

Witnesses to Nuclear Escalation: The Postwar Japanese Press on Atomic Weapons

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Abstract

What was the nature of the ideological landscape of the Japanese press concerning nuclear weapons during the early postwar occupation period? Although extensive research has been done on the broader post-Hiroshima and Nagasaki Japanese cultural landscape, we identify a gap in the literature regarding the specific case of Japanese newspapers under Allied occupation and censorship. In an effort to demonstrate a relationship between the sources and publication dates of censored news articles concerning escalating US-Soviet nuclear tensions, we perform a regression analysis on newspaper headlines held in the Gordon W. Prange Collection's Censored Newspaper Archive. More specifically, we aim to discern which factors (if any) among the origin of a headline, the location within Japan of its publisher, and the date of its publication governed its expressed political allegiances. Although our analysis did not yield any statistically significant results, we hope this initial probe can encourage further exploration of the ideological kaleidoscope contained in the newspapers held in the Prange Collection's archives.

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1 Introduction

Existing literature concerning the state of Japan and its press under Allied occupation and the oversight of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) has developed a rich, if scattered, view of a nation rattled by the horrors of nuclear warfare in a period of rapid rebuilding into a powerful industrial ally of the West. We set out on an attempt to build upon this literature by developing a greater understanding of what factors governed the Japanese press' understanding of and attitudes regarding escalating nuclear tensions between the United States and Soviet Union by analyzing the provenance and publication circumstances of newspaper articles which received censorship action from the Civil Censorship Detachment (CCD) operated by SCAP.

To perform our analysis, we compiled a near-total index of the over 15,000 publicly available newspaper headlines archived in the Censored Newspaper Articles held in the Gordon W. Prange Collection at the University of Maryland, College Park¹. Using the newspaper headlines and date information at our disposal, we filtered the articles using keyword searches down to a little over 100 which discussed nuclear weapons and nuclear escalation between the United States and the Soviet Union. We then hand-categorized these articles based on their ideological leaning, year and prefecture of publication, and whether the headline was simply republishing a headline from a US source. We finally used those articles to perform a linear regression in the interest of using the article metadata as a means of predicting ideological tilt, but ultimately did not produce any statistically significant results.

Despite being unable to produce statistically significant results through our somewhat crude method of analysis, we hope that this preliminary quantitative analysis of the Prange's holdings can stimulate greater and more incisive inquiry into the postwar Japanese press and develop a more nuanced understanding of Japan's role in the early stages of the Cold War.

2 Literature Review

A great deal of scholarship exists concerning Japanese cultural output in the immediate postwar period, especially with respect to the nuclear bomb. Fields (2020) and Treat (1996), for example, provide detailed explorations of the literary and visual artforms through which personal and collective narratives concerning the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were recorded and transmitted. However, the literature is not as comprehensive in discussing the state of the news media in the postwar period under occupation. In one of the most relevant texts for our purposes, *The Atomic Bomb Suppressed* (2017), Mon-

1. The Prange Collection, the only one of its kind in the world, constitutes nearly the sum total of Japanese print output during the first several years (1945-1949) of the Allied occupation, and the Censored Newspaper Articles constitutes a subset of its newspaper collections, most of the articles dating from 1947 or 1948. The Prange holdings are also indexed by the National Diet Library of Japan, which we utilized in building our database.

ica Brau discusses in more detail the nature of Allied censorship of the Japanese press regarding nuclear topics. However, as Jay Rubin notes in his review (Rubin 1993) of Brau, her discussion does not delve deeply into the diplomatic and strategic dimensions of the press with respect to the escalating Cold War.

There is also a rich, if scattered, collection of literature which discusses the arts under censorship, including Rubin (1985) and Hirano (1988). These discussions complicate the views of censorship informed by the work of earlier scholars such as Jun Etō, who railed against the occupation censors as strictly repressive, by indicating that artists obtained a degree of freedom under the CCD which was not permitted under the harsher restrictions on artistic expression imposed by prewar native censorship policies. However, these discussions rarely touch on the degree to which press censorship specifically evolved, and studies of the postwar press such as Wang (2025) indicate the chilling effect that SCAP’s censorship had on discussions of, in the case of Wang, nuclear power, and when they do touch on press coverage of nuclear weapons, such as in Kawaguchi (2006), the role of censorship is rarely discussed.

In an effort to begin filling these gaps in the literature and build on the work of Brau and Wang especially, we hope to explore on a wider scale the invaluable holdings of the Prange Collection and develop a deeper understanding of the intertwining relationships among civil censorship, Cold War relations, and the lasting impact of the devastating nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki which shaped the state of the postwar Japanese press.

