
Title	The “Black Rain”: A re-assessment on the dropping of “Little Boy” and “Fat Man” on Japan
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Source	<i>HSSE Online</i> , 8(1), 1-10
Published by	Humanities and Social Studies Education (HSSE) Academic Group, National Institute of Education, Singapore

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The *Black Rain* – A Re-assessment on the Dropping of “Little Boy” and “Fat Man” on Japan

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In 1965, Masuji Ibuse, a native son of Hiroshima, published his *Black Rain (Kuroi Ame)*.¹ The novel is a masterful reconstruction of death from radiation sickness based on the diary of a Hiroshima survivor plus interviews with some 50 *hibakusha* or victims of the atomic holocaust. Ibuse’s sensitivity to the complex web of emotions in a traditional community torn asunder by this historical event has made *Black Rain* one of the most acclaimed treatments of the Hiroshima story.

This article seeks to demonstrate how ideas about “assessment” should go beyond mere testing of historical knowledge and meeting examination requirements, or of managing teaching strategies and other pedagogical initiatives, to include wider implications of how historical knowledge is reviewed and re-assessed by historians and history educators. It was motivated by a recent discussion I had with two upper secondary history teachers who have been teaching for five to seven years. Both do not teach beyond the dropping of “Little Boy” on Hiroshima and “Fat Man” on Nagasaki to indicate their end of their teaching on the Pacific War in August 1945. When asked why is there no discussion on the aftermath of the dropping of the atomic bombs, one teacher replied that it is not in the syllabus, while another admitted that she has no knowledge of the topic to generate discussion with the pupils.² In short, pupils’ historical

knowledge on the end of the Pacific War literally ended with the dropping of “Little Boy” and “Fat Man”. Consequently, they are not able to judge and evaluate America’s decision to drop the bombs and to appreciate the impact of the decision.

If we are passionate about teaching history, and to impart the craft of the historian to our pupils, we have to give pupils a more holistic understanding (or “Total History”) of the events in history and their relevance to our lives today. We need to allow our pupils to appreciate – and to interpret - the wider implications of development of events in the past and present. This implies that to promote historical understanding and meaningful assessment for learning, we need to anchor decisions on *what* and *how* to assess to the clarity of purpose, that is, the *why*. Pupils would then be able to appreciate concepts of Change and Continuity, Cause and Consequence (or Causation), Similarity and Difference, and Empathy. It is also important to note that, if the teacher has his/her biased interpretation of a historical event, such as the war in the Pacific, it is likely to be reflected in his/her narration of events. The sources selected could also reinforce the teacher’s biased interpretation. We all know that history is one subject that provides opportunities for the teacher to influence the perceptions of pupils towards the historical past, especially controversial, “turning-points” events.

One of the stated learning outcomes related to the end of the War as stated in a Curriculum Planning and Development Division (CPDD) document is to “empathise with people who have lived through trying times under extreme conditions” (CPDD, 2012: 29). The “people” referred to were those living in Singapore or broadly human beings whose lives were devastated by war. We know that history is one of the best subjects in the curriculum to develop empathy in the young. Historical empathy involves the ability to look at people, events and issues in the past as the people in the past would have looked at them. This means that our pupils will be expected to comment on history from the point of view of someone who was living at that period of time under discussion. To understand what happened in the past they must learn to set aside their own ideas and background and picture themselves in the past. The pupils need to think about feelings, motives, attitudes, beliefs and opinions of the people living in a specific place and time in history. To do this, they have to use their imagination. History as narratives deals with basic and powerful emotions familiar even to younger children (Egan, 1979; Levstik and Barton, 2008). Understanding history is more than just equipping pupils with knowledge. We need to make them see the significance of events, to develop insights into the social and moral values that led to the unfolding of events within the particular historical circumstances.

In my opinion, the bomb and its aftermath is one of the best topics to drive home the lessons of history and its relevance to us today. This topic lends itself to cultivate in our pupils the need to show sensitivity to the memory of the victims of the atomic bombs and the feelings of the survivors – just as they do for the Chinese during the Sook Ching operations in Singapore. Today, we read first-hand accounts and see photographs and

video footages of the destruction of cities in Syria, particularly the large-scale devastation of the ancient city of Aleppo, marked by chemical attacks, widespread violence against civilians and targeted bombing of hospitals and schools. As in the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, how do we explain to young Singaporeans the human motivations behind these atrocities in the twenty-first century when they themselves are enjoying the good things in life in this part of the world? How do we get our young to assess objectively such mindless actions of man?

