

After Atomic Bombings, These Photographers Worked Under Mushroom Clouds

A new book of photos documents the human impact of the bombings that ended World War II — and challenges a common American perception of the destruction in Japan.



By Mike Ives

Aug. 6, 2020

In August 1945, a Japanese newspaper sent a photographer from Tokyo to two cities that the United States military had just leveled with atomic bombs.

The photographer, Eiichi Matsumoto, had covered the firebombings of other Japanese cities. But the scale of the calamity that he encountered in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he later recalled, was on another level.

At a Red Cross hospital near Hiroshima's ground zero, he met victims dotted with red spots, a sign of radiation sickness. And on the desolate, rubble-strewn streets of Nagasaki, he watched families cremating loved ones in open-air fires.

"I beg you to allow me to take pictures of your utmost sufferings," Mr. Matsumoto, who was 30 at the time, said he told survivors. "I am determined to let people in this world know without speaking a word what kind of apocalyptic tragedies you have gone through."

Mr. Matsumoto, a photojournalist for the Asahi Shimbun newspaper who died in 2004, is among dozens of photographers who bore witness after the bombings, which forced Japan's surrender and ended World War II.

Some of their images, banned until the American occupation ended in 1952, were eventually exhibited in museums and other venues across Japan. They also became fodder for antinuclear activists waging nonproliferation campaigns.



The mushroom cloud near Hiroshima's ground zero after the atomic bombing on Aug. 6, 1945. Gonichi Kimura/Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum



A view of the center of Hiroshima from a police station in September 1945. A newspaper building, a department store and a bank were destroyed. Yoshito Matsushige/Chugoku Shimbun/Kyodo



Patients being treated in a medical tent in Hiroshima on Aug. 9. Yotsugi Kawahara, courtesy Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum



A young woman who survived the explosion at Minami-Ohashi, a mile south of ground zero, being pulled on Oct. 4 by her aunt on a cart over rubble-covered roads to Hiroshima Red Cross Hospital. Shunkichi Kikuchi, courtesy Harumi Tago

But in the United States, the photographs are still virtually unknown.

“Americans, when they think about atomic war, think about the mushroom cloud,” said Benjamin Wright, a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin who helped curate “Flash of Light, Wall of Fire,” a new book of photographs about the 1945 bombings.

“Perhaps they think of a destroyed city, but it’s very much a bird’s-eye view,” Mr. Wright said by telephone.

The book, published this month by the University of Texas Press to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the bombings, attempts to change that. It includes images from more than a dozen Japanese photographers, starting with Mr. Matsumoto’s photo of a Hiroshima wall clock that stopped at the moment when a nuclear bomb detonated above the city in a flash of light.

Hiding the negatives

Even though the two bombs, which fell on Aug. 6 and 9, killed more than 200,000 people in the two cities and injured many others, the United States enforced a ban, in both countries, on photographs that showed the civilian impact.

For seven years, photographers who had documented the bombings hid negatives from American and Japanese officials wherever they could — in a locker, in Mr. Matsumoto’s case. But after the United States occupation ended in 1952, hidden negatives began to trickle into public view, and books about the atomic bombings were published weeks later.



