

White Light, Black Rain: powerful HBO film about atomic bombing of Japanese cities

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White Light, Black Rain: The Destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, written and directed by Steven Okazaki

In August 1945, in an act that will forever haunt the memory of humankind, the United States government under President Harry Truman ordered the dropping of two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, incinerating some 120,000 people instantly and leading to the slow and painful deaths of hundreds of thousands more in the weeks, months and years to follow.

The recent HBO documentary *White Light, Black Rain: The Destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki* examines the events surrounding the dropping of the bomb and provides rare and powerful first-hand accounts from a group of Japanese survivors.

On August 6, 1945, at 8:15 a.m. on a clear and sunny morning, the US B-29 bomber the Enola Gay dropped a 15-kiloton atomic bomb, codenamed “Little Boy,” over the Japanese city of Hiroshima. An estimated 140,000 people, out of a population of nearly 300,000, were killed immediately or shortly afterward. Everything at or near the hypocenter of the bomb was instantly vaporized. It was the world’s very first encounter with nuclear weapons.

Three days later on August 9, US bombers dropped a second, 21-kiloton atomic bomb, codenamed “Fat Man,” onto the city of Nagasaki. An estimated 70,000 people, nearly all civilians, were killed within a short period of time, many of them also instantly vaporized.

The new HBO film, made by veteran documentarian Steven Okazaki, allows 14 survivors of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki to speak about their memories of that day and those that followed the bombing. Their accounts reveal, in the most personal and shocking manner, the horror that resulted from these barbaric crimes.

These voices and their descriptions shed light on one of the darkest chapters in the history of world imperialism, and serve as a reminder of the dangers that exist at present as the American ruling elite threatens to plunge the world into new conflagrations.

Okazaki, who won an Oscar in 1991 for his documentary *Days of Waiting* about a Caucasian artist interned with Japanese-Americans in the US during World War II, has created in *White Light, Black Rain* a worthy and deeply moving film.

In the opening sequence, the filmmaker asks teenagers on the streets of modern-day Hiroshima if they know which event occurred on August 6, 1945. None of them know the proper answer. “I don’t know,” answers one. “An earthquake?,” replies another. “I’m bad at history,” states a third.

This inability to identify such a momentous event, particularly by the younger generation in Japan, troubles Okazaki. But this disturbing phenomenon of historical amnesia is hardly unique to that country. How much is known or discussed in America or anywhere else about the US government’s decision to unleash the most lethal and destructive weapon in history?

Contrary to the rationale offered by the US government and military that

the use of nuclear weapons in August 1945 was necessary to save American lives and end the war without an invasion of Japan, the historical facts argue otherwise. While Tokyo had already made gestures toward suing for peace, the Truman administration was determined to use the bomb.

On the one hand, the US ruling elite was set on ending the war before Soviet forces could advance into China or Korea, or for that matter Japan itself. On the other, there was the desire to show off the bomb to demonstrate the overwhelming and unchallengeable power of the American military. The war was to end on US terms. There would be no brokering of peace with the involvement of the Soviet Union or anyone else (see “Sixty Years since the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings”).

The accounts from the American pilots, scientific observers and navigators who carried out the bombing missions begin in the chapter of the film entitled “The Survivors.” Although these accounts provide valuable insight into the organization of the missions and the psychology of those involved, their inclusion in a chapter that introduces the victims of the bombings seems misplaced.

Of the fourteen atomic bomb survivors interviewed in *White Light, Black Rain*, most are speaking publicly about their recollections for the first time. Many were left severely disfigured. The filmmaker, in a very effective approach, introduces the survivors holding photographs of themselves before the bombing. The pictures, mainly portraits of beautiful and innocent children alone or with family members, or class pictures with young classmates, seem to transcend national and ethnic identity.

A text notes that Kiyoko Imori, one of the survivors, was three blocks from ground zero at the time of the bombing and lost her entire family. Another text explains that the 11-year-old was the only child to survive from her school—all 620 of her classmates perished.

