

storica **MENTE**
LABORATORIO DI STORIA



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
Università di Bologna
Dipartimento di Storia Culture Civiltà

COMUNICARE

STORIA

VIELLA

STORICAMENTE.ORG
Laboratorio di Storia

Florian Coulmas
How to Write History?
© Florian Coulmas
Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0
International License 2004- 2022

Volume: 2022
Issue: 18
Article number 23
Section: Comunicare storia
Pages. 1-10
DOI: 10.52056/9791254691984/23
ISSN: 1825-411X
Publisher: Viella

Double blind peer review: No
Document type: Article
Research Areas: Editorial material
Published: 23/03/2023

Corresponding Address: Florian Coulmas, IN-EAST In-
stitute for East Asian Studies, University of Duisburg-Es-
sen, Germany

How to Write History?

FLORIAN COULMAS

Institute for East Asian Studies, University of Duisburg-Essen
florian.coulmas@uni-due.de

78 years after the annihilation of Hiroshima, a G7 summit is scheduled to take place in Hiroshima. That both representatives/heirs of the victims and the victimisers of the first nuclear strike in human history will sit there around the same table is ample reason to reflect on the way this event is and should be remembered. Recalling some details of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, this text recalls that the bombs did not, as is often thought, bring about Japan's surrender in World War II and touches upon the contingency of history writing. It also recalls that it was common practice for a long time to refer to the "nuclear holocaust" and raises the question of whether and how present-day circumstances – in particular the fact that the 2023 G7 summit takes place in times of a war not anticipated by many just a year ago – do and should influence the perception and evaluation of past facts and thus their sedimentation in history.

KEYWORDS: HIROSHIMA; NAGASAKI; HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS;
NUCLEAR WAR; G7 2023

“What happened in history?” asked Vere Gordon Childe in his book under the same title, first published in 1942, in which he dealt with the transition from prehistory to early history. He was convinced that it was possible to answer the question, if only we work hard enough. Today, we know more about prehistory and history, but the question has lost nothing of its cogency, and there are good reasons to raise it again and again, also today. One of them is that the next G7 summit is scheduled to take place in Hiroshima in May this year.

Ever since it was rebuilt, Hiroshima has seen itself as a city of peace, which is of particular importance today, in times of war. A museum, a documentation centre, the famous atomic dome, and a cenotaph in the large Peace Park memorialize the barbarous fate its citizens met almost 78 years ago, the more than 140,000 dead, the suffering of the survivors, the complete destruction. Will this affect the G7 meeting in

any way? Will they visit the museum? If so, what will they see? With apologies for the personal digression, when I first visited the museum many years ago, the exposition was raw, unordered, dusty, horrible, hard to bear, as if remains of the destruction had been dumped there just days ago. Today, the photographs of bodies, surviving children, wrecked houses, burnt clothing, glass and porcelain melted from the heat are still shocking, but the general impression has become more aseptic, like a museum.

A museum that is a fixture of secondary school class expeditions. These students are nowadays surely the biggest contingent of visitors, to the Peace Park and the museum. Its exposition is largely apolitical, not pointing fingers and future oriented: an unprecedented cataclysm whose repetition those in responsible positions should do everything they can to avoid. In addition to an exhibition with many photographs of the city in ruins, children killed in the bombing, the firestorm, the black rain that brought radiation on the survivors, other calamities, and conditions in relief stations, there is a gallery that documents the construction of the Peace Memorial Park. The history of Hiroshima is displayed in a separate room, and another one is dedicated to exhibiting and explaining the dangers of nuclear weapons.

Hiroshima has made the combination of memorializing the nuclear destruction with the promotion of peace its mission displayed in various places. The Peace Memorial Museum explains its mission like this: «We think that ‘Hiroshima’ not only has the responsibility to convey historical facts, but also should be a lesson to us who live in the ‘nuclear age’ and a warning to mankind for the future» (*Hiroshima Heiwakinen Shiryōkanzō* 1995, 6). This is in stark contrast with Nagasaki where the memory is largely confined to a memorial hall for the atomic bomb victims. The architecture is impressive, even beautiful¹; however, it is more modest and in a quieter place than in Hiroshima. Rather than being for ever the “second” ground zero, some Nagasaki residents say, while agreeing with Hiroshima’s peace mission, they concentrate on their victims and as a city today have other things to show than de-

¹ An online video tour of Nagasaki’s Memorial Hall is offered here: <https://www.peace-nagasaki.go.jp/en> (accessed March 17, 2023).

struction. Nagasaki prides itself of being an open, cosmopolitan city with a colourful history and refuses to be eternally reduced to a cruel event in the past.

