

How Nuclear Power Followed Nuclear Weaponry into Japan

In 1945 Japan, became the first and only country to suffer direct nuclear attack in warfare. Between the immediate effects of blast, heat and gamma radiation, and the delayed effects of internalized radiation, the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki killed several hundred thousand people. Even today, the Hibakusha, the survivors, endure an epidemiological legacy, as well as emotional trauma from the attacks. Given this history, it was surprising to many around the world on March 11, 2011 when the massive earthquake and tsunami that hit northern Japan was followed by the triple meltdowns of nuclear power plants at the Fukushima Daiichi site in Fukushima prefecture. As people learned that there were over 50 nuclear power plants in Japan, many wondered how the Japanese, given their history with radiation and nuclear technology, could have allowed and even supported a large nuclear energy industry. For many it seemed counter-intuitive.

The reality is far more mundane than it might seem. The road to embracing nuclear energy in Japan was a convoluted path that involved military, economic and emotional pressures. The United States occupied Japan after the end of World War Two until 1951. It worked hard to rebuild the Japanese economy as an export market for American corporations, and to rebuild Japan politically as a forward base for the U.S. military. Even before the United States had built commercial nuclear power plants at home, there was interest among some in the U.S. government to promote nuclear power in Japan. During the Korean War, the United States was interested in staging American nuclear weapons inside Japan. At that time, airplanes were the only means of delivering nuclear weapons. The United States worked hard to site segments of its nuclear arsenal in forward bases that would facilitate a quick strike on the Soviet Union should the two nations engage in a nuclear war. American diplomats and military officials wanted to site nuclear weapons in Japan, but Japanese policy forbade the introduction of nuclear weapons into Japan by foreign governments. American leaders described how the Japanese had an “irrational” fear of all things nuclear. They advocated the promotion of nuclear power in Japan as a means of overcoming this irrationality. Their logic was that the introduction of nuclear power in Japan would pave the way for staging American nuclear weapons at bases located in Japan, and strengthen America’s nuclear posture.

Additionally, Japan, like France, has very little coal or other fossil fuels within its national borders. The idea of nuclear power promised energy independence and was embraced by Japanese leaders much along the same lines of logic that led to its heavy adoption in France. Selling nuclear power to the Japanese public was a complicated proposition. Historian Ran Zwigenberg has shown how American and Japanese leaders took a bold posture to assert their strategy to promote nuclear power in Japan: by coming directly to Hiroshima. Their original plans called for the first nuclear power plant to be built in the city, imagining that if the people of Hiroshima supported nuclear power, who in Japan could oppose it? With significant pressure from the United States, the Japanese government established an “all Japan” exhibit of the touring American “Atoms for Peace” exhibition inside the Hiroshima Peace Museum, temporarily removing the items of the permanent display. There was significant opposition to this move in Hiroshima, primarily as it was seen as disrespecting the “sacred” artifacts commemorating the nuclear attack that the pro-nuclear exhibition displaced. This exhibition occupied the museum for over a year, and elements of it remained in the Peace Museum for several decades.

The public relations push around nuclear power expressed typical “Atoms for Peace” discourse. Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the world had witnessed the negative effects of the atom, now it was time to return modernity to the path of progress and avail ourselves of the positive side of the atom. Whereas the nuclear attacks had killed so many, now the atom could “give life” to Japan and Japanese industry. There was a deep sense after World War Two that Japan had lost the war, in part,

because of its inferior technology. Embracing nuclear power was to be emblematic of Japan's technological advances. It was imagined that nuclear power would allow Japanese industry to flourish without dependence on energy sources derived from foreign markets and unstable regimes.

One of the most significant legacies of the decades of sustained nuclear power generation in Japan is the existence of a large plutonium stockpile. Japan has no policy of pursuing nuclear weapons, however, it is widely believed that were Japan to decide to pursue such weaponry, the existence of this stockpile and its advanced electronics manufacturing capabilities would allow it to construct nuclear weapons in a matter of several years. Among defense strategists this puts Japan in the position of being a virtual nuclear weapon state without the political complications, both internationally and domestically, of becoming an actual nuclear weapon state.

Among the innumerable dark clouds that the Fukushima meltdowns cast upon Japan and upon the shared global ecosystem is the effect that it has had on the Hibakusha in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For many Hibakusha, the imagined narrative that would make sense of their tragedy was that their strong ethical witnessing would lead to the abolition of nuclear weapons by the end of their lifetimes. As that time now approaches, what we see instead is a brand new cohort of Japanese who have been exposed to radiation and who face many of the same stresses and disease paths endured by the Hibakusha. This is the opposite of narrative resolution; and it occurred through the negligence of Japanese corporations and lack of regulatory oversight, not at the hands of an enemy. Additionally, many Hibakusha groups had taken stances over the years in support of nuclear power. This was done as a quid pro quo to receive governmental support for legislation the Hibakusha groups were advancing, seeking specialized health care for radiation related illnesses, and not through any thoughtful consideration of nuclear energy itself. Many groups have come out strongly against nuclear power in the aftermath of the Fukushima tragedy.

As is so often the case, what appears to be a perplexing moment in history is, when unraveled, very much the same mechanisms of profit and power that propel much of the structure of the world around us. The fact that many individual Japanese wonder how they could have so unquestioningly accepted nuclear power into a land plagued with earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanoes gives cover to the economic and political forces that, with clear minds, ignored those very dangers from the start.

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