Sumiteru Taniguchi, a 16-year-old letter carrier at the time, holds up a photograph of himself as a bright and happy teenager. In the bombing he suffered massive burns to his face, arms and back, some of which never healed, and to this day he lives in constant pain.

Many of the survivors describe where they were and what they were doing just before the bomb struck—children were getting ready or arriving for school, attending a church mass, helping their mothers around the house.

And then the bomb explodes in a giant white flash. People are thrown through the air and from their houses. Children burn alive under piles of rubble. Parents and siblings are turned into ash. People with burning flesh run toward the river. The water and its banks are full of corpses.

To depict the moments that immediately followed the bombings, Okazaki makes use of drawings and paintings made by other survivors that portray the unimaginable suffering and carnage. A slideshow of the images can be viewed at: <http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/whitelightblackrain/slideshow.html>.

Sakue Shimorhira was ten years old and lost both her mother and a brother in the Nagasaki bombing. She lived for years in a shack amongst

ruins of the city, surviving by eating grass and garbage. Her sister would later step in front of a train, taking her own life.

"I woke up and looked around. I saw an incredible sight. People with their eyes hanging out," Shimorhira described. "Their skin was shredded and hanging off their bodies. 'Please help me, Please help me!' they cried out. One woman was carrying a baby. The baby had no head. I was so scared."

Shimorhira recalls yelling at her unconscious sister until she came to. "She started crying for our mother, 'Mommy, help us! Mommy, help us!' I saw two burnt bodies. I saw that one of the bodies had holes where the eyes should be and one gold tooth. My mother had one gold tooth, so I knew it was her. We reached out and said, 'Mommy!' Before our eyes it crumbled into ashes."

Thirteen-year-old Katsuji Yoshido of Nagasaki recalls being thrown 100 feet through the air from the blast and landing in a rice field. "People with no arms, no legs, their intestines spilling out, brains spilling out of their crushed skulls," he explains. "And near ground zero, there were black, carbonized bodies burnt beyond recognition. People in unimaginable states."

After the bomb detonated over the center of Hiroshima, winds from the explosion reached 1000 mph and temperatures on the ground reached 9000 degrees Fahrenheit.

Senji Yamaguchi, 14, was living in Nagasaki. He survived the blast and spent over a year in a hospital. "The children were crying," he remembers. "Even though their parents were dead, they still cried for their mothers, 'Mama, please give me water!' Then they'd fall over and suddenly they were silent."

The 16-year-old letter carrier, Sumiteru Taniguchi, was on his bicycle in Hiroshima delivering letters when the blast hit. "When the hysteria died down," he described, "I realized my skin was dangling off my arm, and the clothes on my back were gone. With all my might I tried to get up, but I couldn't stand much less walk. Someone carried me on his back and laid me down under a tree. All around me, people were dying."

Several weeks after the bombings, Japanese film crews began to arrive from Tokyo capturing footage of the aftermath. American troops arrived shortly after and confiscated all the footage and then put the crews to work under their direction. At this point the crews began using color film stock. The footage was taken back to Washington and locked away for nearly 30 years.

Some of this footage, including photographs, is shown in the final and unquestionably most disturbing and powerful part of the documentary entitled, "The Aftermath."

Black and white photographs and film footage document two cities that no longer existed. The charred remains of babies and children emerge from the debris and devastation.

Makeshift hospitals were set up in the ruins of the two cities and were littered with mangled and scorched bodies of all ages. Doctors roamed about looking for people who might still be breathing.

Amazingly, Okazaki managed to match up two of his survivors with color film footage shot in the aftermath of the bombings.

Senji Yamaguchi is shown in a Nagasaki hospital six months after the bomb. The 14-year-old boy's flesh over half his body melted and is raw and infected. Half of his face has been burned away.

