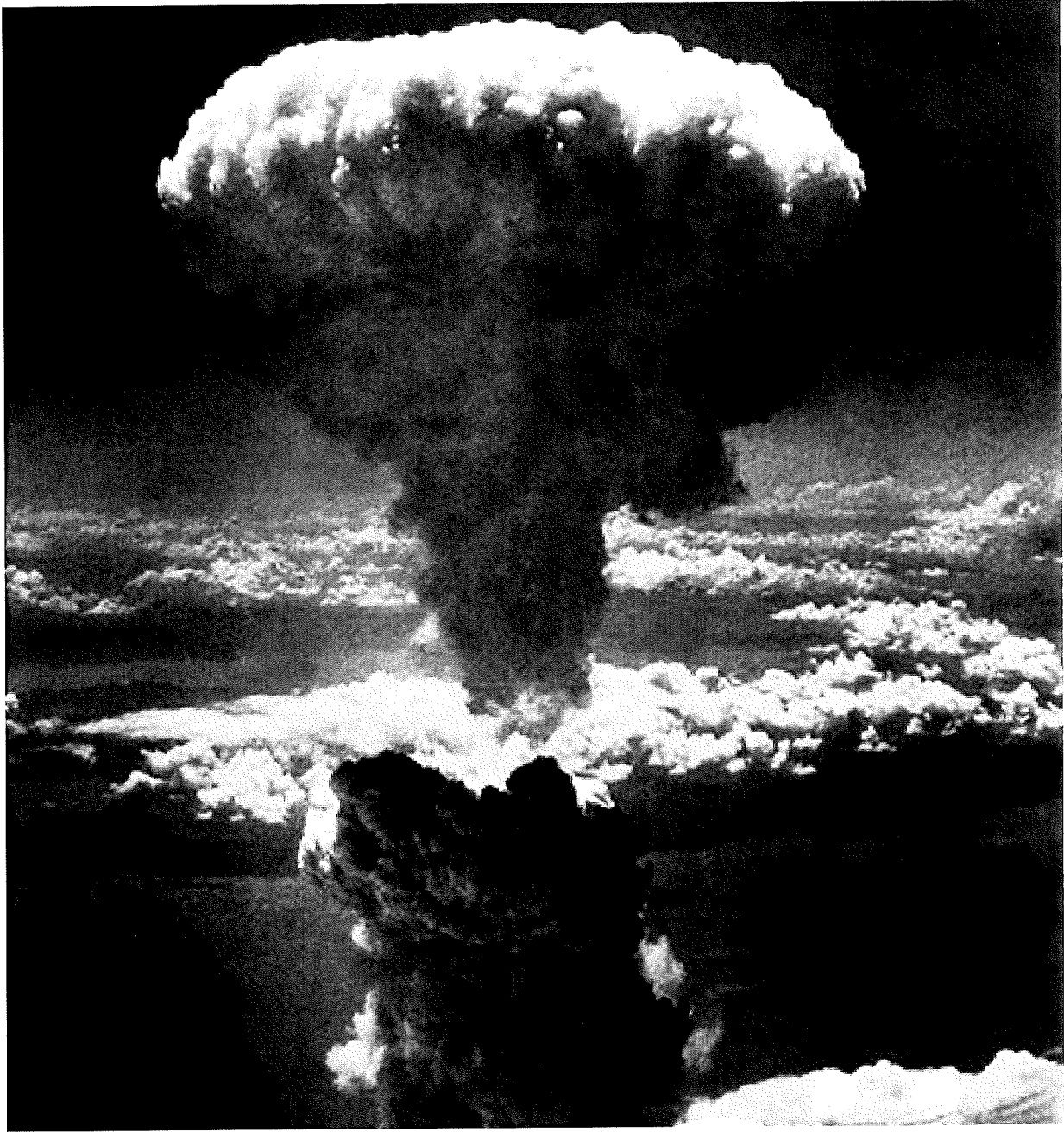


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The Symbolism of the Mushroom Cloud

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Honors 230 B
Hiroshima and Nagasaki
December 13, 2017



Lieutenant Charles Levy, "The Mushroom Cloud over Nagasaki" (1945).