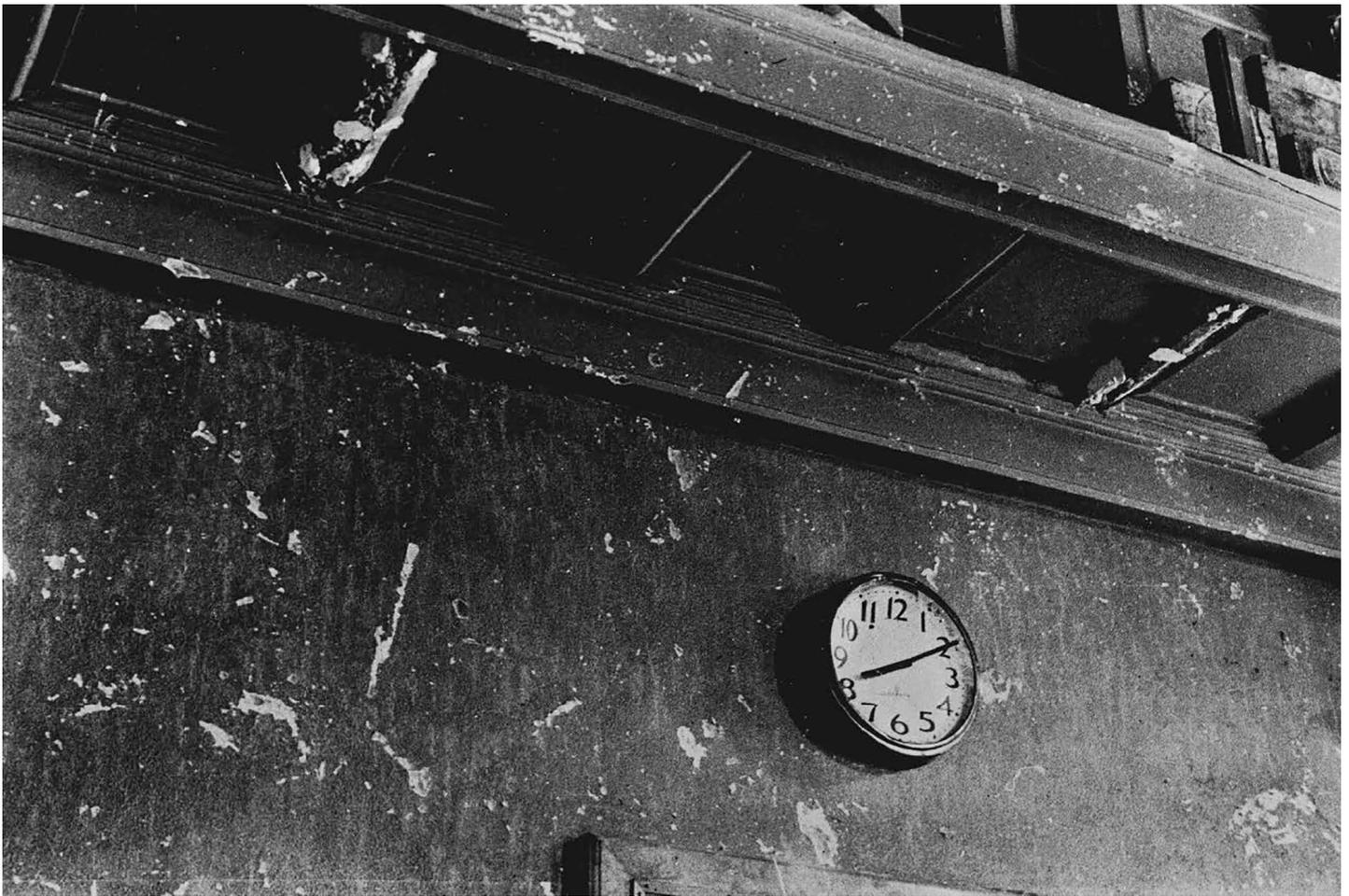
A temporary first-aid station Oct. 7 at Fukuromachi Primary School in Hiroshima. Shunkichi Kikuchi, courtesy Harumi Tago



This man, photographed Oct. 2 at a branch of a hospital in Hiroshima, had been exposed to radiation at Senda-machi. Burned on his right arm, he received skin transplants from his buttocks. Shunkichi Kikuchi, courtesy Harumi Tago



Japanese Navy submarines abandoned in Hiroshima Bay near Ninoshima Island on Oct. 17. Shunkichi Kikuchi, courtesy Harumi Tago



A police station on Sept. 15 in Shimoyanagi-cho, Hiroshima. The clock stopped at the time of the bomb blast. Eiichi Matsumoto

Michiko Tanaka, a newspaper reporter in Hiroshima who wrote the new book's afterword, said in an email that even today, the Japanese public remains interested in survivor testimonies, historical documents and other visceral reminders of the atomic bombings.

"In my mind, the photographs are a powerful medium and play a crucial role in furthering our understanding of the circumstances surrounding the atomic bombing," she said.

But aside from a 1952 *Life* magazine feature about the bombings, Mr. Wright said, whatever public memory existed of them in the United States was effectively eclipsed by other conflicts, including the wars in Korea and Vietnam.

