

Hiroshima and Nagasaki: General Groves and the Nuclear Radiation 'Hoax'

Lingering deaths in Japan? Just 'propaganda.'

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As I've noted in previous posts—and in my recent books [Atomic Cover-up](#) and [The Beginning or the End](#)—the U.S. after dropping the bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki was confronted with a unique publicity (not to mention, moral) problem.

Reports from Japan warned of a mysterious new disease afflicting survivors of the twin blasts. Some in Japan were already dubbing it "radiation disease," which was what Robert Oppenheimer some of our other bomb-makers privately expected (though unmentioned in the Christopher Nolan movie)—but still, officials and most in media in U.S. mocked the idea. No one from the West had yet reached either city.

Seventy-eight years ago this week, however, one of the most horrific, if revealing, conversations of the nuclear era took place.

Gen. Leslie Groves, head of the Manhattan Project, had received a telex the day before from Los Alamos, as scientists asked for information on those shocking reports from Japan. Groves responded that they were nothing but "a hoax" or "propaganda." The top radiation expert at Los Alamos also used the word "hoax."



Knowing that the press would be seeking his official response, Groves called Lt. Col. Charles Rea, a doctor at Oak Ridge hospital (part of the bomb project). According to the official transcript, Rea called the reports of death-by-radiation “propaganda,” “hookum,” and “kind of crazy” and Groves joked, “Of course, it’s crazy—a doctor like me can tell that!”

But Groves knew it wasn’t crazy and he grew agitated as he read passages from the Japanese reports. He even asked, seriously, if there was “any difference between Japanese blood and others.” Both men ultimately seized on the idea that everything was attributable to burns—or “good thermal burns,” as Rea put it. “They are getting the delayed action of the burn,” he advised. Groves replied, “Of course we are getting a good dose of propaganda”—and blamed some of our scientists and our media for giving the reports any credence.

Groves even bragged, “We are not bothered a bit, excepting for—what they are trying to do is create sympathy.” Adding: “This is the kind of thing that hurts us.” (See [PDF of transcript](#). click the Memorandum to access complete document)

~~TOP SECRET~~

MEMORANDUM of Telephone Conversation between General Groves and Lt. Col. Rea,
Oak Ridge Hospital, 9:00 a.m., 25 August 1945.

G: ". . . . which fatally burned 30,000 victims during the first two weeks following its explosion."

R: Ultra-violet - is that the word?

G: Yes.

R: That's kind of crazy.

G: Of course, it's crazy - a doctor like me can tell that. "The death toll at Hiroshima and at Nagasaki, the other Japanese city blasted atomically, is still rising, the broadcast said. Radio Tokyo described Hiroshima as a city of death. 90% of its houses, in which 250,000 had lived, were instantly crushed." I don't understand the 250,000 because it had a much bigger population a number of years ago before the war started, and it was a military city. "Now it is peopled by ghost parade, the living doomed to die of radioactivity burns."

R: Let me interrupt you here a minute. I would say this: I think it's good propaganda. The thing is these people got good and burned - good thermal burns.

G: That's the feeling I have. Let me go on here and give you the rest of the picture. "So painful are these injuries that sufferers plead: 'Please kill me,' the broadcast said. No one can ever completely recover."

R: This has been in our paper, too, last night.

G: Then it goes on: "Radioactivity caused by the fission of the uranium used in atomic bombs is taking a toll of mounting deaths and causing reconstruction workers in Hiroshima to suffer various sicknesses and ill health."

R: I would say this: You yourself, as far as radioactivity is concerned, it isn't anything immediate, it's a prolonged thing. I think what these people have, they just got a good thermal burn, that's what it is. A lot of these people, first of all, they don't notice it much. You may get burned and you may have a little redness, but in a couple of days you may have a big blister or a sloughing of the skin, and I think that is what these people have had.

G: That is brought out a little later on. Now it says here: "A special news correspondent of the Japs said that three days after the bomb fell, there were 30,000 dead, and two weeks later the death toll had mounted to 60,000 and is continuing to rise." One thing is they are finding the bodies.

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But Rea hinted that he knew Groves was merely denying reality, admitting finally, “Of course, those Jap scientists over there aren’t so dumb either.” Still, in a second conversation that day with Groves, Rea advised: “I think you had better get the anti-propagandists out.” One of the great quotes of that time. He also advised, “You will have to get some big-wig to put a countet-statement in the paper.” (That big-wig would end up being....Oppenheimer, again not mentioned in the Nolan movie.)

Five days later, on a visit to Oak Ridge, Groves publicly labelled the reports from Japan propaganda and added, “The atomic bomb is not an inhuman weapon.”

Groves’ top aide, Kenneth D. Nichols (featured as a key Oppenheimer antagonist in the Nolan movie), would admit in his 1987 memoirs that “we knew that there would be many deaths and injuries caused by the radiation....”

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