

# Nagasaki and the Hibakusha Experience of Sumiteru Taniguchi: The Painful Struggles and Ultimate Triumphs of Nagasaki Hibakusha

Sumiteru Taniguchi

Introduction by Peter J. Kuznick

**Abstract:** *Sumiteru Taniguchi was one of the “lucky” ones. He lived a long and productive life. He married and fathered two healthy children who gave him four grandchildren and two great grandchildren. He had a long career in Japan’s postal and telegraph services. As a leader in Japan’s anti-nuclear movement, he addressed thousands of audiences and hundreds of thousands of people. Many of the more than 250,000 who lived in Nagasaki on August 9, 1945 were not so lucky.*

**Keywords:** *Nagasaki, atomic bomb, hibakusha, Sumiteru Taniguchi, the atomic decision*

Sumiteru Taniguchi was one of the “lucky” ones. He lived a long and productive life. He married and fathered two healthy children. He had a long career in Japan’s postal and telegraph services. As a leader in Japan’s anti-nuclear movement, he addressed thousands of audiences and hundreds of thousands of people. He traveled to at least 23 countries. The organizations in which he played a prominent role were nominated several times for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Many of the more than 250,000 who lived in Nagasaki on August 9, 1945 were not so lucky. Tens of thousands were killed instantly by the plutonium core atomic bomb the U.S. dropped that day from the B29 Bockscar, captained by Major Charles Sweeney. The bomb, nicknamed “Fat Man,” exploded with a force equivalent to 21 kilotons of TNT and wiped out an area that covered three square miles, shattering windows eleven miles away. Some 74,000 were dead by the end of the year. The death toll reached 140,000 by 1950. Included among the victims were thousands of Korean slave laborers, who toiled in Japanese mines, fields, and factories. Since then, atomic bomb-related injuries and illnesses have claimed thousands more victims and caused immense suffering to many of the survivors.

The scene of death and destruction defied description. Corpses, many of which had been charred by the blast, lay everywhere. Susan Southard, in her groundbreaking book *Nagasaki: Life After Nuclear War*, describes the scene that U.S. occupation troops encountered when they landed on September 23, 1945: “The Urakami Valley had vanished from existence, corpses were burning on cremation pyres, skulls and bones were piled

on the ground, and people were walking through the ruins with beleaguered and empty expressions.” Among the troops was Keith Lynch, a sailor from Nebraska. Lynch wrote to his parents that he had just seen “a sight I hope my children, if I am so fortunate, will never have to see, hear of, or ever think of. It was horrible and when you get to thinking, unbelievable.... Such a thing as I saw yesterday cannot be described in words. You have to see it and I hope no one ever has to see such a thing again.”

The death toll was even higher and the destruction greater in Hiroshima, which the U.S. had obliterated three days earlier with a uranium core atomic bomb. There, some 200,000 were dead by 1950. The Nagasaki bomb was more powerful than the one that leveled Hiroshima, but damage was limited by the fact that the bomb missed its target and that the mountains surrounding Nagasaki, which is located in a valley, contained the blast. However, in Urakami Valley, the center of Nagasaki’s Christian population, where the bomb landed, nearly 70 percent of the population perished.

Questions about the atomic bombings have persisted ever since those fateful days in August 1945. Renowned journalist Edward R. Murrow asked President Truman in a 1958 television interview, “When the bomb was dropped, the war was near to ending anyway. Was this the result of a miscalculation of the Japanese potential? Was our intelligence faulty in this area?” Truman correctly denied that he had miscalculated or that the intelligence had been faulty. He knew exactly what he was doing. For months, in fact, Allied intelligence had been accurately reporting Japan’s growing desire to quit and the fact that there were alternatives to using atomic bombs to end the war. On July 6, 1945, in preparation for the Potsdam Conference, the Combined Intelligence Committee of the Combined Chiefs of Staff issued a top secret “Estimate of the

Enemy Situation.” The section on the “Possibility of Surrender” clearly stated:

The Japanese ruling groups are aware of the desperate military situation and are increasingly desirous of a compromise peace, but still find unconditional surrender unacceptable....a considerable portion of the Japanese population now consider absolute military defeat to be probable....An entry of the Soviet Union into the war would finally convince the Japanese of the inevitability of complete defeat.