3 Methods

Using the National Diet Library of Japan’s index of the Prange Collection’s Censored Newspaper Article holdings, we obtained the headline text, publication, and date of 15,330 newspaper articles². From these articles, we identified 117 which contain explicit mention of nuclear weapons, virtually all of which concerned either American or Soviet nuclear proliferation. Each of these articles was hand-classified on three metrics: one (“attitude,” see Figure 1) was a categorical variable indicating the attitude of the article, defined as

1	2	3	4	5
Pro-USSR	Anti-US	<i>Neutral</i>	Anti-USSR	Pro-US

Another (“origin,” see Table 1) was a binary variable indicating whether the article was simply republishing a headline issued by a US-based news agency, and the third (“prefecture,” see Figure 3) indicated the prefecture in which the

2. This is a near, but not total index – the Diet Library does not provide direct means, through an API or otherwise, to access the data at scale, so we were forced to undergo a laborious process of web scraping, including simulated browser requests through `curl`¹. The labor-intensive nature of this process and the unexpected delays it produced are another significant factor leading to the limited scope of our approach and results.

newspaper was based³. On top of the hand-classification, we also obtained from the article metadata the year of publication, which was either 1947 or 1948 (“year,” see 2).

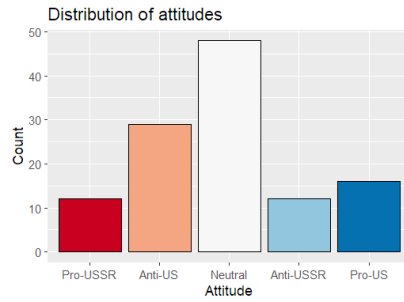


Figure 1: Distribution of attitude

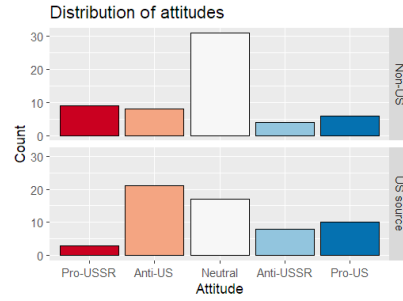


Figure 2: Distribution of attitude by origin

Non-US Source	US Source
58	59

Table 1: Distribution of origin

1947	1948
54	63

Table 2: Distribution of year

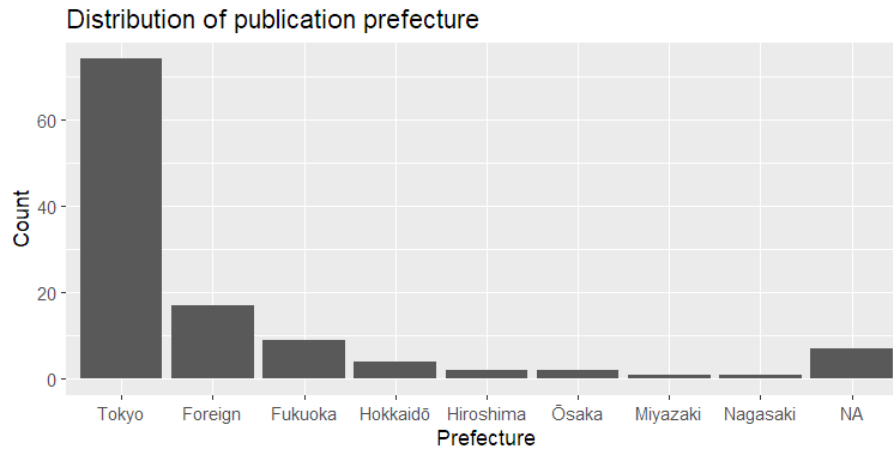


Figure 3: Distribution of publication prefecture

3. In the case of large newspapers like the *Yomiuri Shimbun* or the *Kyōdō Tsūshin*, the branch office was used instead where indicated in the headline text. Foreign newspapers also received their own aggregate categorization.

We provide in Table 3 several examples of our categorization process and in Table 4 the specific criteria by which we classified attitude.

Headline text	Attitude	Origin	Prefecture	Year
Headline: <i>Ainshutain hakase ni shōtaijō. Genbaku kinenbi ni Hiroshima-shi</i> ; Subject: "To write an invitation to Dr. Einstein; on A-Bomb Memorial Day at Hiroshima City;;Yomiuri 103 (Seibu)	Neutral	Non-US	Tōkyō	1948
Headline: Says no hope for Russian agreement on atom issue; News Agency: International News Service (Washington); Subject: Chairman if Senate Atomic Committe, Hickenlooper said that he sees no hope that Russia will make possible a UN pact on atomic warfare;;Hokkaido Shimbun	Anti-USSR	US	Hokkaidō	1947
Headline: Military Gov't Team Checks Boost In Nagasaki 'Atom Fertilized' Crop. Only Field Below Blast Shows Freakish Productivity; Others Within Half Mile Radius Found Normal = <i>Nagasaki o chōsa shita beigun dai IPPŌ</i> ; News Agency: Associated Press (Tokyo);;Nippon Times Foreign, Nishi Nippon	Pro-US	Non-US	Fukuoka	1947

Table 3: Examples of data categorization.