Introduction

On August 6, 1945, at 8:15 a.m. (JST) the crew of the B-29 Superfortress Enola Gay released an atomic bomb nick-named “Little Boy” over the city of Hiroshima, Japan. The bomb fell for just under 45 seconds before detonating over the city at an altitude of approximately 600 meters.¹ The heat of the explosion and the cool atmosphere began to combine, resulting in a giant fireball that slowly rose into the sky. As the Enola Gay flew away to safety, tail gunner George “Bob” Caron watched with his K-20 camera in hand as a “mushroom started coming in view from behind the turret, just the mushroom, the famous mushroom cloud bubbling up.”² Sergeant Caron called pilot Colonel Paul Tibbits over the intercom and asked him to turn the plane just a few degrees, allowing Caron to point his lens out the escape hatch window to capture his now infamous photograph for posterity.

In the beginning, both the Japanese and American perception of this image seemed to align. To Americans, it represented their strength in ending the war. In Japan, top officials shifted blame from their military by crediting America’s technological superiority as the reason for their defeat. However, as time went on and both sides endured the Postwar Occupation, the escalation of the Cold War, and the harsh realities of the Vietnam War, these perceptions diverged.

This divergence leads me to the questions that inform the organization of this essay: How has the symbolic meaning of atomic energy and its manifestation as the mushroom cloud been

¹ Alan Axelrod, *The Real History of World War II: A New Look at the Past* (Sterling Publishing: New York, NY, 2008), pp. 348-350.

² Ross Simpson, “Bob Caron's Interview,” *Voices of the Manhattan Project*, 1985, <<https://www.manhattanprojectvoices.org/oral-histories/bob-carons-interview>> (29 Nov. 2017).

used in different contexts in both Japan and America? What are the specific cultural origins of these uses? Furthermore, what perspectives do the uses of this symbol leave out?

The answer to these questions lies farther back than the dropping of the atomic bombs, and far before the idea of the Manhattan Project first entered the mind of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The first symbol attached to atomic energy originated almost 50 years before the Hiroshima bombing.

Early Hopes

The 20th century opened with the sparkling image of the White City, a future run on energy. In 1900, 50 million visitors traveled to the Paris Exposition to ride the *trottoirs roulants* (moving walkways) and to gawk at the “Palais de l’électricité,” a grand display of electric bulbs.³ Scientists found their corner of the Exposition in the International Congress of Physics, where the brilliant couple Marie and Pierre Curie debuted the findings of their paper, “The New Radioactive Substances and The Rays They Emit,” with glowing vials of radium.⁴ Newspapers began to grasp onto the the buzz of this new metal, introducing the concept of radioactivity into the minds of the populace for the first time since its discovery in 1896.

Meanwhile, a timeline began to weigh on the minds of scientists. The fear of limited coal resources was introduced by economist W.S. Jevons in 18650, and later confirmed by geologists who hypothesized that Britain’s supply would run dry before the mid-twentieth century. In response, scientists began looking for a solution, one that presented itself in the form of an atom. A separate pair of scientific minds, Frederick Soddy and Ernest Rutherford, furthered the Curies’

³ Pauline de Tholozany, “The Expositions Universelles in Nineteenth Century Paris,” Brown University Library Center for Digital Scholarship, 2011, <<https://library.brown.edu/cds/paris/worldfairs.html#de1900>> (29 Nov. 2017).

⁴ Kathleen Krull and Boris Kulikov, *Marie Curie* (Penguin Group: New York, N.Y., 2007), p. 67.

research with their discovery of transmutation, and therefore radioactivity as “inexhaustible power.”⁵ A new type of scientific journalist began to appear, translating these findings to the public, and reporting bright promises of new energy sources and their potential to revolutionize society. Notably, French writer and polymath (or rather pseudo-scientist) Gustave Le Bon is quoted as predicting, “The poor will become rich and there will be no more social problems.”⁶ In these years, there were bright hopes surrounding a scientific future.

