



Research Paper

The Atomic Bomb Survivors Treatment Law of 1957: A Turning Point for the Hibakusha

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Abstract: *The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 left a profound and enduring impact on Japanese society, epitomized by the plight of the Hibakusha—survivors who bore physical, psychological, and social scars. This essay examines the pivotal role of the 1957 Atomic Bomb Survivors Treatment Law in reshaping public perception, expanding medical care, and advancing social recognition for the Hibakusha. By analyzing historical accounts, government policies, and survivor testimonies, the study highlights the intersection of medical advocacy, international awareness, and the socio-political dynamics that transformed the treatment of the Hibakusha. Furthermore, it explores subsequent legislative efforts in the 1960s and 1970s that expanded support systems, addressing the long-term consequences of radiation exposure and societal discrimination. Ultimately, this analysis underscores the resilience of the Hibakusha and the broader implications of their journey for global humanitarian and anti-nuclear movements.*

Keywords: *Hibakusha, Atomic Bomb Survivors, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Radiation Effects, Social Stigma, Anti-Nuclear Advocacy*

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I. Introduction

In August 1945, the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima at the close of World War II, marked a grim chapter in history, affecting countless lives and reshaping the socio-political landscape of Japan. The survivors were known as *Hibakusha*, and experienced many unique and devastating medical conditions from the radiation of the bombing. Additionally, the *Hibakusha* faced discrimination after the war from new residents in the cities who saw them as people of lower socio-economic status. Due to demands from the *Hibakusha* for greater medical care in addition to growing international awareness of their plight and studies such as the GHQ to understand the psychological impact of the bombing, there was a turning point in public perception and access to medical care for the *Hibakusha* starting in 1957, growing through the 1970s, to today.

The Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

On August 6th, 1945, the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. This marked the first time in history that a nuclear weapon was used in warfare. The bomb, nicknamed "Little Boy," was dropped from the *Enola Gay*, a B-29 bomber, and detonated with a force equivalent to approximately 15,000 tons of TNT.¹ Just three days later, on August 9th, 1945, the United States executed a second nuclear attack, this time on the city of Nagasaki. The combined death toll from the immediate effects of the bombings was about 210,000, with Hiroshima accounting for about 140,000 deaths and Nagasaki accounting for about 70,000.² However, the impact of the atomic bombing extended far beyond the immediate destruction. In

¹ The Atomic Heritage Foundation, <https://ahf.nuclearmuseum.org/ahf/history/survivors-hiroshima-and-nagasaki/>²National Park Service, Manhattan Project, "Atomic Bomb Survivors" <https://www.nps.gov/mapr/learn/historyculture/atomic-bomb-survivors.htm>

the months and years that followed, an additional 500,000–600,000 people suffered from severe injuries and the long-term effects of radiation exposure, including the children of the original survivors who may have experienced heavy doses of radiation in the womb.³ These included burns, radiation sickness, and an increased risk of cancer, contributing to a higher mortality rate among the survivors, who came to be known as "hibakusha."

The Hibakusha

The *Hibakusha* refers to the group of "people affected by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II."⁴ According to Robert J. Lifton who researched the psychological effects of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima, "For survivors seem not only to have experienced the atomic disaster but to have imbibed it and incorporated it into their beings including all of its elements of horror, evil, and particularly of death."⁵ For survivors, the impact of the disaster was not just surface-level trauma but also deep penetration of their psyche, the words "horror, evil, and particularly of death" encompass not only the physical scars but also the psychological and moral wounds inflicted by the catastrophe. The aftermath of the bombings was a landscape marked by devastation, not only in the physical sense but also in the societal sense. The *Hibakusha* faced a unique form of trauma, a combination of the direct impact of the bombings and the societal ostracization that followed. This discrimination stemmed from a mixture of fear and misunderstanding of their exposure to radiation.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hibakusha>

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hibakusha>

⁴ Robert J. Lifton, "Psychological Effects of the Atomic Bomb in Hiroshima: The Theme of Death," *Daedalus*, Summer 1963. The MIT Press.