Attitude	Criteria
Pro-USSR	Explicit support for USSR military or diplomatic action
Anti-US	Hiroshima/Nagasaki critique; original or republished Soviet critique of the US
Neutral	No other category
Anti-USSR	Original or republished US critique of the USSR
Pro-US	Hiroshima/Nagasaki defense/apologia; explicit support for US military or diplomatic action

Table 4: Criteria for attitude level

The particular usage of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as benchmarks for the attitudes concerning the United States are inherited from the CCD's censorship guidelines – it was SCAP's policy that criticism of the atomic bombings did indeed constitute criticism of the United States (Braun 2017, 133–142), so we have

inherited that notion for the purpose of replicating the thinking of the time.

We also provide below (Table 5) a cross-tabulation of origin, attitude, and date.

	1947		1948	
	Non-US Source	US Source	Non-US Source	US Source
Pro-USSR	3	2	6	1
Anti-US	4	14	4	7
Neutral	4	6	27	11
Anti-USSR	4	5	0	3
Pro-US	4	8	2	2
<i>Total</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>24</i>

Table 5: Cross-tabulation of date, attitude, and origin

We then performed a linear regression relating the attitude of an article to its origin, prefecture, and date of publication.

4 Results

The linear regression (Table 6) yielded no significant results for any of our variables of interest. We find that the greatest obstacle in producing an accurate analysis of the data is the level of irregularity and lack of detail in our source dataset – many headlines are cut off partway or abbreviated, and it is not always clear what the primary source of a given headline is. If a statistically significant relationship is present among our variables of interest, it is likely being obscured by perturbations caused by the level of hand-categorization which was necessary even on this relatively small subset of the data. Note that the reference for prefecture is the foreign categorization – although we cannot make firm conclusions due to the lack of significance, it is interesting that almost every prefecture is correlated with a negative coefficient, indicating a less pro-US outlook.

Beyond the roughness of the data precluding deeper insight, we also note the potentially problematic nature of our operationalization of attitude – setting aside the value judgments necessary to categorize each headline as holding one ideological lean or another, there is also the possibility that attempting to coerce attitude into this particular linear scale obfuscates any real relationship which may exist. Although we attempted the analysis with different orderings of our chosen levels, the results did not meaningfully change: one avenue for future research is refining this operationalization.

	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
US Origin	0.095	0.237	0.402	0.689
Published 1948	-0.253	0.243	-1.043	0.300
<i>Prefecture</i>				
Fukuoka	-0.067	0.488	-0.137	0.891
Hiroshima	-0.660	0.886	-0.745	0.458
Hokkaidō	-0.271	0.665	-0.408	0.684
Miyazaki	-0.033	1.209	-0.028	0.978
Nagasaki	-1.034	1.209	-0.855	0.395
Ōsaka	0.665	0.897	-0.742	0.460
Tōkyō	-0.378	0.325	-1.163	0.248

Table 6: Linear regression results

5 Conclusions

Our linear regression analysis was unable to find a significant correlation between the origin of an article’s headline or its year/prefecture of publication and its sympathetic lean in the context of early Cold War tension between the United States and the Soviet Union. Likely greatly contributing to the muddying of our analysis was the nature of the dataset itself – there are simpler obstacles of inconsistent and abbreviated archival, but the fact that this is a database of specifically articles which were subject to occupation censorship is inherently responsible for skewing the ideological leanings present in the data (although the specific nature of this skew is hotly contested among scholars).

We ultimately find that a more comprehensive analysis of the Prange Collection’s Censored Newspaper Archive (perhaps referencing the microfilmed originals rather than the seemingly incomplete or faulty index available online) is necessary to draw more competent conclusions regarding the nature of occupation censorship of discussion of nuclear warfare in postwar Japan. A more refined search to identify more articles – as there are certainly far more than could be extracted through our relatively primitive search – would also aid greatly in enhancing the quality of a potential deeper analysis.

We hope that this analysis can contribute to the body of scholarship which has to date largely focused on other forms of cultural output such as literature and visual art regarding nuclear topics in Japan, if at least by demonstrating the need for a more comprehensive analysis.

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