

Nuclear War or Invasion: The False Dichotomy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Like other dark chapters in U.S. history, the official narrative of the decision to unleash the most destructive weapon humanity has ever known upon an utterly defeated people is deeply flawed.

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We bring to your attention this article, first published by Common Dreams on August 6, 2020, in commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing.

Seventy-five years ago, the United States waged the only nuclear war in history. Among the truths held self-evident by millions of Americans is the notion that the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki saved lives, both American and Japanese. The choice, Americans are told starting as school children and throughout their lives by largely uncritical media, was between nuclear war and an even bloodier protracted invasion of Japan, whose fanatical people would have fought to the death defending their homeland and their divine emperor.

As with so many other dark chapters in US history, the official narrative of the decision to unleash the most destructive weapon humanity has ever known upon an utterly defeated people is deeply flawed.

‘Anxious to Terminate’

The Japanese had in fact been trying to find a way to surrender with honor for months before the atomic bombs were dropped, and US leaders knew it. Japan could no longer defend itself from the ruthless, relentless American onslaught; years of ferocious firebombing had reduced most Japanese cities, including the capital Tokyo, to ruins. General Curtis “Bombs Away” LeMay, commander of strategic bombing, even [complained](#) that there was nothing left to bomb there but “garbage can targets.”

After years of war and privation, Japan's people had had enough, and so had many of its leaders. The Allies, through a secret cryptanalysis project codenamed Magic, had [intercepted and decoded](#) secret transmissions from Shigenori Togo, the Japanese foreign minister, to Naotaki Sato, the ambassador in Moscow, stating a desire to end the war.

"His Majesty is extremely anxious to terminate the war as soon as possible," Sato cabled on July 12. However, saving face was imperative to the Japanese, which meant retaining their sacred emperor. Unconditional surrender was, for the time being, out of the question.

In a [secret memo](#) dated June 28, Undersecretary of the Navy Ralph A. Bard wrote that "the Japanese government may be searching for some opportunity which they could use as a medium of surrender." In a 1960 interview, Bard reiterated that "the Japanese were ready for peace and had already approached the Russians" about capitulating.

On July 26, the leaders of the US, Britain and China issued the [Potsdam Declaration](#), demanding unconditional Japanese surrender and vowing "prompt and utter destruction"—the US had [successfully tested](#) the first atomic bomb in New Mexico 10 days earlier—if Japan refused. The declaration was [originally written](#) so that Emperor Hirohito would not be removed from the Chrysanthemum Throne, with Japan to be ruled as a constitutional monarchy after the war.

However, Secretary of State James Byrnes removed that language from the final declaration. It would be unconditional surrender or total annihilation.

President Harry S. Truman, who only learned about the Manhattan Project after being sworn in following Franklin D. Roosevelt's death on April 12, approved a plan to drop two atomic bombs on Japan. Planners sought undamaged cities where military facilities were located near civilians, and the decision was made to detonate the bombs hundreds of meters in the air for maximum destructive effect.

Tokyo, which in early March [suffered firebombing](#) that killed more people than either of the atomic bombs, was off the table as a target. [Kyoto was spared](#) due to its cultural significance. Kyoto's good fortune would mean the Nagasaki's destruction. Hiroshima, Japan's largest untouched target, would die first.

Widespread Opposition



Seven of the eight five-star US generals and admirals in 1945 [opposed](#) using the atomic bomb against Japan. One of them, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, [later said that](#) "the

Japanese were ready to surrender and it wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing."

"Japan was already defeated and dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary," President Eisenhower [wrote in 1954](#). "I thought our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was no longer mandatory to save American lives. It was my belief that Japan was, at that very moment, seeking some way to surrender with a minimum loss of face."

Despite so much high-level misgiving, the US did "hit them with that awful thing." The idea of giving Japanese officials a live demonstration of an atomic bomb on a remote island, proposed by Strategic Bombing Survey Vice Chairman Paul Nitze and supported by Navy Secretary James Forrestal, was rejected. The US was already destroying multiple Japanese cities every week; it was believed that such a demonstration would likely not have moved the Japanese any more than the ongoing destruction of their actual cities.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1945, Japanese officials increasingly sought an honorable end to the war. Although they had no way of knowing that the US was planning to wage nuclear war against them, they knew that the defeat of Nazi Germany meant that a Soviet invasion, first of Manchuria and Korea and then of Japan itself, was now imminent.

"The Japanese could not fight a two-front war, and were more anti-communist than the Americans were," Martin Sherwin, an historian awarded the Pulitzer Prize for co-authoring a biography of Manhattan Project leader Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer, [said a recent webinar](#) sponsored by [over two dozen](#) international peace organizations. "The idea of a Soviet occupation of Japan was their worst nightmare."