Truman recognized the growing desperation of Japanese leaders, whose citizens were becoming increasingly demoralized. The U.S. had firebombed and largely destroyed more than 100 Japanese cities, leaving millions homeless. With the food supply shrinking and the transportation system in tatters, starvation loomed. Energy supplies had run so low that new Japanese pilots could barely undertake the training flights needed to prepare for battle. U.S. forces had decimated Japan’s air force and navy. And, as the July 6 report indicated, Japanese leaders were looking for a way out and American leaders knew it. Truman described the intercepted July 18 cable between officials in Tokyo and Moscow as “the telegram from the Jap emperor asking for peace.” Based on other recently intercepted cables, his close advisors concurred. They knew that giving the Japanese assurances that they could keep the emperor, thereby easing Japanese fears that the emperor would be tried as a war criminal and possibly executed, would likely bring surrender. Secretary of War Henry Stimson pushed Truman and Secretary of State James Byrnes to drop the demand for unconditional surrender and inform the Japanese that the emperor could stay. Most of Truman’s top military and civilian advisors joined Stimson in that endeavor. General

Douglas MacArthur, Southwest Pacific Supreme Commander, later declared, perhaps somewhat overoptimistically, that the Japanese would have happily surrendered in May if U.S. leaders had changed the surrender terms. He later told former President Herbert Hoover that if Truman had acted on Hoover's "wise and statesmanlike" memo of May 30, 1945 advocating changing the surrender terms, it "would have obviated the slaughter at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in addition to much of the destruction ...by our bomber attacks. That the Japanese would have accepted it and gladly I have no doubt."

But that was not the only way to induce surrender without use of the atomic bombs. U.S. leaders could also have waited for the Soviets to declare war against Japan and begin the invasion of Japanese-occupied territories and perhaps Japan itself. The U.S. had pressed repeatedly for Soviet involvement and, at Yalta in February 1945, Stalin had finally agreed to invade three months after the end of the war in Europe. Truman was confident that this would do the trick. When he got Stalin's confirmation at Potsdam that the Soviets were coming in, he wrote in his diary on July 17, "He'll be in the Jap War on August 15. Fini Japs when that comes about." He wrote to his wife the next day, exulting, "We'll end the war a year sooner now, and think of the kids who won't be killed!"

But Truman's responsibility goes beyond slaughtering innocent civilians. Making Truman's actions totally indefensible was the fact that Truman knew that he was beginning a process that could end all life on the planet and said so on at least three occasions. While at Potsdam, most famously, he reacted to an in-depth briefing on the incredible power of the Alamogordo bomb test by shuddering, "It may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Era, after Noah and his fabulous Ark." (See Peter Kuznick, "[The Decision to Risk the Future; Harry Truman, the](#)

[Atomic Bomb and the Apocalyptic Narrative](#)" *The Asia-Pacific Journal* July 12, 2007.) Many scientists knew he wasn't exaggerating. Physicist Edward Teller had been pushing for immediate development of hydrogen bombs for years. Fellow Hungarian Leo Szilard warned that the destructive force in such bombs could be almost unlimited in size. Los Alamos scientific director J. Robert Oppenheimer had earlier warned top government and military leaders that within three years the U.S. would likely have weapons between 700 and 7,000 times as powerful as the relatively primitive bomb that would flatten Hiroshima. In less than a decade, scientists were indeed testifying before Congress about the feasibility of developing a thermonuclear explosive with the power of 700,000 Hiroshima bombs. Insanity was the order of the day. As Lewis Mumford wrote, "madmen," calmly, rationally planning annihilation, had seized the levers of power. As Sumiteru Taniguchi understood, they have not relinquished it since.