Not only because Hiroshima came first, but also because of the two cities' different ways of cultivating their history, Hiroshima is the icon of nuclear destruction more than Nagasaki. This finds expression once again in the upcoming G7 meeting. An American President in this place, that is definitely a special moment. However, President Joe Biden will not be the first; he follows in his pre-predecessor's footsteps. In May 2016, Barak Obama did what no president had done before, he travelled to Hiroshima and, accompanied by then Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe and Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida, who is now Prime Minister, delivered an impressive speech in the Peace Park. He spoke of the horrors of war that have always accompanied humanity, of the insurmountable instinct to want to subdue others, of religion as a license to kill, of science as a tool to make it ever more effective. Hiroshima, that was his message, stood in a series of horrific events that set the rhythm of human history, a series that could only be ended by a "moral revolution".

In keeping with the general habit that victors don't apologize, Obama did not offer an apology on behalf of the United States, nor did he address the question of why the two atomic bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Even the visit to Hiroshima went much too far for conservative circles in the United States. When the U.S. starts or is involved in a war, it does so on morally justified grounds. From their point of view, to cast even the shadow of a doubt on this belief is not legitimate.

The reasons for dropping the atomic bombs were hardly discussed for a long time. The Japanese, after all, were the aggressors in Pearl Harbour, and the bombs finally ended World War II, thank God! That was and is the official American version, which was widely circulated even in Japan, though not necessarily in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After the war, Japan was under nominally Allied, but in fact American, occupation for seven years, that is, a whole generation of students, and during that time nothing was allowed to be published about the atomic bombs

without the American censors' consent. The Japanese government was busy with the reconstruction of the country and not much interested in the misdeeds of the Imperial Japanese Army during the war, nor in the atomic bombs.

The fact that Washington decided during and more so after the occupation to build up Japan as an ally was more valuable to the political elite than clarifying the question of why the bombs were dropped and how the nuclear annihilation was to be evaluated. Radhabinod Pal, an Indian jurist and one of the judges participating in the 1946 "Tokyo Trials" of Japanese war crimes committed during the Pacific War offered this opinion in the only dissenting judgment of the trials, arguing with regard to the atomic bombs as follows:

Kaiser Wilhelm II was credited with a letter to the Austrian Kaiser Franz Joseph in the early days of [World War I], wherein he stated as follows: 'My soul is torn, but everything must be put to fire and sword; men, women and children, and old men must be slaughtered and not a tree or house be left standing ...' This showed his ruthless policy, and this policy of indiscriminate murder to shorten the war was considered to be a crime. ... If any indiscriminate destruction of civilian life and property is still illegitimate in warfare, then, in the Pacific war, this decision to use the ATOM BOMB is the only near approach to the directives of the German Emperor during the first world war and of the Nazi leaders during the second world war (IMTFE 1999, 620).

The Dutch legal scholar Bert V.A. Röling, who like Pal served as a judge in the Tokyo war crimes trials, wrote about the atomic bombs in 1971:

Voices can still be heard in the Netherlands claiming that the atomic bombs put an end to the war. This is a myth used to appease the accusing conscience of these war crimes. As a judge of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East in Tokyo, I had the opportunity to read the minutes of all meetings of the Japanese Council of Ministers and the Privy Council. They clearly show that it was not the atomic bombs that led to the surrender².

² *De Tijd*, October 5, 1971.

These opinions never garnered much attention among the general public. In academia, it was then primarily American military historians such as Gar Alperovitz, Robert Lifton, Greg Mitchell and J. Samuel Walker who disagreed with the official version that the airdrops were inevitable and with President Truman's spurious claim that they saved 500,000 American lives (Bernstein 1986). They opposed this view on history as propaganda where, as Richard Minear put it, «facts do not matter» (Minear 1995, 351). The impact of their work on public opinion was, however, limited.