The color footage of patients in this Nagasaki hospital is almost impossible to watch. Yamaguchi recalls, "Both the adults and the children would hear the nurses coming down the hall and as they approached everyone would beg to be killed."

Sumiteru Taniguchi, at one point removes his shirt for the camera to show what his body looks like at present day. It is devastating. We then see him as a 16-year-old boy lying on a hospital bed filmed in color by a US Army film crew. The boy's entire back, from his neck down, has been burned to a bloody pulp. "They ripped the gauze off my back," Taniguchi

describes, "I tried to bear the pain but at that moment I started yelling at them to kill me."

On August 6, 1945, US President Harry Truman issued a self-serving and vindictive statement in which he justified the horrible bombing. He claimed that the Japanese had begun "the war from the air at Pearl Harbor" and they had now "been repaid many-fold." Truman neglected to mention that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were home to hundreds of thousands of civilians. He went on to warn about the US development of atomic weapons, noting ominously that "even more powerful arms are in development."

The warning was clear. American imperialism, under a Democratic president was baring its fangs and threatening the world, especially the Soviet Union whose forces were now on the verge of advancing into Manchuria, with its ability to incinerate entire peoples.

Soon after the bombing surviving residents of Hiroshima and Nagasaki began getting sick with "atomic bomb disease." Those that should have been getting better began displaying strange symptoms, including hair loss, bleeding and purple spots, the film explains. "Tens of thousands got sick, and they were dying left and right."

Radiation disease struck the two cities not nearly as abruptly as the bombs, but with just as much devastation. "Pika don" became the Japanese word for radiation, though people knew little or nothing about it. It began as a dirty word for the bomb, and it actually grew into a stigma for those afflicted. "And the 'pika don' people became the untouchables," explains a survivor.

Survivors suffering the effects of radiation faced a lifetime of sickness and isolation. Many were left to fend for themselves in the months and years following the US bombings, scavenging the ruins of the city for food. "Since 1946, delayed radiation effects have caused 160,000 additional deaths," the film states.

Dr. Shuntaro Hida, who was a 28-year-old military doctor in Hiroshima at the time of the bomb, describes the social effect of radiation sickness, "In Japan, if people find out you're an atomic bomb survivor, nothing good will happen. They face discrimination. They can't get jobs. If they get married, they could have deformed children." Even if children are born healthy, there exists the constant threat that they could get sick at any time.

The Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission, established in 1947 to study 100,000 survivors, found a high incidence of leukemia and other cancers, as well as birth defects, miscarriage and early menopause.

White Light, Black Rain is a stunning and important film. Steven Okazaki is a serious filmmaker with enormous talent and vision and, on many levels, has created a masterful work with this film. As he endeavors to make clear, the threat of nuclear war is by no means a thing of the past. The survivors' comments provoke deep reflection on the spectator's part.

The ideological difficulties of our time, however, inevitably find reflection in the film. It suffers from a certain passivity. Much is left unsaid. Although serious historical research indicates that the bombings were in no way necessary to end the war and that the Truman administration raced to test the weapons on human subjects for the reasons mentioned above, none of this makes its way into the film.

The current political atmosphere in the US, in which right-wing and militarist opinion holds great sway, probably played some role in weakening this aspect of the film. In 1994, a planned exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum of the Enola Gay, along with artifacts from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, provoked a furious campaign by defenders of the bombings and led to its cancellation. After eighty-one members of Congress, along with influential sections of the military, demanded the firing of the museum's director, he was forced to step down.

Okazaki concludes his film by noting that the nuclear weapons in the world today would produce devastation equal to 400,000 Hiroshimas.

Any struggle against world war today and in the future—a conflict which would threaten humanity's existence—must involve a deep historical appreciation of the underlying tendencies, rooted in the nature of imperialism, that impelled the United States to use nuclear weapons against Japan in World War II. These tendencies have not disappeared, but re-emerge today in increasingly explosive form.

White Light, Black Rain: The Destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki can be viewed on HBO On Demand and on DVD.



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