

## The Decision to Use Atomic Bomb on Japan

The debate over the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki concerns the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which took place on August 6, 1945 and three days later on August 9. The role of the bombings in Japan's surrender has been the subject of scholarly and popular debate for decades. The major issue is whether or not the U.S.A. needed to use the bomb to end the war.

### *Support*

#### *Preferable to Invasion*

Those who argue in favor of the decision to drop the atom bombs argue that massive casualties on both sides would have occurred in the planned invasion of Japan. The U.S. side anticipated losing many soldiers in the planned invasion of Japan. U.S. President Truman stated after the war that he had been advised that U.S. casualties could range from 250,000 to one million men. Other sources put the highest estimates at 30,000 to 50,000. A study done by the U.S. military in April 1945, implied that the two planned campaigns to conquer Japan would cost 1.6 million U.S. casualties, including 370,000 dead. In addition, millions of Japanese military and civilian casualties were expected.

#### *Speedy End of War Saved Lives*

Supporters of the bombing also argue that waiting for the Japanese to surrender was not a cost-free option. Perhaps as many as 250,000 Asian noncombatants would have died each month in 1945 if the war had continued on the Asian mainland. The end of the war also liberated millions of forced laborers working in harsh conditions. Furthermore, the firebombing of Tokyo alone had killed well over 100,000 people in Japan since February 1945,

directly and indirectly. Intensive conventional bombing would have continued or increased prior to an invasion.

Japan was already blockaded, and historian Daikichi Irokawa noted that “[i]mmediately after the defeat, some estimated that 10 million people were likely to starve to death.” Meanwhile, fighting continued in The Philippines, New Guinea and Borneo, and Allied offensives were scheduled for September in southern China and Malaya. The Soviet invasion of Manchuria, in the week before the surrender had caused over 80,000 deaths.

Philippine justice Delfin Jaranilla, member of the Tokyo tribunal, wrote in his judgment:

“If a means is justified by an end, the use of the atomic bomb was justified for it brought Japan to her knees and ended the horrible war. If the war had gone longer, without the use of the atomic bomb, how many thousands and thousands of helpless men, women and children would have needlessly died and suffer ...?”

*Part of “Total War”*

Supporters of the bombings have argued that the Japanese government had introduced a National Mobilization Law and waged total war, ordering many civilians (including women and children) to work in factories and military offices and to fight against any invading force. Thus, these people could be considered combatants, or at least not civilians.

Supporters of the bombings also emphasize the strategic importance of the targets. Hiroshima was used as headquarters of the Fifth Division and the 2nd General Army, which commanded the defense of southern Japan with 40,000 military personnel in the city. Hiroshima was a communication center, an assembly area for troops, a storage point and had several military factories as well. Nagasaki was of great wartime importance because of its wide-ranging industrial activity, including the production of ships and military equipment.

An article published in the International Review of the Red Cross notes that, with respect to the “anti-city” or “blitz” strategy, that “in examining these events in the light of international humanitarian law, it should be borne in mind that during the Second World War there was no agreement, treaty, convention or any other instrument governing the protection of the civilian population or civilian property.” The Blitz was not one of the charges against Hermann Göring, commander of the Luftwaffe, at the Nuremberg Trials.

Truman's stated intention in ordering the bombings was to bring about a quick resolution of the war by inflicting destruction, and instilling fear of further destruction, that was sufficient to cause Japan to surrender.

In his speech to the Japanese people presenting his reasons for surrender, the emperor referred specifically to the atomic bombs, stating that if they continued to fight it would result in the “... collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation...” In a separate speech however, he focused on the impact of the Soviet invasion, and said nothing about the atomic bombings.

#### *Japan's Leaders Refused to Surrender*

Some historians see Japanese warrior traditions as a major factor of the resistance in the Japanese military to the idea of surrender. Traditionally, surrender was not acceptable and warriors were expected to fight to the death. Japanese military leaders seemed willing to do the same with the Japanese nation. A U.S. government history of the Manhattan Project lends some credence to these claims, saying that military leaders in Japan

“... also hoped that if they could hold out until the ground invasion of Japan began, they would be able to inflict so many casualties on the Allies that Japan still might win some sort of negotiated settlement.”

While some members of the civilian leadership did use covert diplomatic channels to attempt peace negotiation, they could not negotiate surrender or even a cease-fire. Japan could legally enter into a peace agreement only with the unanimous support of the Japanese cabinet, and in the summer of 1945, the Japanese Supreme War Council, consisting of representatives of the Army, the Navy and the civilian government, could not reach a consensus on how to proceed.

It has sometimes been argued that Japan would have surrendered if simply guaranteed that the Emperor would be allowed to continue as formal head of state. However, Japanese diplomatic messages regarding a possible Soviet mediation—intercepted through Magic, and made available to Allied leaders—have been interpreted by some historians to mean that “the dominant militarists insisted on preservation of the old militaristic order in Japan, the one in which they ruled.” They also faced potential death sentences in trials for Japanese war crimes if they surrendered.