Many in Japanese society, driven by a lack of knowledge and prevalent superstitions about radiation sickness, shunned the Hibakusha, fearing contamination or believing them to be cursed. According to Lifton's interviews of the *Hibakusha* a store clerk stated to him, "Well...because I am a hibakusha... how shall I say it? I wish others would not look at me with special eyes... perhaps hibakusha are mentally—or both physically and mentally—different from others... but I myself do not want to be treated in any special way because I am a hibakusha."⁶ This store clerk expressed her reluctance to be treated "in any special way" emphasizing a longing for dignity and autonomy, wanting to avoid their entire existence becoming attached to the tragic event in which they survived. This same store clerk also stated, "Usually when people refer to young girls they will say girls or daughters or some person's daughter... but to refer to us as atomic bomb maidens... is a way of discrimination... It is a way of abandoning us."⁷

The term "atomic bomb maidens" carries with it severe implications of damage and victimhood, which hindered the survivors' ability to reintegrate into society and live normal lives. It underscores how language can be used to both reflect and perpetuate societal attitudes, in this case, turning an already devastating personal experience into a public identity that is stigmatized. According to Ran Zwigenberg's book, *Nuclear Minds: Cold War Psychological Science and the Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki*, "They do not like to display their misery for use as 'data' in the movement against atomic bombs or in other political struggles. Nor do they like to be regarded as beggars even though they were in fact victimized by the atomic bomb."⁸ The *Hibakusha* didn't want others to misrepresent who they believed they were and

⁵ Robert J. Lifton, "Psychological Effects of the Atomic Bomb in Hiroshima: The Theme of Death," *Daedalus*, Summer 1963. The MIT Press.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ran Zwigenberg, *Nuclear Minds: Cold War Psychological Science and the Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki*, University of Chicago Press, 2023.

keep their dignity as a result. However, this backfired heavily as this resistance against being seen as 'beggars' furthered their ostracization from society. As a result of this ostracization, it took a long time for them to be officially recognized and receive the support they needed.

In the years leading up to the enforcement of the Atomic Bomb Survivors Treatment Law, the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission (ABCC) not only focused on groundbreaking research into the effects of atomic bomb

radiation but also developed a complex relationship with the *Hibakusha*, the survivors of the bombings.⁹ Upon its establishment in 1947, the ABCC began extensive genetic studies and conducted home visits to examine survivors, a process that laid the foundation for a deep interaction with the *Hibakusha* community.¹⁰ The collaboration with the Japanese National Institute of Health in 1948 symbolized a partnership that would extend the ABCC's reach into the survivor community, facilitating more comprehensive and systematic research efforts.

The Turning Point: The Atomic Bomb Survivors Treatment Law

In 1957, the Atomic Bomb Survivors Treatment Law went into effect. It was the first of its kind that allowed for the *Hibakusha* to receive health handbooks, biannual health examinations for better health management, detailed health examinations in the event that any abnormality was found, and medical compensation if they were certified as eligible by the Minister of Health and Welfare.¹¹ The law also enabled survivors to receive health examinations

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atomic_Bomb_Casualty_Commission¹⁰ <https://www.vice.com/en/article/mgb8d3/70-years-on-researchers-archive-the-longest-running-study-of-a-bomb-survivors>

¹¹ <https://www.ref.or.jp/en/glossary/reliefme-en/>

and medical care using national funds.¹² Following protests by the *Hibakusha* that the benefits were insufficient, in 1960 the act was amended, allowing some survivors to receive medical benefits for support with their living expenses. This law was a significant step in providing medical assistance to the survivors of the atomic bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It acknowledged the long-term health effects of the bombings and ensured that survivors received the necessary medical care they required. There were many laws that were enacted in the years following to further support the *Hibakusha*, reflecting a growing recognition of their needs and the long-term impact of radiation exposure.

The Expansion of Laws and Medical Care to Support the Hibakusha

In the 1960s and 1970s, Japan took significant measures to expand laws and medical care to support the *Hibakusha*. The Special Measures Law was enacted in 1968, marking a pivotal shift in the government's approach towards the *Hibakusha*.¹³ This law acknowledged the Japanese government's responsibility towards the atomic bomb victims and began to provide them with medical and financial assistance. This law was a major step towards stabilizing the lives of the survivors and improving their welfare. In 1967, the Law on Special Measures for Sufferers was enacted following the efforts of Nihon Hidankyo, an organization formed by *Hibakusha*.¹⁴ This law was a testament to the resilience and advocacy of the *Hibakusha*, and it further expanded the scope of support provided to them. The A-bomb Survivors Medical Care Law was also amended in the 1960s, which played a crucial role in expanding the scope of

¹² <https://nuclear-justice.net/article/compensation-measures-for-sufferers-of-the-atomic-bombings-of-hiroshima-and-nagasaki-an-explanation-of-the-atomic-bomb-survivors-support-law1/>

¹³ <https://hiroshimaforpeace.com/en/hiroshima75/mdeicalcare/>

medical care provided to the *Hibakusha*.¹⁵ The amendments to this law ensured that the survivors received the necessary medical care and support, acknowledging the long-term health effects of the atomic bombings. These measures marked a significant shift in the government's approach towards addressing the long-term effects of the atomic bombings and ensuring the well-being of the survivors. They also reflected the changing societal and economic conditions of the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, there was a growing recognition of the government's responsibility towards its citizens and an increased commitment to social welfare.