Facts! What happened in history? What happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki? What do we actually know about it? What do high school students learn about it? As the few above quotations show the facts are not so easy to come by. However, as Minear (*ibid.*) also said, no serious student of history still believes that the atomic bombs did what the U.S. government prefers them to have done, that is, terminate the war. Instead, historians have argued and proved that since the German Reich surrendered on 7 May 1945, the war was effectively over; that President Roosevelt's insistence that Japan, as Germany had done, must surrender *unconditionally*³ prolonged the war; that the gigantic cost⁴ of developing the bombs was part of the motivation to use them; that after the uranium bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima, Nagasaki was bombed in order to also test the plutonium bomb in actual use; and that the real target of the bombs was not Japan but the new enemy looming on the horizon, the Soviet Union. Little known is the fact that Nagasaki rather than being of any strategic value had bad luck. On 9 August, the sky over Kokura, the designated target of the second bomb, was overcast, making it impossible to observe the bomb's effects. Second choice: Nagasaki.

³ The condition the Japanese government held on to was to leave the Emperor untouched and in office. The Americans did not want to accept this, but eventually found it opportune to use him for their own purposes rather than put him on trial with other military and political leaders.

⁴ The Manhattan Project employed as many as 130.000 workers at a cost of U.S. \$ 2.2 billion. U.S. Department of Energy, Manhattan Project Background Information and Preservation Work. <https://www.energy.gov/lm/manhattan-project-background-information-and-preservation-work> (accessed March 17, 2023).

The dominant Japanese political class hardly took part in discussions about the rationale for using nuclear weapons. Instead, it enthusiastically embraced the “Atoms for Peace” programme presented by President Eisenhower to the UN General Assembly in 1953 to become a dormant nuclear power. “Dormant” because this was just about peaceful use of nuclear energy⁵. Today, Japan has 54 nuclear reactors in 17 power plants and, experts agree, is no more than “a screwdriver away” from nuclear weapons.

Over the past decades, the Japanese government has reiterated many times that Japan is the “only country” to have suffered nuclear strikes, but the two cities that actually suffered have not benefited much from these proclamations. Their mayors and city administrations were in constant opposition to the government in Tokyo, since they were largely left to their own devices to cope with the disaster, materially and spiritually, after the war. They also were not convinced of the categorical difference between atoms for war and for peace, and therefore did not share the enthusiasm for nuclear power plants. This is why a high-level international conference in Hiroshima is such an important event.

Prime Minister Kishida had a hand in choosing the venue for this year’s G7 summit, as his family hails from Hiroshima Prefecture, from where he was elected to Parliament. He is considered a peace promotor, and the mayors and city assemblies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki welcomed his ascent to power expecting that he would support their campaigns for the abolition of nuclear weapons⁶. Hiroshima will no doubt welcome the G7 summit, but one can only speculate as to whether the spirit of the venue will have an impact on the conference. Perhaps in so far as it brings the

⁵ The Japanese terminology dissociates atomic energy for war and peace. *Genshiryoku* means nuclear power (for electricity generating), and *kakuheiki* means nuclear weapons.

⁶ The mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have undertaken many initiatives for abolishing nuclear arms. For example, in 1982 they established “The World Conference of Mayors for Peace through Inter-city Solidarity”, now called “Mayors for Peace” which is still active. <https://www.mayorsforpeace.org/en/about-us/outline-m4p> (accessed March 17, 2023).

danger of nuclear apocalypse, which has been pushed more and more into the background over the course of time, back into consciousness.

Not far from Hiroshima City in Hiroshima Prefecture is Fukuyama, an industrial town in a scenic and historical sea-side region which is also known as “town of roses”. It is home to the Holocaust Education Centre, which welcomes visitors with a portrait of and a quotation by Elie Wiesel: «For the dead and the living we *must* bear witness». An unlikely location, some may think, for a place of education against ignorance about «the persecution of Jews executed by the Nazis, starting from social injustice and discrimination and leading to indescribable cruelty, torture and massacre». And explaining that «more than 12 million people were murdered by the Nazis, during World War II and among them were 6 million Jews»⁷. It is the only centre of its kind in Japan, and its location is obviously not coincidental. Is it unjustified?

Shimon Peres, President and Prime Minister of Israel, in 1994, then in his capacity as foreign minister, at the Peace Bell ceremony in New York at UN Headquarters referred to two holocausts: the Jewish holocaust and the Japanese holocaust, because «nuclear bombs are like flying holocausts» (Gil 2021, 44). Everyone was not happy with this juxtaposition which in the eyes of many called into question the uniqueness of the mass murder of Jews by the Nazis, but as a matter of fact, it was then not at all uncommon, which it has become in the meantime, to call what happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki an “atomic holocaust”. Without in any way negating the many differences between the Shoah and the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it cannot be denied that the latter transformed not only the 20th century but human history. How this incision should be remembered is therefore of more than academic interest. The Holocaust Education Centre in Fukuyama directs attention to this issue.