Maddox also wrote that “[e]ven after both bombs had fallen and Russia entered the war, Japanese militants insisted on such lenient peace terms that moderates knew there was no sense even transmitting them to the United States. Hirohito had to intervene personally on two occasions during the next few days to induce hardliners to abandon their conditions.” “That they would have conceded defeat months earlier, before such calamities struck, is far-fetched to say the least.”

Kōichi Kido, one of Emperor Hirohito's closest advisers, stated: “We of the peace party were assisted by the atomic bomb in our endeavor to end the war.” Hisatsune Sakomizu, the chief Cabinet secretary in 1945, called the bombing “a golden opportunity given by heaven for Japan to end the war.”

*Opposition*

*Fundamentally Immoral*

In 1946, a report by the Federal Council of Churches entitled *Atomic Warfare and the Christian Faith*, includes the following passage:

“As American Christians, we are deeply penitent for the irresponsible use already made of the atomic bomb. We are agreed that, whatever be one's judgment of the war in principle, the surprise bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are morally indefensible.”

*The Bombings as War Crimes*

A number of notable individuals and organizations have criticized the bombings, many of them characterizing them as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and/or state terrorism. Two early critics of the bombings were Albert Einstein and Leo Szilard, who had together spurred the first bomb research in 1939 with a jointly written letter to President Roosevelt. Szilard, who had gone on to play a major role in the Manhattan Project, argued:

“Let me say only this much to the moral issue involved: Suppose Germany had developed two bombs before we had any bombs. And suppose Germany had dropped one bomb, say, on Rochester and the other on Buffalo, and then having run out of bombs she would have lost the war. Can anyone doubt that we would then have defined the dropping of atomic bombs on cities as a war crime, and that we would have sentenced the Germans who were guilty of this crime to death at Nuremberg and hanged them?”

A number of scientists who worked on the bomb were against its use. Led by Dr. James Franck, seven scientists submitted a report to the Interim Committee (which advised the President) in May 1945, saying:

“If the United States were to be the first to release this new means of indiscriminate destruction upon mankind, she would sacrifice public support throughout the world, precipitate the race for armaments, and prejudice the possibility of reaching an international agreement on the future control of such weapons.”

Mark Selden writes, “Perhaps the most trenchant contemporary critique of the American moral position on the bomb and the scales of justice in the war was voiced by the Indian jurist Radhabinod Pal, a dissenting voice at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal. Pal observed that previously, indiscriminate murder of civilians in order to hasten the enemy's surrender was considered a crime, and he felt that the use of the atomic bombs was such a crime.

On August 11, 1945, the Japanese government filed an official protest over the atomic bombing to the U.S. State Department through the Swiss Legation in Tokyo. The Japanese government stated that because of the bombs' unheard of power and the fact that they kill civilians, the use of the bombs “constitutes a new crime against humanity and civilization.”

In 1963, the District Court of Tokyo found that “the attacks upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki caused such severe and indiscriminate suffering that they did violate the most basic legal principles governing the conduct of war.” In the opinion of the court, the act of dropping an atomic bomb on cities was at the time governed by international law found in the Hague Regulations on Land Warfare of 1907 and the Hague Draft Rules of Air Warfare of 1922–1923 and was therefore illegal.

As the first military use of nuclear weapons, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki represent to some the crossing of a crucial barrier. Peter Kuznick, director of the Nuclear Studies Institute at American University, wrote that President Truman's decision constituted “not just a war crime; it was a crime against humanity.”

Although bombings do not meet the generally accepted definition of genocide, some consider this definition too strict, and that the atomic bombings do represent a genocide. For example, historian Bruce Cumings states there is a consensus among historians to Martin Sherwin's statement, that “the Nagasaki bomb was gratuitous at best and genocidal at worst.”

The scholar R. J. Rummel argues that the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were war crimes. Rummel quotes an official protest from the U.S. government in 1938 to Japan, for its bombing of Chinese cities, which stated that “[t]he bombing of non-combatant populations violated international and humanitarian laws.”

### *Militarily Unnecessary*

The 1946 United States Strategic Bombing Survey, written by Paul Nitze, concluded that the atomic bombs had been unnecessary to the winning of the war. After reviewing numerous documents, and interviewing hundreds of Japanese civilian and military leaders after Japan surrendered, Nitze reported:

Based on a detailed investigation of all the facts, and supported by the testimony of the surviving Japanese leaders involved, it is the Survey's opinion that certainly prior to 31 December 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated.

This conclusion assumed that a conventional fire-bombing attack would have continued, with ever-increasing numbers of B-29s, and a greater level of destruction to Japan's cities and population. One of Nitze's most influential sources was Prince Fumimaro Konoe, who responded to a question asking whether Japan would have surrendered if the atomic bombs had not been dropped by saying that resistance would have continued through November or December, 1945.

Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote in his memoir *The White House Years* that he was opposed to the use of the bombs “on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary”.

Historian Tsuyoshi Hasegawa's research has led him to conclude that the atomic bombings themselves were not even the principal reason for capitulation. Instead, he contends, it was the swift and devastating Soviet victories in Manchuria that forced the Japanese surrender on 15 August 1945, though the War Council did not know the extent of the losses to the Soviets in China at that time.

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