The U.S. government buried the truth, and it continues to do so seven decades after the war—with the complicity of the mainstream media and museums like the Smithsonian. The act of obscuring the real reasoning and devastation of the bombings began a history of hiding more nuclear crimes on the part of the United States, including its extensive and devastating nuclear weapons testing program in the Marshall Islands and elsewhere in the Pacific.

The U.S. Atomic Energy Commission treated Pacific Islander victims of radiation not as medical patients, but as human subjects in its experiments. Whereas there is some recognition among progressives and the left in the U.S. that the government’s crimes in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were unforgivable, there is virtually no conversation about the testing program in the Pacific islands—or its victims—due to the government’s efforts to marginalize them.

The fact that the U.S. government—under both Republicans or Democrats (and remember, it was a Democratic president who ordered the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki)—has not reckoned with its actions 70 years later shows that it simply will not, unless it is forced to. A new movement against U.S. imperialism, one that exposes its crimes of the past and resists those of the present, is sorely needed.

This summer, a new antiwar movement is shaking Japan. Tens of thousands of people, including a younger generation of activists, have mobilized against Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s efforts to rewrite the Japanese constitution in order to allow the country to have an offensive military—which was outlawed at the conclusion of the Second World War.

With the nightmares of that war in mind, protesters have set out to oppose Japanese militarism. The challenge remains in this country to revive a struggle against U.S. empire—in solidarity with its victims around the world.

Khury Petersen-Smith

P.S.

* “One of history’s worst war crimes”. Socialist Worker (USA). August 17, 2015:

Footnotes

[1] See available on ESSF (article 38087), [Hiroshima-Nagasaki: Atomic Bomb Victims Stand Alone - "The survivors suffer a double injury"](#).

[2] <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=12165&st=&st1=>

[3] http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/176031/tomgram%3A_christian_appy%2C_america%27s_hiroshima_and_nagasaki_70_years_later/