Will the G7 summit in Hiroshima have any impact in this regard? The idea that Hiroshima was a one-time horrible occurrence has be-

⁷ <http://www.hecjpn.org> (accessed March 17, 2023).

come common knowledge, just as President Obama portrayed it in his speech. Can this common knowledge be changed at a time when even in the eyes of its critics the U.S. not only occupies the moral high-ground but is indispensable for holding a force in check that in the course of the last year mutated from rival to enemy of the Western world? The more general question is how present circumstances colour our views on the past.

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, President Putin has repeatedly said that the threat of nuclear war is real. This did not go past the Japanese government as meaningless sabre-rattling. Added to this is China's military strengthening and the fact that North Korea has not only risen to become a nuclear power, but has also occasionally and more often in recent times fired ballistic missiles over the Japanese archipelago. As early as March 2022, the peace politician Kishida has called the nuclear threat from Russia an actual danger⁸, while the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz diagnosed a "turning point" in history. In this environment, the Japanese government in consultation with Washington adopted a massive rearmament programme.

This is remarkable politically and as an example of how far the interpretation of legal norms can go. The famous Article 9 of the Japanese constitution is explicit:

Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.

In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized⁹.

⁸ Kishida calls nuclear threat «increasingly real» as nonproliferation goals fade. *The Japan Times*, March 27, 2022.

⁹ Official English translation: https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html (accessed March 17, 2023).

This manifest prohibition notwithstanding, but, if it is “interpreted” in that way, somehow in the spirit of Article 9, Japan for a long time only had “self-defence forces” and only a Defence Agency under the Cabinet office. It was only in 2006 that it was elevated to Ministry of Defence with its own minister in the cabinet. While increasing the strength of its military forces, which nowadays are ranked 8 on the Global Fire Power Index¹⁰, the government generally followed the political guidelines of the strict limitation of military means to self-defence. That with this policy the “only country” to have suffered nuclear strikes would place itself under the nuclear umbrella of those who carried them out struck many anti-nuclear activists as odd, not to say unacceptable, but that is the reality. Japan is now planning for the first time since the end of World War II to develop a preventive strike capability as a national security strategy. So far, Japan has kept its military budget at 1 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP). It now plans to double that over the next five years to 2 per cent of GDP. With the most extensive expansion of its military expenditures, Japan turns its back on the peace policy it has persistently pursued for a long time. It is an irony of history that the task of realizing this change falls to Premier Kishida of Hiroshima. He too represents the human species, which up until now has come up with nothing better than *si vis pacem para bellum*, rather than a “moral revolution”.

Under these circumstances, the question of why an atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and why on Nagasaki are of interest primarily to historians. That the politicians convening for the G7 summit in Hiroshima will pay them serious attention, let alone the question “what happened in history?” is highly unlikely. Hiroshima will therefore continue to go down in history, for the general public at least, in a way that suits the victor of the war of which its destruction was a part, who thus wrote history in the double sense of the word. It is an additional irony of world history that, regardless of what they know or learn in Hiro-

¹⁰ After US, Russia, China, India, U.K., South Korea, and Pakistan. <https://currentaffairs.adda247.com/global-fire-power-index-no-change-in-top-4-military-rankings> (accessed March 17, 2023).

shima about the bombs, the G7 leaders will have to remind themselves in Hiroshima that nowadays Hiroshima can be anywhere.

Reference List

- Bernstein, Barton J. 1986. "A postwar myth: 500,000 U.S. lives saved." *Bulletin of the Concerned Atomic Scientists* 42: 38-40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.1986.11459388>.
- Gil, Avi. 2021. *Simon Peres: An Insider's Account of the Man and the Struggle for a New Middle East*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Hiroshima Heiwakinen Shiryōkanzō (Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum Collection)*. 1995.
- IMTFE – International Military Tribunal for the Far East. 1999. *Dissent Judgment of Justice Pal*. Tokyo: Kokusho-Kankokai. http://www.sdh-fact.com/CL02_1/65_S4.pdf.
- Miner, Richard H. 1995. "Atomic holocaust, Nazi holocaust: some reflections." *Diplomatic History* 19, no. 2 (Spring): 347-65. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24912300>.