The question that plagues many historians is not whether the bombs needed to be used to prevent an invasion that was not even scheduled to begin for another three months against a foe that had clearly been defeated. Obviously, they did not. Seven of America's eight five star officers in 1945 are on record saying as much. Admiral William D. Leahy, Truman's personal Chief of Staff, said that in using the atomic bombs, the U.S. "adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the dark ages." Even the National Museum of the U.S. Navy in Washington, DC acknowledges that the vast death and destruction wreaked by atomic bombings "made little impact on the Japanese military. However, the Soviet invasion of Manchuria...changed their minds." The question is not whether the atomic bombs were militarily or morally justifiable—they clearly were not. The question is why Truman chose to use them when he knew the end of the war was imminent and said so repeatedly and knew they were putting humanity on a glide path to

annihilation.

As historians have increasingly come to realize, Truman had been obsessed with the Soviet Union since April 13, 1945—his first full day in office. His close advisors, most of whom had little if any influence upon Roosevelt, pushed him to act firmly to challenge Soviet actions in Europe. Truman’s confrontation with Foreign Minister Molotov on April 23, in which he erroneously accused the Soviets of having broken their Yalta promises, marked how dramatically the wartime alliance between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. had deteriorated in the 11 days since Roosevelt’s death. James Byrnes, who became Truman’s Secretary of State in early July but had been his most trusted advisor since his first day in office, and Gen. Leslie Groves, the driving force behind the Manhattan Project, both asserted that the Soviet Union loomed as the real target behind the bomb project. Byrnes told three visiting scientists in late May that the bomb was needed to reverse Soviet gains in Eastern Europe. Groves appalled physicist Joseph Rotblat, the future Nobel laureate who quit the project a few months later, when he said in March 1944, “You realize of course that the main purpose of this project is to subdue the Russians.” Groves stated on another occasion, “There was never from about two weeks from the time I took charge of the Project any illusion on my part that Russia was our enemy, and the Project was conducted on that basis.”



**Photograph: Sumiteru Taniguchi holding photo showing photo showing his wounds**

Sumiteru Taniguchi concurred with that assessment. In this moving memoir, he writes, “Some studies point out that the U.S. wanted to test the uranium and plutonium-type bombs to show off their military muscle and take the advantage in the post-World War II diplomacy. I agree with this perspective.” He understood fully and says directly that “nuclear weapons are weapons of annihilation.” When he died in August 2017, 72 years after the atomic bombings, his anger had not abated. Those who work closely with Hibakusha (atomic bomb-affected persons) have often heard them say that they don’t condemn U.S. leaders; they condemn war. In Akira Kurosawa’s moving 1991 film *Rhapsody in August*, when the 80-year old grandmother Kane, whose husband had been killed in the Nagasaki bombing, learns of her four grandchildren’s concern about her suffering at U.S. hands, she explains, “it was a long time ago that I felt bitter about America. It’s been 45 years since grandpa died. Now I neither like nor dislike America. It was because of the war. The war was to blame.” This sentiment was especially pervasive in Nagasaki where the response to the bombings was deliberately depoliticized by a form of Christian apologetics.

Visitors to Nagasaki quickly discover that the bomb missed its intended downtown target near the Mitsubishi shipbuilding and munitions manufacturing headquarters by two miles. It exploded instead above the Urakami Cathedral, East Asia's largest, in the center of the biggest Catholic community in Japan. Nagasaki's Catholic community dates back to the 16th century, but, after flourishing briefly, its members were persecuted and driven underground. The community didn't reemerge until the Meiji government lifted the ban against Christianity in 1873. There were approximately 14,000 Catholics in Urakami at the time of the atomic bombing. The one who did the most to shape the city's postwar narrative was Catholic doctor Takashi Nagai.

Nagai converted to Catholicism in 1934 after a one-year stint as a Japanese imperial army surgeon in Manchuria. During his second military tour from 1937 to 1940, he served in Nanjing at the time Japanese troops were carrying out the brutal massacre, commonly known as the "Rape of Nanjing." Upon his return to Japan, Nagai was decorated with the Order of the Rising Sun for his "bravery." Back in Japan, he served as Dean of the Department of Radiology at Nagasaki Medical University where he was diagnosed with leukemia in June 1945. He suffered another major blow two months later when his wife was killed in the atomic bombing, leaving him to raise his two young children.

