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When Children Are Murdered, What is There to Celebrate?



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

After news broke that Han Kang—the South Korean author—had won the Nobel Prize for Literature, her father—the novelist Han Seung-won—asked her where she wanted to hold a press conference to talk about the award. She published her fiction with Changbi and her poetry with Munhakdongne, both of which hoped to host her. Initially, Han Kang, the 53-year-old author of the 2016 Booker Prize-winning *The Vegetarian*, thought that she would

talk to the press. But then, after reflection, she told her father that he should make a statement in her place. “With the war intensifying and people being carried out dead every day,” she told the press through her father, “How can we have a celebration or a press conference?”

The Nobel Committee awarded the Peace Prize this year to the organization Nihon Hidankyo “for its efforts to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons and for demonstrating through witness testimony that nuclear weapons must never be used again.” The group was formed in 1956 by survivors of the U.S. nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Its mission from the first has been to ban nuclear and other horrendous weapons. Part of its impact had been to hold Hiroshima Day events on August 6 to publicize the dangers of such weapons (these events have sadly become less impactful, but perhaps the Nobel Prize will raise their status). At its press conference, one of the co-heads of Nihon Hidankyo Toshiyuki Mimaki (who had been struck by atomic radiation in Hiroshima at the age of three), said, “I thought the prize would go to those working hard in Gaza... In Gaza, bleeding children are being held [by their parents]. It’s like Japan 80 years ago.”

It is like Japan in its effects: the “bleeding children” that Mimaki referred to have been a constant sight for the past year. But it is not like Japan in its execution. Only a small number of people knew the deadly potential of the atomic bomb when the U.S. military dropped it on Hiroshima and then three days later Nagasaki. After the bombs fell, first Japan and then the United States prevented journalists from reporting on their impact. One hundred and fourteen employees of Chugoku Shimbun, the main newspaper of Hiroshima, died in the attack. Those who remained created Verbal Reporting Corps or *kudentai* to go about and provide information in person about relief opportunities. Yoshito Matsushige from the paper took some of the most evocative photographs of the devastation. Two foreign reporters—Leslie Nakashima (Asian American) and Wilfred Burchett (Australian)—broke through the barricades to report from Hiroshima. “What had been a city of 300,000 population had vanished,” Nakashima wrote for United Press International on August 31, 1945.

The Bombs Continue to Drop

In fact, the city had not vanished. Despite the overwhelming Israeli bombardment (far greater firepower used in Gaza than on Hiroshima and Nagasaki), the Palestinians remain across Gaza in their homes and in shelters. They refuse to leave, as many of them tell me, because they remember the stories of their grandparents and parents from 1948; when the Israelis chased them off from their villages then, they never allowed them to return. That feeling of defiance combined with the fact that there really is nowhere to go has kept the Palestinians amid rubble.

And the Israelis have not stopped their bombing. There is not one atom bomb, but thousands of lethal bombs that continue to rain down from Israeli jets. In December 2023, the Israeli authorities designated al-Mawasi, just west of Khan Younis, as a humanitarian or safe zone. Despite that, Israel has continued to attack settlements and shelter within this safe zone, reducing what was already measly to a fraction of what had been designated for the people. The density of population per square kilometer in this zone is roughly 35,000, far greater than the densest place on earth (Macau, a small city, with a population density of 21,000), and—for comparison—the density of population in the United States is 35 people per square kilometer.

In one week this month, the Israelis struck three schools that have become shelters in Deir al-Balah, 15 kilometers north of al-Mawasi, as reported by Abubaker Abed: Ahmed al-Kurd school (October 5), al-Ayesha School (October 3), and Rufaida al-Aslamia Secondary School for Girls (October 10). The Israeli attacks on Rufaida school just before 11:30 a.m. killed 28 Palestinians, many of them children and the elderly, and among them two staff of the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF). The bombs landed, as Imad Zakout reported, when the coordinators of the shelter were handing out milk formula to the children and their parents.

The bombs dropped by Israel—the GBU-39—are manufactured by Boeing and are designed to scatter shrapnel and cause great physical harm even to those who survive the blast. No one in the shelter takes Israel's contention that it struck Hamas operatives. The people have been identified, and everyone knows them and knows that they are not part of any Hamas structure. The youngest person killed was Mila Alaa al-Sultan (age six) and the oldest was Sumaya Younis al-Kafarna (age 87). Among the dead are a much-loved policeman named Salem Ruwaishid al-Waqadi (age 26) and the administrator of the school named Ahmed Adel Hamouda (age 58).

Humans Are Scary

Those who have read Han Kang's *Human Acts* (2016) will not be surprised by her reaction to the Nobel Prize and the genocide in Gaza. When she was 10 years old, in 1980, the South Korean military dictatorship of Chun Doo-hwan unleashed terrible force against the Gwangju Uprising for democracy. This violence, in Han Kang's hometown, led to the deaths and injuries of thousands of people. When she was 13, her father showed her an album of photographs of the violence. "If I had been older," Han Kang reflected in 2016, "I would have experienced a social awakening out of anger toward the new military regime. But I was too young. My first thought was that humans are scary."

Human Acts tells the story of several characters from May 1980 to the present: Jeong-dae dies in the uprising, Eun-sook and Kang Dong-ho gather the dead, Kim Jin-su goes to prison and commits suicide ten years later, while Seon-ju is tortured by the military. These are powerful stories of human courage and dignity in the face of terrible violence. That is what Han Kang and others see in the Palestinian predicament: the Israeli violence is ugly, but the remarkable resilience of the Palestinians demands that humans commit acts that refuse the feeling that “humans are scary.”

Vijay Prashad’s most recent book (with Noam Chomsky) is *The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and the Fragility of US Power* (New Press, August 2022).

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