On 15 August 1945, in the unforgettable radio broadcast, the “Son of Heaven”, Emperor Hirohito announced Japan’s capitulation. It was not easy for Hirohito who had to repeat recording three times his unprecedented message. His voice was “sacred” to ordinary Japanese. The Japanese – as the Emperor’s loyal subjects - had supported the country’s long war, beginning with the Manchurian Incident in 1931. At the end of 15 years (1931 to 1945), close to 3 million Japanese were dead and 9 million were people made homeless. Sixty-six major cities had been heavily bombed, culminating with the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In his Surrender Imperial Rescript, Hirohito carefully stated that “the enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bomb, the power of which to do damage is, indeed, incalculable, taking the toll of many innocent lives. Should we continue to fight, it would not only result in an ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation, but also it would lead to the total extinction of human civilization”. Japan’s surrender, in the official imperial rendering, thus became a magnanimous act that saved humanity itself from possible annihilation. Interestingly, on 9 August 1945, the celebrated political

cartoonist David Low published his cartoon in the *Evening Standard* that featured a Western scientist holding a ball nicknamed “Life or Death” and tempting a baby representing “Humanity” crawling on the globe, with the caption “Baby play with nice ball?” (Bryant, 1989: 145). It drives home the stark message that the scientific creations of man could eventually lead to the final extermination of mankind. Today, the “new” Cold War between U.S. and Russia continues with the tension over the deployment of Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force (INF) weapons. And China poses the main challenge to US supremacy with its large inventory of INF weapons, threatening American military installations in South Korea and Japan. Clearly, the nuclear race is still with us.

In retrospect, why did Japan go to war with the most powerful nation in the world when they knew very well that the odds of victory is practically zero? Why did the military men, civilian politicians, diplomats – and even Emperor Hirohito – make a decision that was doomed from the start? Very few, if any, of the textbooks will cover this issue. Most will put forth the reasons for the outbreak of the war in Asia Pacific – such as, the economic crisis in Japan and its demand for oil and other natural resources from countries in Southeast Asia, and the weakness of the League of Nations. This is also an important question to stimulate class discussion. It brings into the picture human frailties, desires, ambitions, honour, motivation and pride. Recent interpretations points to the muddled Japanese leadership that was eager to avoid war but remained confrontational to the West. It was a leadership that was deluded by reckless militarism couched in traditional notions of pride and honor, and tempted by the gambler’s dream of scoring the biggest win against all odds. Eri Hotta (2013) reveals just

how divided Japan’s leaders were, right up to (and, in fact, beyond) their eleventh-hour decision to attack. Hotta’s research exposes the all-too-human Japanese leaders torn by doubt in the months preceding the Pearl Harbour attack. She emphasizes the multitude of choices Japanese leaders opted out of, concluding that Japan was never “forced” into an inevitable war with the West. In the end, Japanese leaders convinced themselves through selective amnesia that they were being “bullied and humiliated” by the West and needed to respond in an appropriately strong manner (2013: 269). Ultimately, Japan’s decision to expand its already costly war in China to include a front on the Pacific was a “huge national gamble” (2013: 19).

In our history textbooks, the end of the Pacific War is usually depicted by the picture of the “mushroom cloud”. Nothing is mentioned of what happened at ground-zero after the bombing. It is also not surprising that, in most cases, the history teacher will end the topic at this point as well. The unspoken message seems to be that to deal with things evil, we need to inflict the ultimate in pain and destruction. The danger here is that pupils wittingly or unwittingly believe this is retribution for all the evils that Japan had wrought on the people in China and Southeast Asia. “They (the Japanese) deserve it.” could become a common verbal response by the pupils if asked of their opinion on the use of the bomb. Japan must pay the price of attacking Pearl Harbour and the sufferings its imperial soldiers inflicted on the peoples in Southeast Asia. Hence, the students are likely to justify their own assessment of the use of the bomb. Moreover, unlike Germany, Japan’s political leadership has been elusive in admitting and apologizing for the war atrocities. But, perhaps unknown to many of us, post-war Japanese did admit that Imperial Japan was indeed responsible

for the years of trauma and mass sufferings in Asia. A *Yomiuri* poll conducted in October 1993 indicated that 61.7% of Japanese in the twenties agreed that Japan was the aggressor. Twelve years later, in October 2005, 68% of Japanese citizens believed that Japan was the aggressor of war.