The utopian image of the White City did not remain unscathed for long, however. Physicist Spencer R. Weart’s novel *Nuclear Fear* argues that the concept of the scientific doomsday sprung up from the very beginning. Weart points out that Sody, in his first address of atomic power to the public, warned that our planet is “a storehouse stuffed with explosives, inconceivably more powerful than any we know of, and possibly only awaiting a suitable detonator to cause the world to revert to chaos.”⁷ This fear easily permeated into the minds of the populace, and showed up in the writings of journalists and, of course, pseudo-scientists. Le Bon, showing much less optimism than in his earlier writings, began to predict it would not be long until a device could “blow up the whole earth” with a simple push of a button.⁸ Weart points to this period as the point when “ideas about the end of the world first began to separate from their original mythical and religious contexts, joining up instead with science.”⁹

Yet, it was not until the 1960s that the image of the White City had made its complete transformation to one of nuclear holocaust. This shifting image reflects a transition from atomic

⁵ Spencer R. Weart, *Nuclear Fear: A History of Images* (Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 5-16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

hope to atomic fear in the minds of the masses, which was markedly motivated by the first use of atomic energy for destruction on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In order to fully understand this transformation, we must first recognize why the human mind clings to these sorts of images.

The Psychology Behind Symbols

In the discussion of historical symbolism, Ernesto “Che” Guevara, the face of perhaps the most reproduced image of the 20th century, *Guerrillero Heroico*, comes to mind. Tracking the popularization of this image may in turn help to understand the symbolism of the mushroom cloud. Again, it starts with the shot. Press photographer Alberto Korda recalls,

At the foot of a podium decorated in mourning, I had my eye to the viewfinder of my old Leica camera. I was focusing on Fidel and the people around him. Suddenly, through the 90mm lens, Che emerged above me. I was surprised by his gaze. By sheer reflex I shot twice, horizontal and vertical. I didn’t have time to take a third photo, as Che stepped back discreetly into the second row . . . It all happened in half a minute.¹⁰

In the moment, that accidental shot was just one in a film roll of many, later to be filed away for months. Then, in 1967, magazine Paris Marth published the image as a full page attached to an article about Che’s disappearance from Cuba. “Where is Che?” asked the headline. For this first time, this image caught hold of the public eye.

Due to the rejection of international copyright laws in communist Cuba, this image began to spread without credit to Korda. Publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli was the first to reproduce it in the form of a poster, supposedly selling hundreds of thousands primarily throughout Europe.

¹⁰ Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo, “The Story Behind Che’s Iconic Photo,” Smithsonian Institution, 2 November 2016, www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/iconic-photography-che-guevara-alberto-korda-cultural-travel-180960615/ (1 Dec. 2017).

From there, Guevara was immortalized as “Che,” an icon of resistance and of freedom. Notably, the Paris student riots of 1968 used the poster as a political medium against capitalism and American imperialism. Even today, we see this same image of Che pop up in protests around the world.¹¹ It is curious to consider how the face of man who was part of a regime that rounded up and executed gays has appeared in gay rights protests. This transformation of an image into a symbol is not an easy one to track. However, it is important to keep in mind that the process of symbolism is not a conscious one. It is likely the student at the 1968 Paris riots, and especially those who display Che on shirts and as stickers on their laptops today, do not know who this man truly was.

Even more difficult to understand, however, is why and how these specific images are chosen. The origins of symbolism trace back to the origin of human conscience, according to paleoanthropologist Ian Tattersall. Tattersall argues that what sets humans apart from other species is that we are “language-using, symbolically reasoning beings, whose relationship to the rest of the living world is, so far as we know, totally unlike that of any of the millions of other living species with whom we share our planet.”¹² Around 80,000 years ago, Tattersall argues that Homo sapiens’ language abilities were spontaneously “switched on,” and we became using symbols as a way of communicating the world around us. Therefore, he posits, “Language involves forming intangible symbols in the mind, and it allows us to combine those symbols in new ways.”¹³

¹¹ Luis Lopez and Trisha Ziff, directors, *Chevolution* (Red Envelope Entertainment, 2008).

¹² Ian Tattersall, “What Happened in the Origin of Human Consciousness?” *The Anatomical Record*, Vol. 276B, No. 1 (2004), Introduction.

¹³ *Ibid*, The Arrival of Modern Human Cognition.