A shared goal

The idea of publishing in the United States images from the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings was first proposed to the University of Texas at Austin in 2017 by the Anti-Nuclear Photographers' Movement of Japan, one of the organizations that have worked for decades to collect and preserve such photographs.

The group was seeking an American publisher because it worried about rising tensions enveloping North Korea, Japan and the United States at the time, and it wanted to broadcast its antinuclear message to a wider audience. Through an intermediary, it approached the Texas university's Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, whose collection includes photographs of the Vietnam War by the American photojournalist Eddie Adams.



The mushroom cloud on Aug. 9, 15 minutes after the explosion. Hiromichi Matsuda, courtesy Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum



Tree trunks in October 1945 that had been knocked down by the blast in Nagasaki. Shigeo Hayashi



Around 2:00 p.m. on Aug. 10. The atomic bomb had exploded about a third of a mile above this location, the Matsuyama-machi intersection. The remains of a private school is in the rear at right. The chimney, center rear, was part of the Mitsubishi Nagasaki Steel Works. Yosuke Yamahata, courtesy Shogo Yamahata



Bones scattered in September 1945 on a school playground, less than a mile from ground zero. Teiji Nihei

Because the atomic bombings have stirred bitter arguments in both Japan and the United States for decades, any book about them would clearly have an “intrinsic controversial nature,” Hank Nagashima, the intermediary for the antinuclear group, wrote in an email to the Briscoe center’s executive director in 2018.

“By the same token, we believe it is the right time to present the dreadful consequences that no words can describe of the nuclear weapons once deployed,” he wrote.

The center’s director, Don Carleton, said that while he initially worried that the Japanese group might use the project to “assign war guilt,” it turned out that the two sides had a simple goal in common: educating the public about the horrors of nuclear war. The association eventually agreed to make its photos available as a digital archive at the university, starting in 2021.

“I was very leery of this whole thing because I was afraid there was going to be an agenda,” Dr. Carleton said. “And there was an agenda — but it was the same one I was interested in.”

Misery, up close

Survivors of atomic bombings often used the term pika-don. It translates as “flash-bang” or “flash-boom” and describes how nuclear weapons produce blinding light before an explosion.

Even though many Americans associated the bombings with the multistory mushroom clouds they produced, Japanese survivors found that their term “captured the dazzling sight and thundering sound of the misery they experienced up close,” the University of Texas historian Michael B. Stoff wrote in an essay for the new book.

When the two bombs were detonated, thermal heat from the explosions seared human skin and vaporized some people instantly. “The closer to ground zero and the more exposed you were, the more horribly you were likely to die, but the less likely you were to be aware of it,” Professor Stoff wrote.

Those who survived woke up in a moonscape.

In Hiroshima, an estimated 140,000 of the city's 350,000 people were killed, and the vast majority of structures were either damaged or destroyed. Japanese Navy submarines were left abandoned in a nearby bay.



A dead horse and a wagon south of Nagasaki's ground zero, the day after the bombing. Yosuke Yamahata, courtesy Shogo Yamahata



A man in Nagasaki searching for a doctor to treat his wounded baby the day after the bombing. Yosuke Yamahata, courtesy Shogo Yamahata

Feelings of powerlessness, desperation and defeat “all came together,” Shigeo Hayashi, who traveled there on assignment for a military propaganda magazine, recalled in a 1991 interview for the Japan Photographers Association's newsletter. “I pressed the shutter button almost unconsciously to capture the scene in front of me.”

In Nagasaki, Mr. Matsumoto saw bonfires and assumed they were for cooking. Later, he realized that people were cremating their relatives because the bodies had putrefied.

Photographers who covered the bombings might have sensed that the assignment was dangerous, but at the time, even medical experts did not fully understand the health risks of exposure to nuclear radiation.

Decades later, Mr. Matsumoto met with Soviet photographers who had covered the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster. They asked what type of protective gear he had worn in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

“You've got to be kidding me,” he said he replied, according to the 1991 newsletter. He and his colleagues had “absolutely no idea” about the health risks, he added, so they wore ordinary clothing.



A family cremating its dead in Nagasaki in September 1945. Eiichi Matsumoto

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 14 of the New York edition with the headline: Bearing Witness, 'Without Speaking a Word'