The debate as to the motivations for the use of atomic bomb still rages on. Former U.S. President Barack Obama's visit to Hiroshima in May 2016 had also rekindled the discussion on the justification for the nuclear bombing of the two Japanese cities. The common consensus is that President Truman saw it as a quick solution to the ending of the war and thus potentially saving the lives of many young American soldiers. The counter-argument is that by 1945 Japan was a nation at the brink of defeat. In a famous essay, the late cultural historian Paul Fussell (1981), declared "Thank God for the Atomic Bomb". His stand is that the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had prevented terrible slaughter of American soldiers that would have been lost in a protracted invasion of the Japanese mainland. Such a perception or belief was baseless because Japan simply did not have the military prowess to fight the Americans on Japanese soil. How could Japan defeat the Americans when the military had to exhort the emperor's loyal subjects to take up bamboo spears to defend the homeland? The military had deceived the people and led the country against a war which they could never win. Investigation of a "Bombing Survey" sanctioned by President Truman, had concluded that, certainly prior to 31 December 1945 and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated. Dwight Eisenhower was reported to have said after the war: "It wasn't necessary to hit them with

that awful thing".

There is also the racist explanation - the intense desire of the superior white Americans to show off their imperial might to the yellow, "little people" of the East. Truman stated bluntly: "When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast" (quoted in Hume, 1995: 18). The simian image depicting the Japanese was given full coverage in Western iconography. Political cartoons and poster propaganda were widely used by the British and Americans (similarly, by the Japanese too) to depict the evil enemy. Such was the racial overtone that prevailed throughout the years of conflict between the Anglo-Americans and the Japanese in Asia. Following the attack on Pearl Harbour, long-standing antipathies of Westerners towards coloured races in general, and East Asians in particular, were focused on the Japanese. In Asia, Japan was castigated for subjugating the native people of Dutch Indonesia, British Hong Kong, Malaya and Burma, America's Philippines, and French Indochina. The string of Japanese military successes destroyed the notions of racial superiority and invincibility of the Western imperialists. The Allied Powers were beaten and humiliated by an Asian power and before the eyes of their colonial subjects. It is interesting to note that there is no mention of the issue of racism in World War Two in the history textbooks used in Singapore's secondary schools. Why is this so? Is it because of the sensitivity generated by the teaching and learning of such a theme within a multi-racial society? Is it because the curriculum planners feel that our pupils are too young to understand and appreciate such "adult" issues? An open discussion of racism and the racial thinking behind the atrocities of the Pacific War (and not forgetting Hitler's extermination of the Jews and the Russians) has its educational values. Such discussions provide opportunities for pupils to explore

and debate on historical controversies and, on a more philosophical level, the question of how men should live.

Finally, there is the “atomic diplomacy” motivation. The bomb was used not to end the war with Japan but an effort to intimidate Stalin and Soviet Union (Alperovitz, 1994; Miscamble, (2017). The possession of the bomb changed the American strategy towards the Soviet Union at the Potsdam Conference (17 July to 2 August 1945) and set in motion the beginning of the Cold War. Truman had told Stalin that the US had a powerful new weapon, though he did not provide details. More than anything else, the atomic bomb had become a symbol of American prowess and power. After Hiroshima, Stalin realized the strategic importance of the bomb and demanded that Soviet scientists worked doubly hard to give him the atomic bomb. In the morning of 29 August 1949, the Soviet Union detonated its atomic bomb in northeastern Kazakhstan. The Cold War was launched.