Thousands of years later, symbols remain a central means of expressing our emotions and thoughts. Swiss psychotherapist Carl Jung introduced the idea that humans share common archetypes, including the apocalypse and other religious imagery, in our “collective consciousness.”¹⁴ Thus, not only do we, as humans, share a common familiarity to certain images, but also share a common understanding of their underlying meanings. Though this may seem unconnected, the concept of a shared consciousness can actually help us understand the symbolism of both Che and the mushroom cloud. Curator Trisha Ziff points out, “*Guerrillero Heroico* is a statuesque image taken from below. It derives from a visual language of mythologized heroes harking back to an era of socialist realism, yet it also references a classical Christ-like demeanor.”¹⁵ Similarly, as I have mentioned before, Weart argues that the image of a nuclear holocaust originates from “mythological and religious contexts.” Therefore, it is no wonder that we find the icon of Che universally appealing, and the symbol of the mushroom cloud universally terrific.¹⁶

What we can learn from *Guerrillero Heroico*, and apply to the symbolism of the mushroom cloud, is how collective consciousness and historical context work together in the popularization of an symbol. Che’s portrait arrived in a time of social change around the world, and it represented the perfect mixture of heroism and rebellion these efforts needed. It caught hold due to both its aesthetic appeal and the context of the world at the time. The danger with this iconography, however, is that it places a simplified meaning to the nuanced nature of

¹⁴ Darrel Lawlor, “Carl Gustav Jung 1875-1961,” University of Regina, <uregina.ca/~lawlorda/jung/jung.htm> (1 Dec. 2017), Introduction.

¹⁵ Trisha Ziff, “Kordas Che Moves Out into the World,” California Museum of Photography, <cmp.ucr.edu/exhibitions/che/essay_001.htm> (2 Dec. 2017), Introduction.

¹⁶ Here I used the word terrific to mean both frightening and awe-inspiring, unlike its modern usage.

Ernesto Guevara and the Cuban Revolution. Although many of those who use *Guerrillero Heroico* have little understanding of its origins, they unintentionally disrespect those who were harmed in the process of the regime's genocide of its own people, of which the estimated death toll ran from 35,000 to 141,000, according to historian R.J. Rummel.¹⁷

The symbolism of the mushroom cloud appeared in a similar fashion, although more difficult to track, and also carried repercussions. In the rest of my essay, I will attempt to explain how the mushroom cloud has been used in different contexts in both Japan and America, and how this symbolism leaves out important perspectives.

Rise of Resentment in Japan

In Japan, the atomic bombings gave rise to a sense of "victim consciousness," which made it easier to ignore their own responsibility in the Pacific War, and easier to forget how they themselves stood as the victimizers to many Chinese and Koreans. Surprisingly, this mindset not only originated within the postwar occupation of Japan, but also was promoted by the nature of the Supreme Command for the Allied Powers' re-education efforts.

Historian James J. Orr explains that the Allied Powers (mis)interpretation of the war as "a conspiracy of militarists and radical nationalists who were responsible for Japanese aggression, encouraged the attitude that Japanese, both as individuals and as a people, were somehow less accountable for their own wartime actions."¹⁸ This interpretation manifested in the Occupation's goals, which included blaming the Japanese military for Japanese wartime aggression by means

¹⁷ Glenn Garvin, "Red ink: The high human cost of the Cuban revolution," *Miami Herald*, 1 December 2016, <www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article118282148.html> (2 Dec. 2017), Deaths.

¹⁸ James J. Orr, *The Victim as Hero: Ideologies of Peace and National Identity in Postwar Japan* (University of Hawai'i Press: Honolulu, HI, 2001), pp. 14-23.

of driving “a wedge between the Emperor and the people and the one hand, and the military clique on the other,” as revealed by a report by the Psychological Warfare Branch of the U.S. Army.¹⁹ The ultimate goal of using the military as a sort of moral scapegoat and conducting the subsequent war trials was to weaken its influence on the populace, promoting future pacifism. In this sense, the Japanese stood as victims of indoctrination by a military clique, instead of victims of the atomic bombs dropped by the Allies. Moreover, Japanese could blame their own military leaders for continuing the war to the point at which the U.S. had no other choice but to end the war by such means.

Occupation censorship largely concealed the impact of the atomic bombs and radiation, especially when associated with the suffering of the *hibakusha*. Nonetheless, this did not stop some translations of literature relating to the bomb from slipping through the cracks, notably John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* in 1949 and P.M.S Blackett’s *Fear, War, and the Bomb* in 1951. Then, when Japan regained independence in 1952, a wave of atomic literature began to appear. Japanese historian Asada Sadao explains how Revisionism and its thesis of “atomic diplomacy” began to take hold especially among intellectuals after the release Blackett’s novel, which it is important to note, “did not even pretend to be a work of history.”²⁰ Despite this fact, many school textbooks began to characterize the atomic bombs as a diplomatic weapon used to impress the Soviet Union. Therefore, the Japanese became not only a victim of their own military leaders’ aggression but also a victim caught in the crossfire of the Cold War, further shifting blame from themselves.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 17.

