

Reading Guide – The Dawn of the Nuclear Age

This week we launch into the first unit of the subject, “The Bomb and Atomic Culture.” Readings for **Session 3** examine the first successful effort to create nuclear weapons and early reactions from a variety of historical actors to their use after WWII.

Assigned Readings

- Allan Winkler, “Origins of the Atomic Age,” from *Life Under A Cloud: American Anxiety about the Atom* (1999) 9-33.
- Paul Boyer, Selections from *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (1985) 3-64.
- Stephen Del Sesto, “Wasn’t The Future of Nuclear Energy Wonderful?” in *Imagining Tomorrow: History, Technology and the American Future*, Corn, ed. (1986) 58-73.
- Norbert Wiener, “A Scientist Rebels,” *Atlantic Monthly* (1946).

Questions to Consider

Allan Winkler is a political historian who writes primarily about Americans’ experience of wartime. The chapter we read this week from his book, *Life Under a Cloud*, examines the making of the first atomic bomb and the decision to use it. It also explores early resistance to the bomb. What caused the “wave of revulsion” Winkler describes, and which groups were more likely to express concern, rather than optimism, at the dawn on the nuclear age? What attempts were made to contain and repress voices that were critical of atomic warfare?

Paul Boyer is a cultural and intellectual historian. His book, *By the Bomb’s Early Light* was one of the first historical studies devoted exclusively to the question of how the advent of the nuclear age impacted American culture. What, according to Boyer, made the “Atomic Age,” different from others periods in American history? How does he describe American reactions to Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Finally, what role did scientists play in helping shape American reactions to the bomb?

Stephen Del Sesto’s short essay examines American optimism surrounding the nuclear future. What uses did Americans imagine for this new technology? Why were they so optimistic? What can Del Sesto’s essay teach us about the interactions between ideology, social values, and technological change?

Norbert Wiener (1894-1964) was a preeminent professor of mathematics at MIT. Along with many other accomplishments, he was the originator of the field of cybernetics, as well as the stereotype of the “absent-minded” professor. What is Wiener’s major concern in this letter, published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1946/7? What (or who) exactly is he is “rebellious” against?

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