While we narrate to our pupils how the Japanese Imperial Forces inflicted sufferings on the Chinese in Singapore, should we not also tell them the aftermath of the bomb on the Japanese, bearing in mind that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were largely populated with civilians? What happened at ground-zero immediately after the detonation? Thousands of people were instantly carbonized in a blast that was thousands of times hotter than the sun's surface; further from the epicenter, birds ignited in mid-flight, eyeballs popped and internal organs were sucked from bodies of victims. At an instance, 70% of Hiroshima was charred. Based on the first-hand accounts, including that of Hachiyo Michihiko, a doctor who survived the Hiroshima bomb and recorded what he saw and heard in his *Hiroshima Diary*, John Dower (2012) describes the image of the nuclear hell:

Eerie silence. People walking in lines with their hands outstretched and skin peeling off – like automatons, dream-walkers, scarecrows, a line of ants. Corpses frozen by death while in the full action of flight. A dead man on a bicycle. A burned and blinded horse. Youngsters huddles together awaiting death. Mothers with dead children. Infants with dying mothers. Corpses without faces. Water everywhere – in firefighting cisterns, swimming pools, the rivers that fed the city – clogged with dead bodies. Fires like the inferno of hell. A man holding his eyeball in his hand. Survivors in crowded ruined buildings, lying in vomit, urine and feces. Everywhere flies and maggots (p. 165).

This is the familiar iconography of the immediate aftermath of the atomic bombing provided by eyewitness accounts. We should also not dismiss the total exhaustion and despair of the Japanese people as they came face to face with the victors on their own homeland. Japan, as a nation, suffered a state of total psychic collapse, which was so deep and widespread that it became termed as the “*kyodatsu* condition” (Dower, 1999). The Japanese were physically and emotionally exhausted. There was widespread alcoholism, drug addiction, suicides, violence and starvation. There are plenty of visual and written primary sources for the teacher to use to reinforce the discussion on “What happened to Hiroshima after the nuclear explosion?” It would be a one-sided historical narrative if we do not provide our pupils with a sense of what happened to the Japanese people when “Little Boy” and “Fat Man” exploded.

Then, we have the plight of the *hibakusha*, the survivors of the bomb. The US Occupation authorities had repudiated and censored writings, photographs and pictorial depictions of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. All

early journalistic accounts about the horrible consequences of radiation were also censored. The *hibakusha* were marginalized and outcast by the Japanese society. Again, in John Dower's words (2012: 147-148): "Some were disfigured. Some were consigned to slow death. Some, in utero on those fateful midsummer days, were mentally retarded... And all initially were presumed to carry the curse of the bombs in their blood". Journalist Rodney Barker (1985) in his *Hiroshima Maidens*, documented the story of a group of 25 young, grotesquely disfigured Japanese women who were brought to America for reconstructive surgery. Reading it, one can empathize the fear and deep-seated pain etched in the women and, at the same time, their courage and resilience remind us of human values which may yet triumph in the face of adversity and misfortune. The price to pay for being "the aggressor" was indeed heavy.

Paradoxically, the dropping of the bombs led to the rise of Japan's post-war advancement in science and technology. The bomb thus became *Janus* – simultaneously a symbol of terror of nuclear war and the promise of science. The horror inflicted by the bomb brought home one crucial lesson for the Japanese – the defeat of Japan was due to the country's weakness and deficiency in science and technology. Defeated Japan recognized that the only way to rebuild the country is through the promotion of science and technology. An article in the *Asahi Shimbun* in August 1945 declared with the headline, "Toward a Country Built on Science". It stated that Japan "lost to the enemy's science". Henceforth, the drive to promote and advance science and technology in Japan was relentless. With the impending communist victory in China in 1949, the US foreign policy now focused on the strategic balance of Asia. Japan now became a potential ally and became a recipient of

America's technological generosity (Morris-Suzuki, 1994: 167). Transfer of knowledge and skills in manufacturing technologies, management, training and quality control flowed into the country. In no time, Japan was exporting its "Made in Japan" products, known for its quality and exemplified by household names such as Sony and Toyota. In the words of Sony's Akio Morita (1987: 78), "We were bringing out some products that had never been marketed before – never made before, actually, such as transistorized radio and solid-state personal television sets – and were beginning to get a reputation as a pioneer". By the 1980s, Japan had risen from the ashes of nuclear destruction to become an economic superpower.³ Along with the mother goose, younger geese learned from Japan's economic transformation in a "flying geese" formation, with mother goose Japan at the front of the flying pack.⁴ The "economic miracle" experienced by Singapore in the 1970s and 1980s owed much to the assistance provided by post-war Japan. It is a testimony to human resilience that war-ravaged Japan was able to pick itself up and transform to become a world economic and technological power by the 1980s. This lesson of History should be told to our young generation.