²⁰ Sadao Asada, “The Mushroom Cloud and National Psyches: Japanese and American Perceptions of the A-Bomb Decision, 1945-1995,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* (1995), p. 110.

During the Cold War era we also see the significance of the atom bomb widen from its destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to represent a technological shift from conventional weapons to nuclear power. The Bikini Incident of 1954, in which Japanese fishermen aboard the *Lucky Dragon 5* were exposed to radiation during the American “Bravo” hydrogen bomb test, stands prominent in this discussion. Orr explains how the incident “attracted nationwide attention to Japan’s continuing vulnerability to nuclear danger,” and inspired a nationwide ban-the-bomb movement from its Tokyo housewife origins.²¹ This helped to further the atomic victimhood narrative to one of heroism. Being “the only country in the world to have suffered an atomic bombing,” as repeated by Cabinet ministers, gave them the unique backing to their efforts of nuclear disarmament, using their own *hibakusha* as the face of suffering.

The anxiety caused by the Bikini Incident also helped inspire one of the most famous pop icons of Japan: Godzilla (*Gojira* in Japanese). The original 1954 film opens with a crew aboard a Japanese freighter, the *Glory No. 5*, experiencing a bright flash, soon to be engulfed in flames – a scene bearing an uncanny resemblance to the fate of the *Lucky Dragon 5*. The hydrogen bomb is allegorized in this film by the monster Godzilla, a sea creature that “raids the island, crushing houses, killing livestock, and terrifying the populace.”²² The film stood as a form of anti-nuclear activism itself. Director Hondo Ishirō recalls passing through Hiroshima after the bombing, and how he used this experience as the basis for his film. Japanologist William Tsutsui explains, “To Honda, Godzilla was a means of ‘making radiation visible,’ of giving tangible form to unspoken fears of the Bomb, nuclear testing, and environmental degradation.”²³ The creators’ activism

²¹ Orr, *The Victim as Hero*, p. 37.

²² William M. Tsutsui, *Godzilla on My Mind: Fifty Years of the King of Monsters* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2004), p. 27.

²³ *Ibid*, pp. 32-33.

shows up in the film with the theme that nuclear power must be avoided, or else it may destroy humanity. Nonetheless, *Gojira* ended up having very little political impact. In a later interview, Honda lamented, “Believe it or not, we naively hoped that the end of Godzilla was going to coincide with the end of nuclear testing.”²⁴ Although Honda’s film did little to impact the use of nuclear power, it reflected the prevalence of victim consciousness among Japanese and embodied the suffering of their *hibakusha*.

Friction with the U.S. began to escalate along with the escalation of the Vietnam War. From the beginning, the Satō cabinet supported the war in hopes of future trade and the regaining of Okinawa after the end of the conflict. Yet, historian Thomas R.H. Haven marks the beginning of February 1965 when the U.S. began bombing North Vietnam as a time when public commotion began to rise. Rallies against the war begin to pop up in Tokyo, and Nobel prize-winning physicists Yukawa Hideki and Tomonaga Shin’ichirō called on world leaders to end the war. Havens explains, “This was the beginning of a fusillade against the United States from liberals, socialists, neo-nationalists, and uncommitted intellectuals.”²⁵ Reporting on the conflict in Vietnam by Japanese media helped to support this resistance, and to augment the decline in public opinion against the United States. Japanese government officials were surprised that they had not been consulted beforehand – a precedent for the rest of the war – yet the Satō cabinet continued to treat the conflict as what Haven has coined a “fire across the sea,” aiming to calm the public and avoid joining in.²⁶ In response to this “armchair attitude,” the anti-war movement Beheiren was born.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 33.

²⁵ Havens, Thomas R. H., *Fire Across the Sea: The Vietnam War and Japan 1965-1975* (Princeton University Press, 1987), pp 24-53.

²⁶ Ibid, pp. 52-53

Simultaneously, the Vietnam War gave racial interpretations of the A-bomb more backing. Some strong minds combined the bombings of Vietnam and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with the claim that both “stemmed from the same racist attitude of treating Asians as ‘less than human beings.’”²⁷ Along with this sentiment came the “guinea pig theory” supported by many Doshisha students, who depicted the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as experimental units chosen by the U.S. to test their atomic bomb on.