Nagai worked tirelessly and heroically to help the victims of the bombing at a time when doctors and medical facilities were in desperately short supply. But, as Yuki Miyamoto has explained, it was his Biblical interpretation of the bombing that proved his most enduring, and controversial, legacy. This was best captured in a lecture he gave during a mass on November 23, 1945 in which he stated, "It was the providence of God that carried the bomb to that destination...Was Nagasaki, the only holy place in all Japan, not

chosen as a victim, a pure lamb, to be slaughtered and burned on the altar of sacrifice to expiate the sins committed by humanity in the Second World War? Only when Nagasaki was burned did God accept the sacrifice. Hearing the cry of the human family. He inspired the emperor to issue the sacred decree by which the war was brought to an end." Nagai called upon Nagasaki's Catholics to "give thanks that Nagasaki had been chosen for the sacrifice."

Living in a tiny 43 square foot hut with his two young children, the charismatic Nagai, his health rapidly deteriorating, wrote fifteen books before his death in 1951. His classic work, *The Bells of Nagasaki*, was published in 1949 with the blessing of the occupation authorities and turned into a popular movie. Publication had been delayed for more than two years due to the strict censorship U.S. authorities imposed on discussions and photographs of the atomic bombs and its victims. GHQ, the General Headquarters of the Allied Powers, insisted he change the title from his original choice *The Curtain Rises on the Atomic Age*. With its new title, the book quickly became a bestseller and helped popularize the idea that the bombing was "God's Providence" and the Nagasaki Catholics were deliberately chosen for this "redemptive sacrifice."

In other writings, Nagai shifted the blame for the atomic bombing from the Americans to the Japanese themselves: "it is not the atomic bomb that gouged this huge hole in the Urakami basin. We dug it ourselves to the rhythm of military marches....We turned the beautiful city of Nagasaki into a heap of ashes....It is we the people who busily made warships and torpedoes."

As Tomoe Otsuki has shown in her dissertation and articles, Nagai's message of "forgiveness" and "reconciliation" was one that U.S. occupation authorities were more than happy to propagate. Gen. Douglas MacArthur, the



Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers, had sought to replace Shinto influence in Japan with Christianity. Shinto, he believed, abetted militarism, while Christianity undergirded democracy. “Democracy and Christianity have much in common,” he averred, “as practice of the former is impossible without giving faithful service to the fundamental concepts underlying the latter.” Under MacArthur’s command, GHQ officials worked hard to assist Nagasaki’s Catholics during the postwar reconstruction of the city, paving the way for the city’s new identity—an identity that Nagasaki governor Sojiro Sugiyama happily embraced two years after the bombing when he declared, “Nagasaki is the land of Christian martyrdom.” As a result, the saying caught on that “Ikari no Hiroshima, inori no Nagasaki”—“Hiroshima rages, Nagasaki prays.”

Taniguchi was part of a different Nagasaki. He raged rather than prayed. When I met him in 1998, the year that my American University students and I first added Nagasaki to our annual study tour in Hiroshima and Kyoto, I asked him what he thought about Harry Truman. He minced no words in expressing his deep disdain for Truman. He expressed no hint of being willing to forgive those responsible for the atomic bombing, which he considered cruel and unjust, even barbaric. He saw nothing positive resulting from the suffering that he and others had undergone and deplored the nuclear sword of Damocles that has hung over all humanity since August 1945. There is nothing nuanced, ambivalent, or qualified about his feelings on this topic. As he writes in his memoirs, “There are people who made the atomic bomb, people who ordered its production, people who ordered its use, and people who rejoiced at its use. I don’t regard these people as humans.”