Historian and professor Peter Kuznick, who with Oliver Stone co-authored the bestselling *The Untold History of the United States*, also spoke at the webinar, adding that "the Joint Chiefs of Staff repeatedly reported that if the USSR should enter the war then Japan would realize that defeat is inevitable." Kuznick also noted that General George Marshall, the only five-star US officer to approve of using the atomic bomb, said that a Soviet invasion would likely lead to Japan's swift surrender.

Truman knew this too. On the opening day of the Potsdam Conference, he had lunch with Joseph Stalin. Afterwards he [wrote in his diary](#) that the USSR "will be in the Jap war by August 15. Fini Japs when that occurs."



Regardless, Truman pressed ahead with the plan to destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki while attempting to convince himself that there was some humanity in the act.

“I have told Secretary of War Stimson to use [the A-bomb] so that military objectives... are the target, not women and children,” the president [wrote in his diary](#) on July 25.

“Even if the Japs are savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic, we as the leader of the world for the common welfare cannot drop that terrible bomb on the old capital [Kyoto] or the new [Tokyo],” he added. “The target will be a purely military one.”

The First Nuclear War

At 8:15 a.m. on August 6, 1945, a Boeing B-29 Superfortress dropped “Little Boy,” the first nuclear weapon ever used in war. It exploded above Hiroshima with the force of 16 kilotons of TNT, [destroying everything and everyone](#) within about a 1-mile (1.62 km) radius. The heat, blast wave and ensuing inferno killed as many as 90,000 people. Tens of thousands more were injured, many of them mortally. Tens of thousands more people perished from radiation over the following weeks, months and years.

Three days later, Nagasaki suffered a similar fate as “Fat Man,” the second and so far the last nuclear weapon used in war, [obliterated Nagasaki](#) in a 20-kiloton air burst. As many as 75,000 people died that day, with a similar number of people wounded and tens of thousands more dying later from radiation.

Despite Truman’s attempt at self-delusion, [most of the people](#) living in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 were women, children and old people, as most of the men were away fighting the war, or dead from it.

The same morning that Nagasaki was destroyed, Prime Minister Kintaro Suzuki addressed the Japanese cabinet, [declaring that](#) “under the present circumstances I have concluded that our only alternative is to accept the Potsdam Proclamation and terminate the war.”

Why Japan Really Surrendered

Suzuki did not learn about Nagasaki until the afternoon of August 9. But he did know that the Soviet Union had declared war on Japan the previous day. This, Japanese officials and historians on both sides of the Pacific agree, precipitated Japan’s surrender more than the A-bombs, although it also slammed the door shut on attempts to negotiate a surrender via Moscow.

“The destruction of another city was just the destruction of another city,” said Sherwin. “It was the entry of the Soviets into the war that really threw the Japanese into a complete panic.” They knew that if they didn’t surrender soon to the US, they would lose not only their overseas empire, but also Hokkaido.

An exhibit at the National Museum of the US Navy in Washington, DC [states that](#) “the vast destruction wreaked by the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the loss of 135,000 people made little impact on the Japanese military. However, the Soviet invasion of Manchuria changed their minds.”

“The atomic bomb had nothing to do with the end of the war at all,” General LeMay [stated flatly](#) in September 1945.

“The use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan,” [agreed](#) Admiral William Leahy, Truman’s chief of staff. “The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender because of the effective sea blockade and the successful bombing with conventional weapons.”

It is probably too much to say the atomic bombings had nothing to do with ending the war. Hirohito, after all, spoke of “a new and most cruel bomb” that could “lead to the total extinction of human civilization,” in his surrender broadcast. It is also important to note that the decision to capitulate was not unanimous; in fact, a cabal of hard-line military officers [attempted to stage a coup](#) the day before the emperor’s announcement.

Target: Moscow

Not only were Hiroshima and Nagasaki the last battles of World War II, they were also the first battles of the Cold War. American leaders knew very well that the Soviet Union would feature prominently in the postwar world order.

The US wanted to maximize its own position as the dominant world power, and what better way to do this than to show the Russians that the United States had the cold resolve necessary to unilaterally wage nuclear war, even when it enjoyed an atomic monopoly and dropping the bomb wasn’t even necessary?



Stimson [acknowledged](#) that some US officials saw nuclear weapons as “a diplomatic weapon,” and that “some of the men in charge of foreign policy were eager to carry the bomb as their ace-in-the-hole” and wanted “to browbeat the Russians with the bomb held rather ostentatiously on our hip.”

“I’ll certainly have a hammer on those boys,” Truman [reportedly said](#), referring to the A-bomb and Soviet leaders.

[According to](#) Manhattan Project scientist Leo Szilard, Secretary Byrnes believed that “Russia might be more manageable if impressed by American military might, and that a demonstration of the bomb might impress Russia.”

But instead of “managing” Russia, some US officials admitted that waging nuclear war actually empowered it, encouraging Moscow to rush to develop its own nuclear arsenal,

which it did in 1949.

‘A Nice, Round Figure’

As for the common claim that a US invasion of Japan would have cost a million lives, Kai Bird, who shared the Pulitzer Prize with Sherwin for their Oppenheimer biography, said it is simply not true.