Through these years, we see the mushroom cloud arise as a symbol of victimization of the Japanese people. This symbolism made it easier for the public to ignore their own responsibility in wartime aggression, and easier to avoid addressing the Asian peoples they themselves victimized. However this is not to say that Japan had never addressed its own role as victimizer. On the contrary, we can also identify a number of individuals who have spoken out against victim consciousness. In 1946, film director Itami Mansaku wrote:

Being deceived means that you have been injured at the hands of the unjust, but it is not necessarily written ... that the deceived are in the right. Those who mistakenly think just by saying they were deceived they are thereby relieved of all guilt, and can unconditionally join the just, must reconsider their position.²⁸

Instead, by tracking its symbolic use, we can see how the mushroom cloud has largely been used to support limited narratives. It is safe to say that, on the whole, victim consciousness still prevails over victimizer consciousness in Japan. This should not be much of a surprise either, because it is far easier to see the faults in others than to acknowledge your own. We will see this aspect of human nature reveal itself in the U.S., as well.

The Impact of Cold War and Vietnam War on America

²⁷ Asada, “The Mushroom Cloud and National Psyches,” p. 111.

²⁸ Orr, *The Victim as Hero*, p. 14.

The approval statistics collected after the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki overwhelmingly pointed to a population who justified their use, the PEW Research Center reporting a rate of 85% in 1945.²⁹ Many of the beginning reports reiterated those of journalist William L. Laurence, who was earlier chosen by General Leslie Groves to cover the inner workings of the Manhattan Project. Later accused of being paid by the War Department to sing their praises, Laurence's depictions of atomic power mirrored those of the White City. Weart quotes Laurence as saying during a radio broadcast, "We can air condition the jungles and make the arctic wastes livable ... and we can lick disease."³⁰ In the same manner, nuclear energy could solve all the problems connected to war. This mindset explains why much of the American population, who were preconditioned to have hopes attached to atomic energy, saw the atomic bombs as a solution to the end of the war and to save American lives. This, of course, was perpetuated by Henry L. Stimson's "The Decision to use the Atomic Bomb."

But not all were convinced by the idea of the White City. Weart explains that from the beginning "some fundamentalist Christians began to speak of true apocalypse. Atomic bombs, they announced, proved that the day foretold in biblical revelation was at hand."³¹ Again, we see this contrasting imagery of nuclear holocaust pop up, an archetypal image we perhaps share in our collective consciousness. This image was strengthened by John Hersey's New York Times article "Hiroshima," which stood as the typical American's first exposure to Ground Zero. Although the article did little to sway the nation's approval of the bombings, it did succeed in

²⁹ Stokes, Bruce. "70 Years after Hiroshima, Opinions Have Shifted on Use of Atomic Bomb," Pew Research Center, 4 Aug. 2015, <www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/08/04/70-years-after-hiroshima-opinions-have-shifted-on-use-of-atomic-bomb/> (2 Dec. 2017).

³⁰ Weart, *Nuclear Fear*, p. 105.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 106.

linking atomic power to death and destruction. As more information on the horror of radiation was released, the symbol of the mushroom cloud became more and more connected to the end of times, instead of simply one connected to America's technological strength.

With the opening of the Cold War, this fear of the end of times became a personal one to the American public. National security came to the forefront of Americans' minds when Truman announced a Soviet atomic bomb test in 1949. Americans now began to fear falling victim to a nuclear attack, themselves. Weart explains, "Most people assumed that a bombing would mean shrieking mobs and cities disintegrating into chaos; by 1953 the American press was using the word 'panic' fourteen times more often than in 1948."³² Truman created a Federal Civil Defense Administration to reassure the public, yet congressmen did not vote to back the program with the needed budget. Weart posits that this lack of funding prompted civil defense agencies to spread images of atomic war, as if to further scare the public into supporting such programs. When building an underground bunker system proved too costly for the government to tackle, families began to build their own.³³ Then, on April 2, 1952, the *Operation IVY* movie dominated TV screens around the U.S., and the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima paled before that of the hydrogen bomb. The image of nuclear holocaust had begun to overpower the White City.