Taniguchi spoke to my students almost every August between 1998 and his death. His testimony was unforgettable. That his presentation to my students focused largely on

the 1945-1949 period is completely understandable. He was horribly burned in the bombing of Nagasaki. He was a 16-year old postal worker delivering mail on his bike when the bomb exploded. Burns covered his entire back. He remained bedridden, lying on his stomach, for one year and nine months. The pain was so intense and unrelenting that he begged nurses and doctors to kill him. “Lying on my stomach with my chest wounds pressed down into the bed—the pain was excruciating,” he recalled. The bedsores covering his chest, back, sides, jaw, and knees were so deep that portions of his heart and ribs were exposed. He could not move his neck or right arm. Pus poured from his maggot-infested wounds. Though no one expected him to live, he did and on March 20, 1949, three years and seven months after the bombing, he was finally discharged from the hospital.

Marine Sergeant Joe O’Donnell arrived in Nagasaki soon after the bombing with orders to provide a photographic record of the bombing’s aftermath. He arrived at the temporary relief hospital at Shinkozen, to which Taniguchi had been moved, on September 15. There he encountered the horribly burned teenager. O’Donnell photographed Taniguchi’s burned body. He recalled, “I waved the flies away with a handkerchief, then carefully brushed out the maggots, careful not to touch the boy’s skin with my hand. The smell made me sick and my heart ached for his suffering, particularly because he was so young. I decided then that I would not take other pictures of burned victims unless ordered to do so.” O’Donnell hid 300 images from U.S. occupation authorities and brought them back to the United States, where he stored them in a trunk for nearly a half century before ginning up the courage to look at them. Even then, he found them so disturbing that he joined the ranks of activists fighting to abolish nuclear weapons. It was 2005 when he published *Japan 1945--A U.S. Marine’s Photographs from Ground Zero*, photos by Joe O’Donnell.

Meanwhile, despite being in constant pain, Taniguchi tried to resume a normal life. On April 1, 1949, he returned to work. His back, which had not yet completely healed, was covered with scars. His legs and bottom were covered with keloids. He had limited movement in his left arm. The left side of his chest was deeply gouged from the bedsores. As he writes in this memoir, he felt “hatred towards war and the atomic bomb” and “profound anger” toward government authorities and adults in general for the wartime lies that he and others had been fed.

So this is no tale of Christian forgiveness. Taniguchi knew who and what to blame and stated it openly. Among the targets of his anger was the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission (ABCC), which the U.S. occupation authorities set up in Hiroshima in 1947 and Nagasaki in 1948 not to treat the atomic bomb victims but to study them. Initially curious about the research, he volunteered to be studied. But after being examined, he was told, “No abnormality existed.” No abnormality? Incredulous and furious at this “truly merciless human experimentation,” he never again set foot at the ABCC. Like so many other Hibakusha, he was outraged over the humiliating treatment he received.

Back at work in the Telegraph Office, he faced discrimination from both management and fellow employees. The better educated and higher paid office workers looked down upon the delivery workers. On one occasion, when Taniguchi and other telegraph delivery workers formed a band to play music at the send-off for a fellow worker who had been drafted, the office workers mocked their poor performance. “They treated us like idiots, and I was so angry,” Taniguchi recalled, adding, “We took them to a shrine behind our office and beat them up.” Taniguchi was clearly not one to turn the other cheek or behave like a “sacrificial lamb.” He joined the labor movement to fight for equal wages, explaining, “I could not stand

the discrimination I witnessed against equal human beings.” His colleagues, he reported, “often said I had a strong sense of justice or that I had guts.” In Taniguchi’s case, it was not an either/or. He had both.

But Taniguchi had not yet gotten involved in Japan’s fledgling anti-nuclear movement. The Castle Bravo hydrogen bomb tests in March 1954 would change that. The uproar over the nuclear contamination of the crew members aboard the Lucky Dragon No. 5 fishing vessel convinced Taniguchi that the time was right to organize for the abolition of atomic and hydrogen bombs. On October 1, 1955, he, his friend Senji Yamaguchi, and 14 other atomic bomb survivors who had also had surgery at Nagasaki University founded the Nagasaki A-Bomb Youth Association. From its inception, the association worked closely with the Nagasaki A-Bomb Maidens Association. The two organizations merged in May 1956, forming the Nagasaki A-Bomb Youth and Maidens Association with Yamaguchi as president and Taniguchi as vice-president. The next month, in June 1956, saw the formation of the Nagasaki Council of A-Bomb Survivors (Nagasaki Hisaikyo), which Taniguchi would chair for many years before stepping down in 2017. Hisaikyo often joined forces with Gensuikyo, the Japan Council against A and H Bombs, which had formed in September 1955 from the merger of the World Conference against A and H Bombs, the National Council for the Signature Campaign Against A and H Bombs, and the Organizing Committee for the World Conference. Japan was abuzz with anti-nuclear activity and Taniguchi was in the forefront of the organizing efforts.

