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(Re)Imagining Japan: Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Victimhood Nationalism

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GIORGIO SHANI, AUG 9 2025

The official commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima passed without incident. Senior politicians in black suits and ties delivered suitably somber speeches in front of similarly conservatively dressed visiting dignitaries. While the Mayor of Hiroshima Matsui Kazumi chided the “international community” for a “flagrant disregard” of the “tragedies of history” noting that the former Cold War superpowers still possess 90% of all nuclear weapons, the Prime Minister of Japan, Ishiba Shigeru, stuck to the time-honored script of mourning the indiscriminate loss of life that August morning while refusing to blame the perpetrator. Refusing to blame the US for unleashing genocidal violence which killed 200,000 people from a B-29 against a civilian population in turn has allowed successive Japanese Prime Ministers from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to evade their nation’s responsibility for its own colonial and wartime atrocities in the 15-year war it waged against its neighbours. Instead, blame has been displaced from the perpetrators onto “humanity” as a whole.

Hiroshima is a lesson for us all: its effects “naturalized”, and the US absolved of its “war crimes.” In Nagasaki, the epicentre of the bomb fell on Urakami Cathedral, the largest Catholic cathedral in Asia. Consequently, religious interpretations drawing on Nagasaki’s history of martyrdom and sacrifice came to resonate with official narratives of victimhood. Nagasaki became a sacrificial lamb to atone for the original sin of the nuclear age.

Unlike in Germany where defeat led to a partial de-Nazification yet rearmament and division during the Cold War, liberal democracy did not bring about remilitarization or the abolition of the imperial system but a weaponization of peace in the service of nationalism. Since Japan was the only nation to have suffered a nuclear holocaust and renounced the use of force under Article 9 of its Constitution, it would forever be a model victim. Japan became a textbook case of “victimhood nationalism” and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park (*Hiroshima Heiwa Kinen Koen*) from where the remembrance ceremony took place, and its counterpart in Nagasaki (*Nagasaki Heiwa Koen*), *lieux de mémoire* around which Japan could be re-imagined. *Lieux* in this case denotes, following Pierre Nora, material and non-materials sites which have become the “symbolic heritage” of a community: in this case, the “imagined community” of Japan.

However, these *lieux* are also contested, and reclaimed, by the victims of the atomic bomb. The deserved award of the Nobel Prize in 2024 for *Nihon Hidankyo*, an organization representing the survivors (*Hibakusha*) of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, unwittingly plays into this sense of victimhood nationalism yet contests it at the same time. Founded in 1956, *Nihon Hidankyo* has consistently demanded compensation from the Japanese state which they consider to be culpable for “the damage caused by the atomic bombs” and have campaigned for the abolition of nuclear weapons worldwide. Their mobilization has led to legislation such as the “A-Bomb Sufferers’ Medical Care Law” in 1957 and the December 1994, the “Law Concerning Relief to Atomic Bomb Survivors” (A-Bomb Survivors Relief Law).

Yet, the provisions of these acts were not initially extended to non-Japanese subjects of the Japanese Empire who also were victims of the atomic bombs. There were approximately 140,000 Koreans living in Hiroshima at the time the atomic bomb was dropped. Many were working as forced laborers near the epicentre. Consequently, the mortality rate was relatively high. Koreans accounted collectively for 20% of the victims of the atomic bomb. After the war, most of Japan’s colonial minorities were repatriated as Japan was re-imagined as a “homogenous nation” *tan’itsu*

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minzoku); the Emperor was stripped of his divine authority and his divinity conferred on the *ethnos*, an ethnically defined nation.

Embracing defeat, in John Dower's words, behind the US security umbrella did bring real benefits to the Japanese people in terms of rapid economic growth—particularly during the years of the 'Bubble economy' in the 1980s—which until recently has taken the form of peace, secure employment, access to education, and social and affordable medical insurance. Even a 30-year decline and the triple disasters of March 11, 2011 (3.11) have failed to dent the social fabric upon which Japanese national identity draws sustenance, one based on *Kizuna*, ties which have assumed the form of ethnic bonds. However, for many members of the "lost" post-Bubble generation, these bonds are unravelling, not because of economic decline, inflation or the piecemeal neo-liberalization of the economy, but because of a fear of migration and overtourism. T

his may explain the unanticipated success of the *Sanseitō* party in the recent Upper House elections with their "Japan First" narrative which mirrors that of Trump and much of the global populist right. *Sanseitō* have drawn support from the *netto uyoku* (Japan's online far right): a younger, alienated, post-COVID generation who have grown up in isolation online and been socialised into an ecosystem of conspiracy theories blaming foreigners, who make up 3% of Japan's declining population, for Japan's woes.

In part, the *Sanseitō* platform is not so very different from parties such as *Nihon Ishin no Kai* (Japan Innovation Party) and the more nationalist wing of the LDP which was represented by the late Japanese PM, Abe Shinzo. Abe bridged the divide between the pre-war and post-war periods, represented by his grandfather, the former PM Nobusuke Kishi, through a conservative nationalism centred on revising Article 9 and making Japan a "normal" and "beautiful" country again. Initiatives such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) were designed not only to bind Japan closer to the US in order to counter the threat of a rising PR China but also to assert Japan's status as a regional power, capable of fulfilling its responsibilities to the US-led "international community," within the constraints imposed by Article 9 (which has been eroded but still not yet been formally revised).

In conclusion, memories of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki remain Japan's collective trauma permitting the Japanese nation to be imagined as a homogenous ethnic-based nation, a *tan'itsu minzoku*, now under siege from the foreigners it badly needs for economic growth and recovery. By refusing to name the US as the perpetrator yet affirming Japan's status as victim of the world's only nuclear holocaust, post-war LDP governments absolved the US of its responsibility for the nuclear Armageddon it inflicted on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and pre-war elites of their responsibility for the atrocities committed under wartime and colonial rule: entwined atrocities. However, these memories are contested by groups such as *Nihon Hidankyo* which, while reproducing a narrative of "victimhood nationalism," affirm that the real victims of the atomic bombing were the *hibakusha* of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – including colonial minorities—and not an ethnically homogenous imagined community that the conservative faction of the LDP and groups such as *Sanseitō* claim to represent.

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