

Early Opposition to the Atomic Bomb Came from Black America

Editor's note: On August 17, 1945, only days after the US atomic bombings, David Lawrence, the conservative columnist and editor of US News, put it this way: "Last week we destroyed hundreds of thousands of civilians in Japanese cities with the new atomic bomb. ... We shall not soon purge ourselves of the feeling of guilt. ... We... did not hesitate to employ the most destructive weapon of all times indiscriminately against men, women and children. ... Surely we cannot be proud of what we have done. If we state our inner thoughts honestly, we are ashamed of it."

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., who experienced the firebombing of Dresden first hand and described it in Slaughterhouse Five, said, "I know a single word that proves our democratic government is capable of committing obscene, gleefully rabid, racist, yahooistic murder of unarmed men, women, and children, murders wholly devoid of military common sense. The word is a foreign word. The word is Nagasaki."

By Dan Park

While the Japanese faced widespread, extreme racism during World War II, Black leftists were among the first critics of the US atomic bombings of Japan.

Three days after the initial attack, the United States dropped a plutonium bomb on the port city of Nagasaki, killing at least 40,000 and as many as 70,000 people, or more. Within months, almost a quarter million would be dead from just the two attacks — with the victims being overwhelmingly civilians. Much has been written about the morality and military expediency of using the bomb, but missing from many of these discussions is a critical examination of the extreme racist hatred that rapidly developed in the United States against people of Japanese descent, and how that led to the annihilation of two cities.

Also missing is the recognition that African-Americans were some of the first in the country to voice concern about or even condemn the bomb, and that Black leftists were some of the first to draw the connections between colonialism, racism, capitalism and war.

The general American hatred for the Japanese during World War II cannot be overstated. Thanks to the tireless activism of younger Japanese-Americans in the 1960s and 1970s, many Americans now know about the inhumane internment of Japanese-Americans during WWII — fewer know that Nazi POWs held in American camps were often treated with musical, theatrical, and movie showings on most nights, set up volleyball leagues with their guards, were invited to dances and other social events, and were able to visit shops and restaurants in town that Black American G.I.s could not. Some historians have pointed out that most Americans at the time could differentiate between Nazis and Germans, fascists and Italians — but with Japan, all Japanese people were not only suspect, but by their very nature, the enemy. Everything was done to dehumanize Japanese people, from seemingly all major forces of society:

- From a January 1945 issue of *Newsweek*: "Never before has the nation fought a war in which our troops so hate the enemy and want to kill him."
- From *Time* magazine around the same period: "The ordinary unreasoning Jap is ignorant. Perhaps he is human. Nothing ... indicates it."
- From General Joseph Stilwell in a letter to his wife: "When I think of how these bowlegged cockroaches have ruined our calm lives it makes me want to wrap Jap guts around every lamppost in Asia."
- From commander of the South Pacific Force, Admiral William Halsey: "Kill Japs, kill Japs, kill more Japs."
- From a US Marine Corps slogan of the time: "Remember Pearl Harbor — keep'em dying."

• From the popular press, public discourse, and military culture: "yellow monkeys," "apes," "gorillas," "demons," "savages," "subhumans."

Indeed, by the end of the war and even well past it, the general mood in the United States was one of vicious and unrestrained vengeance for the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which claimed 2,403 American lives, 50 of whom were civilians.

Polls were conducted periodically after the end of the war regarding citizens' attitudes toward this new weapon of mass destruction, the results of which are somewhat disturbing. Less than a week after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 85 percent of Americans approved of the attacks according to a Gallup poll. Indeed, historian Lawrence Wittner notes that through late 1945, in all the polls conducted on the issue, none saw more than 4.5 percent of respondents opposing the use of the atomic weapons. In fact, when one Roper poll asked whether we should have: 1) not used the bombs at all, 2) dropped the first in an unpopulated area and the second on a city if they don't surrender, 3) used the bombs as we did, 4) used many more bombs before they could surrender, or 5) don't know, 22.7 percent of respondents answered with option four. Two months after defeating the enemy, almost a quarter of respondents prioritized killing as many Japanese people as possible.



