



The Atom Bomb and Popular Culture

A Bomb is Born

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German surrender brought the Second World War in Europe to an end. But all feared that war with Japan would drag on and on...

Behind the scenes, the US had been working on a secret weapon – the most powerful ever devised – and by August 1945... it was no longer such a secret.

It is an atomic bomb! It is a harnessing of the basic power of the universe! We have spent more than 2 billion dollars on the greatest scientific gamble in history. And we have won!

So victory was celebrated, as the A-bomb brought the war to an end. Although, the west was broadly unaware of the full horror and lingering effects of radiation on the people of Japan. It saw the bomb as a new hero – great material for literature and film, even celebrated in a remarkably chipper Buchanan Brothers tune.

Atomic Power! Atomic Power! It was given by the mighty hands of God!

Information films...

...essentially propaganda - like A is for Atom - helped to sell the upside of the A-bomb, and the message was clear: America had the power to rule the world.

Because here in fact is the answer to a dream as old as man himself. A giant of limitless power at man's command!

But meanwhile, the USSR – uneasy Allies of the West during the War – resented the way they'd been kept in the dark about the A-bomb.

And the West wasn't at all happy about the way the USSR was expanding into its neighbouring countries.

An iron curtain has descended across the continent.

The US thought it had at least a decade of invincibility before the USSR would develop its own nuclear power.

But in 1949...

Suddenly the west wasn't just capable of doing the bombing, it could be bombed as well! So cue the arrival of Burt the turtle –

The All-American solution to keeping fear at bay – and spreading the word that everything will be fine.

There was a Turtle by the name of Burt.

We all know the atomic bomb is very dangerous. We must get ready for it, just as we are ready for many other dangers that are around us all the time.

Remember what to do friends.

The A-bomb, and its new big brother the H-bomb, were seen generally as a necessity in the post-war world.

In one British film...

...an opponent to the bomb was portrayed as mentally ill when he threatens to blow up London unless the UK government abandons all nuclear weapons.

He wouldn't do that. Mr Folland, do you think he's ill?

Yes, I do Miss Willingdon.

The one country with direct experience of nuclear attack saw things differently. The Japanese film Gojira

relived the atomic nightmare with a monster horribly mutated by nuclear radiation. When the American version – Godzilla – was released 2 years later it was the same story, but without any reference to nuclear nastiness. What had caused Godzilla to be evil was not relevant, and as in most Hollywood movies –

absolute good must destroy absolute evil.