II. Conclusion

The enduring legacy of the Hibakusha, the survivors of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, underscores a pivotal chapter in global history, encapsulating not only the profound human cost of nuclear warfare but also the resilience and determination of those affected to seek justice and recognition. As we navigate the complexities of the present day, the plight of the *Hibakusha* serves as a strong reminder of the ongoing struggles faced by war survivors and the marginalized, often overlooked in the aftermath of conflict. The establishment of international laws and resolutions, including the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (2017), which explicitly acknowledges the Hibakusha, signifies a collective endeavor towards not only acknowledging the atrocities of the past but also safeguarding future generations from the horrors of nuclear warfare. Yet, challenges persist, as evidenced by the continued discrimination against the children of *Hibakusha*, who still grapple with access to necessary medical care and societal acceptance. In this light, the story of the *Hibakusha* transcends its historical confines, urging a renewed commitment to empathy, inclusivity, and the unwavering pursuit of peace and justice in our global community.

Appendix A

Nagasaki, Japan: A Japanese Torii gate survives the atomic bombing



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<https://www.nps.gov/mapr/learn/historyculture/atomic-bomb-survivors.htm>

Appendix B

Hiroshima: A *Hibakusha* with nuclear burns in the pattern of the kimono she was wearing at the time of the bombing



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hibakusha>

Appendix C

Terumi Tanaka of Nagasaki tells of his experience as a Hibakusha to the United Nations



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hibakusha>

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Application from Overseas for Issuance of Atomic Bomb Survivor's Certificates <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/bunya/kenkou/pdf/english.pdf>

Annotation: This source gave information on qualifications on how someone could be considered a Hibakusha

Secondary Sources

Atomic Heritage Foundation, "Survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki." <https://ahf.nuclearmuseum.org/ahf/history/survivors-hiroshima-and-nagasaki/>

Annotation: This source provides information on the immediate aftermath of the bombing but also the actions of the USA and Hibakusha afterwards.

Hiroshima for Peace. "Medical Care and Support for A-Bomb Survivors." <https://hiroshimaforpeace.com/en/hiroshima75/mdeicalcare/>

Annotation: This source provided a timeline of each stage of help that the Hibakusha received

International Humanitarian Law Database. <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/tpnw-2017/preamble>

Annotation: This source is the treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons

Lifton, Robert J., "Psychological Effects of the Atomic Bomb in Hiroshima: The Theme of Death"

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20026792>, *Daedalus*, Summer 1963. The MIT Press. Annotation: This source presents information such as firsthand accounts from survivors and explains the psychological trauma they faced

Naono, Akiko, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10371397.2019.1654854>, September 8, 2019

Annotation: This source provides information on the history of the Hibakusha

National Library of Medicine, "Psychological effect of the Nagasaki atomic bombings on survivors after half a century," <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15558886/>

Annotation: This source presents information on the GHQ which was a survey utilized to analyze psychological differences between the Hibakusha and a control group

National Park Service, "Atomic Bomb Survivors." <https://www.nps.gov/mapr/learn/historyculture/atomic-bomb-survivors.htm>

Annotation: This source provides information on the bombings, such as death count and how powerful the bombs were

Putnam, Frank. "The Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission in retrospect." https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC33857/_May12,1998

Annotation: This source provided a reflection of the history of and what the ABCC did and how they translated

Radiation Effects Research Foundation. Francis Committee (reports submitted in November 1955)

https://www.rerf.or.jp/en/about/history_e/committee-en/francomm-en/

Annotation: This source contains information on the Francis committee which questioned the morality of continuing the ABCC's research

Radiation Effects Research Foundation (RERF) https://www.rerf.or.jp/en/about/establish_e/

Annotation: This source provides information on how the ABCC transformed into the Radiation Effects Research Foundation

Radiation Effects Research Foundation, "A-bomb Survivors Medical Treatment Law." <https://www.rerf.or.jp/en/glossary/reliefme-en/>

Annotation: This source provides a brief summary of the A-bomb Survivors Medical Treatment Law

The Voice of Hibakusha <https://www.atomicarchive.com/resources/documents/hibakusha/index.html> Annotation: This source provides first-person accounts from *Hibakusha*

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/mgb8d3/70-years-on-researchers-archive-the-longest-running-study-of-a-bomb-survivors>

Annotation: This source is a first-hand recounting of how the ABCC worked.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hibakusha>

Annotation: This source provides a large amount of information that relates to the Hibakusha. This source provides information on the ABCC and topics that relate to it

Zwigenberg, Ran. *Nuclear Minds: Cold War Psychological Science and the Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki*, University of Chicago Press, 2023.

Annotation: This source provided information on the American perspective of *Hibakusha* psychology