During the Vietnam War, this fear translated into activism. From the end of WWII, the younger generation had begun to call into question how the U.S. could have allowed the atrocities of the Holocaust and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to take place. From this period, the Beat generation, a group of creatives who rallied against mainstream American

³² Ibid, p. 129.

³³ "Federal Civil Defense Act of 1950," *Major Acts of Congress*, Encyclopedia.com, <www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/federal-civil-defense-act-1950> (6 Dec. 2017).

culture, was born.³⁴ In a sense, the Beats seemed to lump the Bomb and the Holocaust together to form one great evil of war. In Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," this evil materialized as Moloch, a monster who represented war, conformity, and materialism, and who "destroyed the best minds" of his generation.³⁵ The poem was soon labeled "obscene," and faced censorship. Years later, Beatnik Gregory Corso would release "Bomb," a satire written in the shape of the mushroom cloud, which also received much public condemnation. Soon the roots founded by the Beat generation would expand to a hippie counterculture, with folk and rock standing as their anthem. Meanwhile, a National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE) was formed in the mid-1950s, following in the footsteps of the UK's Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). This is the context in which the anti-war movement emerged. In 1957, images of protest began to print in world newspapers, and became the norm around 1961.³⁶

Considering the ban the bomb movement that took hold in the U.S. during the 1960s, one might expect approval ratings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to plummet during this time. However, this is far from the case. Asada references a nationwide poll by Louis Harris conducted in 1965, which returned 70% agreeing that the U.S. was "right" in using the A-bomb to save American lives, and a mere 17% who "regretted" it.³⁷ From these statistics, we see that the general public's opinion had changed very little from the 1945 polls. In addition, the mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki still stood as a symbol of American strength to many. Although these facts seem to paint a curious contradiction, the explanation behind them is quite simple. The ban

³⁴ Walter L Hixson, "Roots of the Anti-Vietnam War Movement," *The Vietnam Antiwar Movement* (Garland Pub., 2000), Abstract.

³⁵ Allen Ginsberg, *Howl* (Museum of American Poetics Publications, 2006).

³⁶ Weart, *Nuclear Fear*, p. 241.

³⁷ Asada, "The Mushroom Cloud and National Psyche," p. 101.

the bomb movement in the U.S. stood not as a conscious reconsideration of the justification of the atomic bombs, but as a manifestation of the increasing fear that one day they could be the victims underneath the mushroom cloud. Although Beatniks and historical revisionists may have raised the morality question, the majority of the U.S. never seemed to reconsider whether the atomic bomb was justified. Asada explains, “In a world of nuclear deterrence policies, the symbolic meanings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki for humankind seemed to have become overpowered by the rhetoric of megaton overkill.”³⁸

Looking Towards the Future

This essay has examined how the symbolism of the mushroom cloud has been used in different contexts in both Japan and the U.S., focusing on the 20 years that followed the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In Japan, the acceptance of Revisionism and the rise of victim consciousness left out not only the nation’s responsibility in prolonging the Pacific War, but also the narratives of the Chinese and Koreans who they victimized. In the United States, Cold War anxieties resulted in activism against nuclear power, yet little consideration was given to the country they had used this power against. During these years, both nations have used this symbol largely in ways that put themselves in the best light, and that made it easier to ignore their past mistakes.

Finally, it is worth examining what the mushroom cloud means in a modern context and what new significance it might acquire in the future. A 2015 poll conducted by the PEW Research Center shows a decline in support of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in both Japan and the U.S.. In Japan, 14% agree the bomb was justified, compared to 29% in 1945. In

³⁸ Ibid, p. 99.

the U.S., 57% approve the use of the atomic bombs against Japan, compared to the 85% in 1945.

³⁹ These statistics show a continued downward trend in Japan and growing minority of those who disapprove in the U.S., yet a majority who still cling to orthodoxy. The treatment of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in school textbooks may provide an answer to these numbers. Modern Japanese textbooks often leave out discussion of the atomic bombs – even going so far as to leave out which country dropped them. Some U.S. textbooks have begun to ask the student to question the morality, however most reiterate orthodoxy.⁴⁰ As time passes and the memories of WWII fade, it is possible that Japan may slowly forget, while the U.S. may continue to accept the viewpoint of Stimson.