Though active in the anti-nuclear movement, Taniguchi had not yet spoken publicly about his own struggles as a victim of the bombing. In August 1956, he attended the World Conference Against A and H Bombs in Nagasaki. On August 9, Chieko Watanabe addressed the assembly of 3,000 people on

behalf of the Youth and Maidens Association. As a 16-year old, Watanabe had been mobilized as a student and was working at the Mitsubishi Electric Manufacturing Company when the bomb exploded. A steel beam fell, breaking her spine and leaving her a paraplegic. For 10 years, she remained secluded in her home until four A-bomb maidens visited her. At the World Conference, her mother carried her to the podium, from which she tearfully pleaded, “Please look at me in this miserable condition. We must be the last victims of atomic bombs. Dear friends from around the world, please work together and abolish all A and H bombs.” All, including Taniguchi, were deeply moved. The entire hall, he writes, “exploded with applause.” This was particularly moving, he remembered, because “in fear of discrimination and prejudice, the *hibakusha* had kept their mouths shut for a long time.”

Taniguchi’s opportunity came the next day in front of a smaller workshop. It was a life-changing experience. He writes, with simple elegance, “Words began to pour from my lips as though a dam inside me had broken—what had happened on ‘that day,’ the three years and seven months of hospitalization, the pain on my back, and the accumulated suffering and resentment. It was the very first time I had spoken in front of a large number of people, and I was not sure if my talk conveyed what I wanted, but I received great applause from the audience.”

That day was not only a milestone for Taniguchi, it was a milestone for all Hibakusha, 800 of whom attended the conference. The attendees founded the Japan Confederation of A- and H-Bomb Survivors Organizations (Nihon Hidankyo), which would go on to lead the fight for Hibakusha medical care and other rights and benefits. Taniguchi would later become a co-chairperson of Hidankyo.

Taniguchi’s memoir operates on at least two distinct though tightly intertwined levels. On

the one hand, it is the story of his involvement in and leadership of the anti-nuclear movement. In that regard, it provides revealing new insight into the history of the antinuclear movement in Japan. Over the years, Taniguchi worked with virtually all the leading Hibakusha and antinuclear organizations. He saw the squabbles and feuds and played the role of peacemaker, understanding that the common interests and objectives far outweighed the differences and that in unity there was strength. He was particularly disappointed by the 1960s split between the Communist Party-affiliated Gensuikyo and the Socialist Party-affiliated Gensuikin. Although he remained loyal to the older Gensuikyo, he understood that the fracture severely weakened the broader anti-nuclear movement. Despite this, in his view, the movement had not gotten the credit it deserved. While the movement has not succeeded in eliminating nuclear weapons as it has striven to do, the Hibakusha, through their prominent and highly visible participation, have helped stigmatize nuclear weapons and convince the world that such weapons should never again be used.

On the other hand, it is the story of the extraordinary challenges Taniguchi faced socially and psychologically to deal with the personal tragedy that almost destroyed his life. Among the challenges that he and so many other Hibakusha faced was dealing with the often disfiguring physical scars that the bombings had caused. In the memoir, Taniguchi describes the persisting sense of shame he felt when people stared at the scars on his face. He tells of his insecurity around women, which was reinforced by being rejected for marriage by five or six different potential partners. He tells of marrying Eiko ten days after meeting her and the trepidation he felt during their honeymoon, fearing she would leave him after seeing his horribly scarred body. They remained happily married for more than 60 years before Eiko passed away in 2016 at age 86.



