

Hiroshima: The atomic hecatomb

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Letter from comrade Sadako Kuriara (Member of the Local Council of the Japanese Anarchist Federation)

The horrific explosion of the atom bomb dropped over Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 at 08.30 a.m., created a ferocious hecatomb, a terrifying massacre perpetrated by the very people who claim to stand for the world's number one civilisation.

A book by the name of Hiroshima has been written about the immeasurable distress of the populace by the America John Hersey and articles by Japanese have been published on the ordeals they have been through.

I am writing here at the request of some French comrades, relying solely on memory. I cannot speak of this subject without heartbreak. But I need to let all the comrades in France know that in these tragic circumstances, the people conducted itself in an anarchist manner, in accordance with its own initiative and that when surrounded by boundless devastation. My aim is to reinforce your beliefs through contact with my own in the realisation of our ideal.

In Hiroshima, those residents who had managed to find accommodation in the province in order to escape the cramped conditions in the city were already gone, leaving the remainder of the population to wait in fear, exposed to possible air attack at any moment. In the meantime we told ourselves that, today having gone smoothly, tomorrow would be much the same; and we headed for our workplaces with that optimism in mind.

That morning, I breakfasted at the table, the weather being splendid.

In town, precautions had been put in place against the air raids that we sensed were imminent and here and there overly dense housing clusters were being torn down. Soldiers, students and some peasants had been commandeered and mobilised for this task. A feeling of oppression and persecution hovered over them, whilst at the same time they could all see that there was a chance of an end to the war.

The place where the bomb fell was the city centre, near the prefecture, the blocks adjacent to which were in the process of being demolished. The few thousand men at work there were the first victims.

The second column of the Western Front army was gathered on the so-called "parade ground" near the seat of the explosion, waiting for the order to return to barracks. It was wiped out before it could ever set off for the front; after that, all I could find in the area was a heap of rusted ironmongery.

It was morning break time in the schools. Afterwards, in the playgrounds, all that could be found was a general sprawl of poor tiny corpses slumped across one another, pretty much like fried fish on a plate. Parents tried to find their little darlings, now burnt to cinders. Such a scene of tragedy!

All along the roads, there was nothing but dead bodies sprawled on the ground, felled in their hopeless efforts to escape and trapped by the smoke and the huge inferno.

On every side, heaps of corpses bobbed on the seven canals crossing the city, having been blasted there and looking like ghastly barrels on the tranquil waters.

The most poignant account was what was witnessed by those who came upon a family member pinned, moaning, beneath the debris of their homes; there was no way of freeing the bodies and meanwhile the firestorm was gradually closing in on them. Alas! screams for help for their dearly beloved ones rang out, as the beams and blocks of masonry bit into the flesh of their limbs.

And then came the immense fire, devouring everything.

No one could afford any help. The only option was to die there alongside one's loved ones, in the flames, despite the victims' screams of: "Run for it! I'm going to die right here. You run for it!"

But they could not make a run for it and abandon their loved ones. Some made a number of attempts at running, stilling their consciences, but all in vain; they soon returned to the scene and hurled themselves into the inferno, sharing the fate of the beloved victims. Others eventually talked themselves into it and fled, carrying away the ghastly shame that would gnaw at and torment them for the rest of their days.

And thus, in a flash, the city of Hiroshima was reduced to rubble. In a short time, all roads leading out of the city were packed with lines of refugees running around, disoriented. All bearing the wounds of atrocious burns caused by the atomic radiation. Every last one of them looked odd, both arms wrapped around their heads, faces covered to the eyes and their bodies barely clad.

They stood in odd poses because of the boundless terror and the pain inflicted by their burns.

Outside the city, the news soon broke with the influx of refugees. Everyone rushed from factory and field to offer assistance. The refugees were made welcome in the schools, temples, factories and doctors' surgeries and directed to aid centres.

Peasants did their bit for the humanitarian effort by bringing rice taken from their own inadequate reserves, by cooking it and distributing it to the victims, for days and nights on end without wearying, as others tended to them.

In response to the populace's appeal to "Save Hiroshima!", everyone brought whatever clothing and blankets they could, without stinting.

Everything was in ruins: the town hall, the prefecture, police stations, courthouses, communications had broken down and the regular distribution of food rations had ground to a halt. Naturally, no orders came and no help came from central government!

So the populace displayed tremendous solidarity and autonomy in its freely organised actions.

Unlimited food and care was dispensed upon the refugees, everybody freely placing themselves at their service!

However, given the floods of seriously injured victims, there was no way of helping every survivor left groaning amid the rubble of the city, sweltering among the debris and the slates and with the scorching August sun on their shoulders. And so, after a few days, the lists of the dead lengthened.