“This figure was never given to Truman or bandied about by Stimson,” Bird told the webinar audience. “I asked [Stimson protégé] McGeorge Bundy about it, and he sheepishly admitted that he chose 1 million because it was a nice, round figure. He pulled it out of thin air.”

There is no doubt that an invasion of Japan would have been horrific for all involved, as demonstrated by the bloody battle for Okinawa, in which over 12,000 US invaders and six times that number of Japanese defenders died, along with as many as half of the island’s 300,000 civilians, many of whom [committed mass suicide](#) rather than fall under enemy occupation. However, the probability of Japan remaining in the war by the time the US was ready to invade was extremely low, especially given the Soviet Union’s declaration of war.

Plus, the claim that the United States cared anything about the lives of Japanese people, who were portrayed in wartime propaganda as sub-human barbarians, beggars belief. US bombs and bullets had killed over a million Japanese people by 1945, and back in the United States, Japanese Americans and Japanese nationals—who had been banned from even immigrating to the US since the 1920s—were still languishing in a network of [concentration camps](#).



Representatives of the Empire of Japan stand aboard *USS Missouri* prior to signing of the Instrument of Surrender on September 2, 1945. (Photo: US National Archives/Army Signal Corps)

Being mere [“dirty Japs”](#) made it easier for the Americans to try out their ultimate weapon, in which so much time and treasure had been invested. The cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki would make perfect laboratories in which to test the atomic bomb, as some US officials later acknowledged.

“When we didn’t need to do it, and we knew we didn’t need to do it, and they knew that we didn’t need to do it, we used [the Japanese] as an experiment for two atomic bombs,” [said](#) General Carter Clarke, the intelligence officer in charge of intercepted Japanese cables.

Tough Luck

Many of the very men who invented the A-bomb also had grave misgivings, even before it was used. These Manhattan Project scientists wrote what came to be known as the [Franck Report](#) in May 1945. It recommended a demonstration of the bomb to the Japanese and questioned whether using it would really bring Japan to its knees when massive conventional bombing had failed to do so.

“If no international agreement is concluded immediately after the first detonation, this will mean a flying start of an unlimited armaments race,” the report prophetically stated.

One notable participant in the events of August 6, 1945 [had no regrets](#). Paul Tibbets flew the B-29 bomber, named Enola Gay after his mother, that let loose “Little Boy” over Hiroshima on that fateful morning. Asked at age 87 about doing it again, Tibbets, who died in 2007, said he “wouldn’t hesitate if I had the choice.”

“I’d wipe ‘em out,” he said. “You’re gonna kill innocent people at the same time, but we’ve never fought a damn war anywhere in the world where they didn’t kill innocent people. If the newspapers would just cut out the shit: ‘You’ve killed so many civilians.’ That’s their tough luck for being there.”

A False Choice

Seventy-five years later, a slim majority of Americans [still believe](#) the nuclear war against Japan was justified. Millions of Americans believe the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were acts of “necessary evil,” while ignoring alternatives to the standard narrative that the only choice was between nuclear war and invading Japan.

What if the United States had clarified its unconditional surrender stance to assure that Hirohito would not be hanged? Or announced that he would be allowed to remain in a position of ceremonial leadership? After all, General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Allied Commander, would ultimately allow Hirohito to remain emperor, even if only as a figurehead.

“It is possible,” [wrote Stimson](#) in his memoir, “that an earlier exposition of American willingness to retain the emperor could have produced an earlier ending to the war.”

It is also possible, adds Sherwin, “that unconditional surrender would have been qualified earlier” if the atomic bomb wasn’t being developed and tested for use.

“Most historians know this, but most Americans regurgitate the official narrative,” Bird told the webinar audience.

The official US narrative blames the Soviet Union for starting the Cold War and the nuclear arms race, which [on numerous occasions](#) over the following decades brought the world within reach, and once to the brink, of thermonuclear annihilation. But it was the United States that fired the first fiery salvo, forcing the Soviets to scramble to develop their own deterrent and launching an arms race in which there are now thousands of nuclear warheads in the arsenals of a record number of countries, with the risk of nuclear armageddon [as real as it has ever been](#).

Americans must admit that the nuclear war against Japan was one of the greatest atrocities in human history. For the first time ever, we humans now have the power to bring about our own extinction. There is absolutely nothing “necessary” about this evil.

“If we’d lost the war, we’d all have been tried as war criminals,” General LeMay remarked, [according to](#) Robert McNamara, who brought maximum efficiency to B-29 bombing during the war and maximum death and destruction to Vietnam as secretary of defense during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.

He added: “What makes it immoral if you lose but not immoral if you win?”

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Featured image: In this handout picture released by the U.S. Army, a mushroom cloud billows about one hour after a nuclear bomb was detonated above Hiroshima, Japan on Aug. 6, 1945. (Source: U.S. Army via Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, HO)

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