Taniguchi's sense of shame at being seen in public was eased somewhat by plastic surgery. But the thought of taking his shirt off in public, even at the beach, continued to mortify him. In the summer of 1956, male and female members of the Youth and Maidens Association went by boat to a secluded beach, where, for the first time, they were able to shed their clothes in public without having people stare at them scornfully. Taniguchi recalls, "As *hibakusha* with visible scars, we had been afraid to show our bodies in bathing suits for fear that people would look at us coldly and with disgust." But since they were all Hibakusha, the inhibition was gone. "We were so excited," he writes, "like little children."

The thought of exposing his body in front of non-Hibakusha, however, was still unimaginable to him. Finally, one day, a co-worker urged him to shed his long-sleeve shirt at the beach and he decided he was ready to take the plunge. As he ran topless to the beach, he "knew people were staring at me in surprise but I didn't care. I was crying in my heart, 'Look at me and think about why I became like this. Don't turn your face away.'"

But Taniguchi's life changed dramatically in 1970 when the *Asahi Shimbun* published a photo taken by a U.S. soldier on January 31, 1946 of Taniguchi's raw, red, scarred back as he grimaced in pain. The photo came from 16mm color film footage that had been found in the U.S. National Archives. A week later, the shocking footage was broadcast on Japanese television. See Greg Mitchell, "[New Film Explores U.S. Suppression of Key Footage from Hiroshima and Nagasaki](#)." Up to that point, Taniguchi had been active in the anti-nuclear movement but had not been a prominent national leader. However, when a British TV crew came to interview him, he removed his shirt and displayed his scarred body. After that, his life would never be the same. He was catapulted into a leadership position and was in constant demand as a speaker. The image of

his back became one of the most universally recognized reminders of the horrors of nuclear war and his passionate involvement in both the fight for Hibakusha rights and the nuclear abolition movement have, as he himself and other Hibakusha say, "brought him back to life again" and imbued his life with special meaning.

When Taniguchi addressed my students, as he did with other groups, he held up the large color photo of his raw red back. The photo itself is more than most students can bear. And then he removed his shirt, revealing a heart that could be seen beating through his ribs and a back covered with scars. The natural instinct of the students was to turn away, but, out of respect, they tried to choke back their tears and not avert their gaze, looking at Taniguchi's disfigurement just as he wanted them to and understand more deeply the abomination of nuclear warfare that Taniguchi had been trying to convey.

In these pages, Taniguchi shares his extraordinary life with us. Despite his having undergone dozens of surgeries, undertaken extraordinary daily measures just to stay alive, and endured endless suffering, Taniguchi's story is inspiringly life-affirming. It is the remarkable chronicle of a man who had gone beyond personal tragedy to dedicate himself to the struggle to make sure that life will continue on this planet and that others will never need to suffer the way he has. Taniguchi ends with a simple plea, but it is the one that motivated him for more than 70 years: "Let Nagasaki be the last atomic bombed site; let us be the last victims. Let the voice for the elimination of nuclear weapons spread all over the world." At a time when the threat of nuclear war is the greatest it has been since the Cuban Missile Crisis almost six decades ago, this simple plea carries a poignancy that must be heard. Human beings and nuclear weapons really can no longer co-exist.

**This article is adapted from Peter Kuznick’s introduction to Sumiteru Taniguchi’s *The Atomic Bomb on My Back: A Life Story of Survival and Activism* (Kindle edition to be released on August 8, 2020).**

**Peter Kuznick**, Professor of History and Director of the Nuclear Studies Institute at American University, He and Oliver Stone co-authored the 12-part Showtime documentary film series and *New York Times* best-selling book both titled *The Untold History of the United States* (Simon and Schuster, 2012, 2019). The documentaries are now available on Netflix. He has also co-authored (with Akira Kimura), *Rethinking the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Japanese and American Perspectives* (Kyoto: Horitsu Bunkasha, 2010) and written several other books on scientists and politics, Cold War culture, U.S. empire, and nuclear history.