By night, Hiroshima looked even more terrifying, surrounded by blazing hills lighting the entire ruined city, whilst, inside the cordon, the corpses were being burned in a hellish crematorium that glowed each night.

In the hospitals or other aid centres, there was a ghastly spectacle to be witnessed. Grotesque giants: dead folk whose burning cadavers, swelled due to hydropsy to almost three times the normal size, their hair burnt crisp; there was no way even to telling which sex they were.

They were set out in heaps even in the playgrounds, flanked by the dying who were forever crying out: "Drink, give me some water!" There was no way of helping them: they could be neither given drink nor food and, delirious, they screeched like shrill lunatics: the atmosphere was supernatural and terrifying. The Hiroshima survivors have lived in fear of fresh threats, tending to the injured, burying or burning the dead up until 15 August and the capitulation of a defeated Japan.

After that, the organs of authority – the city administration, prefecture, police stations – sprang back to life, having no more air raids to fear. And then security and property were guaranteed and order, back in the saddle again, prevailed.

What was the mood of the populace at that time? As we have seen, left to their own devices, the masses followed their own lead and practised solidarity. But once the machinery of government resurfaced, private assets were off limits again.

In its candour, the populace had been giving freely of what it had in the way of clothing or food, in response to the call "Save Hiroshima!" With central authority re-established, it started to poke through the debris for items of value, nipping into half-demolished homes to steal anything that still had any use and brazenly ferrying away furniture and building materials in pushcarts.

True, the example was set by the bureaucrats and the military, looting military stores and, on the pretext of distributing them to the people, selling them off and thereby pocketing lots of money.

In the wake of these injustices, government offices, banks and the big capitalist firms were re-established in Hiroshima and prospered like before.

During the period, the schools and workers' quarters were neglected. In fact, among the scattered ruins of the blast there were only some huts, crude ones, to say the least. Despite that, the leaders, the capitalists and the major landlords deployed the "Hiroshima, atom bombed" business card, switching from their previous militarism to pacifism. They beat the drum and blew the trumpet for "The city of Peace" or "Come visit Hiroshima", in the aim of screwing some special allocation out of the state budget and invited foreign capital investment or shamelessly courted the charity of foreign tourists.

And so these businessmen raised money for the rebuilding of a Hiroshima that has nothing in common with the life of the ordinary people, but is preoccupied solely with rebuilding the capitalist colony.

The atomic bomb is now being used by the politicians and the bourgeois landlords as Hiroshima's business logo. Which is why, even now, city folk are at war with their use of the word "Peace".

The "Hiroshima is no more!" movement would likewise be only another astute vehicle for political ambition, but for the fact that it has grown from the ranks of those injured or who have lost loved ones.

My family and I lived some way outside Hiroshima city. Thanks to that, my home was only partly demolished by the pressure wave generated by the explosion: the floor, doors and windows were damaged but not too badly.

After the defeat of Japan, we immediately took steps to contact comrades and get ourselves organised, but most had run out of energy and could not generate any enthusiasm any more. Unable to communicate with comrades in Tokyo any more either, we therefore decided that the best thing to do was not to reveal ourselves once again as the anarchist movement straight away, but to strive to break up the feudalism and centralism at provincial level, so that we might have more freedom to react as libertarian communists.

So in October 1945 we launched the Central Regional Japanese Cultural Federation and since March 1946 we have been issuing a monthly review, Chugoku (Culture). It has since changed its title (to Freedom) and serves as the mouthpiece of the Japanese Anarchist Federation: at the same time, we publish the Hiroshima Heimin Shimbun, a local newspaper. The most recent edition was No 48 and it helps our movement in the Hiroshima area in practical ways.

Our movement had endured a 10 year freeze. However, since the war, we have been working for 4 years, treading a very prickly road, but right now the seed of anarchism is germinating among the young – not all that prolifically but vigorously and wholesomely.

My thanks and loving greetings go to the French comrades for showing consideration to the movement in Hiroshima and the atomic destruction.

And there I conclude my letter.

P.S. Learning from or paper the Heimin Shimbun of the anarchist campaign in France against Nazi barbarism in the recent war, I am so moved and encouraged by it that you cannot imagine.

My spirit is lifted by the knowledge that we are now bound together by brotherly comradeship as well as by a staunch hatred of the authorities.

From far-off Hiroshima,

Comrade Sadako Kuriara

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Letter from a Japanese anarchist about the Hiroshima bombing, and the response of
self-organisation and mutual aid from the local population following the explosion.

From: Le Libertaire (Paris) of 07.10.49. Translated by: Paul Sharkey.

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