Yet, recent events have shown that the mushroom cloud remains a sore subject for both countries. When in December 1994, the U.S. postal service made plans for a mushroom cloud stamp labeled “Atomic bombs hastern war’s end, August 1945,” the Japanese public, mass media, and leaders denounced it as insensitive.⁴¹ Similarly, a 50th anniversary Enola Gay exhibition at the Smithsonian, which discussed the ongoing debate surrounding the justification of the bombings, promoted such “fiery controversy” that they dropped any discussion of the bombings all together.⁴² These two events provide abundant evidence that the world, especially Japan and the U.S., has failed to agree on a public memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In order for the U.S. and Japan to finally abandon their limited perspectives and self-serving symbols, they must each make a conscious effort to address their respective

³⁹ Stokes, “70 Years after Hiroshima.”

⁴⁰ Asada, “The Mushroom Cloud and National Psyches,” pp. 113-115.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 100.

⁴² “Controversy over the Enola Gay Exhibition,” Atomic Heritage Foundation, 17 Oct. 2016, <<https://www.atomicheritage.org/history/controversy-over-enola-gay-exhibition>> (11 Dec. 2017).

responsibility for the Pacific War, and work cooperatively to create a narrative that tells the full story. Above all, they must not forget. For the significance of the atomic bombs may have been misused in the past, but its lessons can be passed on for years to come.

Bibliographic Essay

The selection of my essay topic, “The Symbolism of the Mushroom Cloud,” was a long and winding path. It begins several years ago, in my AP U.S. History class, when I first became interested in historical symbolism. I was sitting in a cafe, reading about the bloody Cuban Revolution from my textbook, when I spotted the image *Guerrillero Heroico* at the bottom of the page, and thought it had an oddly familiar quality to it. As I looked up from my textbook and around the cafe, I noticed that the college-aged student sitting at the table across from me had the same image plastered across her laptop in the form of a sticker. I instantly took to Google and looked up Che Guevara, wondering what sort of connection this young woman could have to the Cuban Revolution. From my search, I realized why this image seemed so oddly familiar to me. I scrolled through images of modern protests, in which the protesters toted signs displaying recreations of *Guerrillero Heroico*. The next day, I brought up the topic to my history teacher, and he recommended the documentary *Chevolution*, which I have referenced in my essay, to help me understand how such an image can become a symbol with meaning detached from its true origin. From that time on, I remained curious about the origins of the symbols that surround me.

When completing one of the assigned readings for my Hiroshima and Nagasaki seminar, I was reminded of a Allen Ginsberg poem, “Nagasaki Days,” that I had read a few years back. This got me thinking about what kind of influence the Beat Generation might’ve had on the public perception of the atomic bombs. A meeting with history professor William Rorabaugh did much to inform me of the other influences in the popularization of Revisionism during the Vietnam era, including SANE and the CND. He also brought to my attention that the Beats used the events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and also the Holocaust, as symbols of the evils of war in their writings. As I looked further into protests against atomic power, especially those in America, I came to the realization that they were not reconsidering the events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but marching for their own safety against such power. I realized that they were using the mushroom cloud as a symbol for their own agendas, and not as a conscious protest against the events the symbol originated from. I instantly drew parallels between the mushroom cloud and *Guerrillero Heroico*. This is why I use the framework of those who have analyzed Che’s portrait, notably Trisha Ziff, to analyze the mushroom cloud throughout my essay.

The source that stood central in my analysis of the symbolism of the mushroom cloud was Spencer R. Weart’s *Nuclear Fear: A History of Images*. Being one of the first novels to address the images attached to atomic power and their origins, it was surprisingly detailed and thorough. As a physicist, Weart provided an interesting perspective on how symbolic representation of atomic energy has arisen throughout history. Weart’s work aided my research in the “Early Hopes” section of my paper, and also helped in discussing how the image of the White City transformed to one of nuclear holocaust, especially within the context of the United States. However, this novel mentioned public perception in Japan very little. To fill in these gaps, I turned to James J. Orr’s *The Victim as Hero* to research the rise of victim consciousness, and then turned to Thomas R. H. Haven’s *Fire Across the Sea* to research how the victim narrative transformed into one of heroism during the Vietnam War. Sadao Asada’s “The Mushroom Cloud and National Psyches” helped bridge the gap between these novels, and helped me analyze how the U.S. and Japan impacted each other’s perceptions, either directly or

indirectly. These four main sources, along with the Che framework, largely informed the content and conclusions of my essay.

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