Baritone, athlete, actor, and activist Paul Robeson speaks to the crowd in Trafalgar Square in London, June 28, 1959, demonstrating against nuclear weapons. Some 10,000 had marched from Hyde Park for the rally. Photo: Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament

Meanwhile, a new generation of African-Americans had won positions in the sciences, in certain parts of the military, and in other previously inaccessible fields. After the Japanese surrender, Black newspapers and magazines of the time frequently made note of Black chemists, physicists and other scientists who had worked on the atomic bomb. Many Black moderates had believed that such contributions to the war effort — from normal Black soldiers fighting valorously, to Black scientists harnessing the power of the atom — would win greater freedoms and opportunities for Black people in America after the war.

But some of the earliest criticisms of the atomic bomb came from African-American communities. Of course Black America is not monolithic but contains a multiplicity of diverse opinions. Even so, concern about the bomb was noticeably higher in Black communities than in white ones. Indeed, the warnings and recommendations of the racially integrated National Committee on Atomic Information more closely followed Black concerns about atomic weapons than they did general white-dominant American concerns.

Conservative journalist George Schuyler wrote about the horrors of the "murder of men wholesale" and "being able to slaughter whole cities at a time." ... Clergy members also began to speak up. Rev. J.E. Elliot of St. Luke Chapel said, "I have seen the course of discrimination throughout the war and the fact that Japan is of a darker race is no excuse for resorting to such an atrocity." Rev. Louis F. Lomax

of Taber Presbyterian Church, said "[The atomic bomb is a] diabolical weapon [and we have] more scientific knowledge than religion to control it."

In 1946, the NAACP called for nuclear disarmament at its annual conference. Poet Langston Hughes, author Zora Neale Hurston, NAACP leader Walter White, and many others were early critics of atomic weapons.

But it was really the Black leftists who saw the connections between racism, colonialism and war early on. For many of them, it started with the 1935 Italian invasion of Ethiopia — the last holdout of African resistance to European colonialism. The invasion made it clear to Black leftists that colonialism was at its core a perpetual war of racial domination. The event radicalized many African-Americans. Singer and actor Paul Robeson noted that since the invasion, "The parallel between his [African Americans'] own interests and those of oppressed peoples abroad had been impressed upon him daily." W.E.B. Du Bois wrote about his fear that "If power can be held through atomic bombs, colonial peoples may never be free."

In 1942, James Farmer along with A.J. Muste, George Houser, and others founded the Congress of Racial Equality, or CORE, which grew out of the pacifist movement, including the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Harlem Ashram. Marjorie Swann, co-founder of the Committee for Nonviolent Action, or CNVA, which started the Voluntary Peace Trust, was also a charter member. Bayard Rustin gave support as an "uncle" to CORE, a role he played for so many organizations.

Six years later, CORE joined two hundred other activists in Chicago to form a new movement of "revolutionary pacifism" which included campaigning against building nuclear weapons. From this conference emerged the Peacemakers — one of the very first groups outside of the scientific community to organize opposition to nuclear-arms proliferation. Among the founders were Wally Nelson, one of CORE's first nonviolence trainers, as well as his partner Juanita Morrow Nelson. Both would become dear friends of CNVA/Voluntary Peace Trust. The Peacemakers and CNVA became influential groups that would train countless activists and organizers in the peace, justice

and civil rights movements.

In 1946, Paul Robeson gave a scathing, brilliant speech about the connections between nuclear weapons, racism against the Japanese, and Black liberation. He said, "it is all part of one problem, this matter of discrimination, and it may be the foremost question facing us today in the atomic age."

Robeson puts the crux of the problem not on the weapon itself, but on the ideologies and prejudices that compel its use. As a rising Black performer with much to lose, Robeson made these dangerous connections between racism, capitalism, colonialism, war, and ultimately, extinction.

"Our government is getting uranium from the Belgian Congo for atomic bombs. American companies are prospecting for oil in Ethiopia and for minerals in Liberia," he said. "But, although the enemy has all the advantage and has a head start in the race, it is yet possible for us to catch up and win. It is possible to win if the majority of the American people can be brought to see and understand in the fullest sense the fact that the struggle in which we are engaged is not a matter of mere humanitarian sentiment, but of life and death. The only alternative to world freedom is world annihilation."

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