For independent Singapore, despite the war-time atrocities committed by the Japanese Imperial Army in Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew had deep admiration for the resilience of the Japanese as illustrated by Ibuse's *Black Rain* and the way they created their industrialized society through creative adaptation of Western technology.⁵ Citing the cohesiveness and creativity of the Japanese society to illustrate his thinking, Lee commented in 1971:

The non-economic factors, the human factors of the Japanese society - that have made the Japanese economy what it now is. That will not change. The cohesiveness,

the industry, the application, the willingness to take over what somebody has discovered and developed and improve upon it - is part of the Japanese make-up. The Japanese will find some way around these difficulties. It is a closely-knit society in which differences in income and status are made tolerable by an embracing and equalising patriotism and national pride (Lee, 1971).

After World War II, Singapore's economic planners consciously studied the Japanese experience in economic transformation, beginning with labour-intensive industries and using income from exports in this sector to purchase new technology and upgrading the training of its manpower. Several industrial training centers, especially those supported by Japan (and Germany), were also built during the 1970s.

This article has provided the history teacher with a bigger picture of the dropping of "Little Boy" and "Fat Man" and their scathing aftermath on the Japanese people. In August 1945, the world witnessed a destruction of mankind beyond comprehension. Japan was (and hopefully, is) the only nation in the world to experience the horrendous effects of nuclear bombs.⁶ More than 70 years later, nations are clamouring to possess atomic power and threatening each other with its usage. As historian Andrew Rotters (2008) argues, "Little Boy" and "Fat Man" were the world's offspring, in both a technological and moral sense. He concludes his book by stating emphatically (2008: 303): "One cannot kill as many civilians at once with a "conventional" bomb or a car bomb as with a nuclear bomb. But, if humankind has, since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, stepped back across the nuclear threshold, it has stridden grimly forward in its willingness to target the innocent". The race to create and deploy the atom bomb was international, and the

consequences of that nuclear race are carried by the whole world to this day. It is time for us, particularly the younger generation, to know and to remember the "black rain" that once shrouded Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Can any lessons at all be learned from the defeat of Japan? How should we preserve humanity? By being more compassionate and understanding for all races or by producing mass weapons of destruction to destroy "unwanted" races or nations? Such are the lessons and impact of the "Black Rain". For the teacher, it is important to move beyond the conventional notion of "assessment" and think about how historians review, revise and re-appraise historical knowledge. For the students, a wider historical narrative can help them to assess objectively their perceptions of events that shaped world history.

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¹ In 1989, the novel was made into a movie of the same name by director Shohei Imamura. Black rain generally refers to two atmospheric events: a nuclear fallout and rain polluted with dark particulates such as rain dust.

² In my view, to enjoy teaching History and for the students to see the “big picture”, History teachers should “teach beyond the textbook”. It is often argued by the teachers that the students are already finding it heavy going with the textbook. Another common argument is that the extra information is not examinable. Hence, for some teachers, teaching history is all about the textbook - what I called “Textbook History”. No wonder many pupils find learning History uninspiring and boring.

³ It is useful to inform our pupils that of primary importance to the economic survival of post-war Singapore was the role of Japan. In the early 1960s, our leaders courted Japan to help Singapore achieve an economic “take-off” but the plan was thwarted by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce demands for compensation for the massacre of Chinese committed during the war. A skilful manipulation of events and sentiments by the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew ensured that not only the Chinese community led by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce pacified, but that Singapore was able to continue to enjoy Japanese investment into the country.

⁴ The phrase "flying geese pattern of development" was coined originally by Kaname Akamatsu in 1930s articles in Japanese. The late Saburo Okita (1914-1993), well-known Japanese economist and a foreign minister in the 1980s, greatly contributed to introducing the FG pattern of development to the wider audiences including the political and business world. Thus, the regional transmission of FG industrialization, driven by the catching-up process through diversification/rationalization of industries, has become famous as an engine of Asian economic growth.

⁵ The resilience of the Japanese was demonstrated to the world after the disaster of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami of 11 March 2011.

⁶ President Truman did explore the thought of using the atomic bomb to end the Korean War after the US Forces suffered heavy defeats (especially in the Battle of Chosin Reservoir) in the hands of the Red Army as attempted to occupy North Korea right up to the Yalu River bordering China in November 1950.