HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI: THE PHYSICAL, MEDICAL AND SOCIAL EFFECTS OF THE ATOMIC BOMBINGS
by The Committee for the Compilation of Materials on Damage Caused by the Atomic Bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki
(Basic Books; xiv + 706 pp.; $37.50)

George A. Silver

Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as Robert Jay Lifton writes on the book jacket, is "the most complete account we have of the overall human effects of the two atomic bombings....We gain an accurate, disturbing, sobering picture of the extraordinary radius of death, suffering and destruction, resulting from the use of this first 'tiny' nuclear weapon." To read this book is to experience outrage, and while the length and thoroughness of the text may lead to some slowing of the reaction, a sense of dumb, defeated hopelessness remains. How could human beings have done this to one another? Add: How can they consider doing this to one another again?

True, war is a sickening process in any case. You kill a few or many—slowly with starvation, more rapidly with high explosives—burn, shoot, bayonet, bomb. Is the massive flash of instant disintegration and the many delayed consequences of pain, suffering, and genetic distortion really more horrible, more vicious, more iniquitous—more to be condemned?

Chapter headings give some idea of the completeness of the reporting. Under "Physical Aspects of Destruction" one finds "The Atomic Bomb and Thermal Radiations," "Blast Caused by the Atomic Bomb Explosion," and "Radiation from the Atomic Bomb." Under "Injury to the Human Body" one finds "Atomic Bomb Trauma (Injury From Blasts)," "The Pathology of Atomic Bomb Injury (Acute Phase)," "Keloid," "Blood Disorder," "Ocular Lesions," and so on. There are even more particular details in bits of chapters headed "Course and Termination of Pregnancy After Exposure in Utero" and "Malignant Tumors," "Aging and Life Span," and "Chromosome Changes." Under "The Impact on Society and Daily Life," the most moving chapter, one finds "A Society Laid Waste." But others are painful too. "A-Bomb Orphans" and "Hardships of Making a Living," as well as "Overcoming Psychological Shock." The final section, "Toward the Abolition of Nuclear Arms," is an appeal to the reason and self-interest of mankind. It describes both the efforts at medical care for the victims at the time of the bombings (many medical aides and relief workers were poisoned and suffered radiation-induced illnesses, some died), as well as eventual government and private agency efforts to provide long-term medical care, financial support, and welfare services. The last hundred pages deal with the efforts of individuals, agencies, and governments to educate the world and abolish atomic and nuclear weapons.

The book's first twenty pages are given over to photographs, an unforgettable progression of destruction from city to buildings, to havoc in the social organization—nauseating pictures of the effects on human beings. It may be enough simply to look at these pictures slowly and attentively to feel the full force of this book. A few passages may also give a sense of this.

"The power of the atomic bomb expressed in equivalents of TNT...ignores the essential qualitative differences between an atomic bomb and a conventional bomb."

"When the key members of a community are wiped out or wounded, the community itself disintegrates, and traditional society collapses."

"A-bomb damage...must be seen overall, as an interrelated array—massive physical and human loss, social disintegration and psychological and spiritual shock—that affects all life and society."

Of those out of doors less than a kilometer from the hypocenter, like the students at the Girls' High School, 100 per cent were dead before the week was out, and most within a day. In Hiroshima an estimated 118,661 died, 30,524 were severely injured, and 48,606 slightly injured. In Nagasaki, 73,884 died, 74,909 were injured, and 120,820 were "affected."

There is no way for us to comprehend fully all this book contains, but perhaps there is no need to try. Only one lesson has to be drawn from this. Nuclear war must not be allowed to happen. There must be no "thinking the unthinkable," no national planning of useless shelters, no estimates of "acceptable casualties" in the academic boardrooms and military war rooms.

One must add to such a sad and terrifying picture the possibility that this horrifying episode was avoidable, that peace negotiations were under way and a crippled and defeated Japan was on the brink of surrender. In defense of the bombing, it is often claimed that our intelligence service and the White House and State Department staff were unaware of that eventuality and were faced with the alternative of invading the Japanese home islands at a fantastic cost in lives and treasure. But if that was the case and Hiroshima was thought necessary, was Nagasaki necessary too?

It also has been suggested that more was involved than haste to terminate the struggle. Patrick Blackett, the British Nobel physicist, and U.S. General Leslie Groves are referred to as authoritative sources for the judgment that "the primary concern of the American military authorities who decided to drop the atomic bomb on Japan was to confirm its immense destructive power...And it is just possible that the color of the enemy played some part in that decision-making process."

What was it that the officials who made the decision did not know? The magnitude of the bomb's destructive power? How many might die? The eventual effects and consequences for those who survived and for children and generations yet unborn? Did the scientists know—after Trinity? And after all the books and the soul-searching ("scientists knew sin," said Oppenheimer) how much did they manage to say, how much were they able to transmit to the decision-makers? In short, how cold-blooded was the decision!

The editors write that "it is clear that from the outset this new weapon was not intended for use in war theaters where opposing armies were locked in battle; rather it was to be dropped on densely populated centers that contained military facilities and industries
as well as high concentrations of houses and other buildings. Moreover, the A-bomb attacks were not so much against Japan—already on the brink of surrender and no longer capable of mounting an effective counteroffensive—as to establish clearly America's post-war international position and strategic supremacy in the anticipated cold war setting. One tragedy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is that this historically unprecedented devastation of human society stemmed from essentially experimental and political aims."

The ethical questions raised are the grim ones we must face and respond to today as we move relentlessly toward another such "justifiable" exercise. Can we learn from this experience? If so, what does it teach? The barbarism of the West! The racism of American society! The incapacity of mankind to recognize the terrible, inescapable doom hovering over us all in the awesome but comparatively tiny bodies of our nuclear weapons?

Auden wrote:

When Statesmen gravely say "We must be realistic",
The chances are they're weak and, therefore, pacifistic.
But when they speak of Principles,
look out: perhaps
Their generals are already poring over maps.

The editors write:

"Nuclear arms have become a mark
of national power and pride."

It now seems clear that the use of nuclear weapons in war is inevitable—possibly even in the near future. The pugnacious, defiant foreign policy course of the great powers and the equally belligerent attitudes of smaller powers promise nothing less. In Hiroshima and Nagasaki we have a map of the terrain, a road-map to hell—a history of consequences written in advance of the event. 

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