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. J. Samuel Walker noted that "The fundamental issue that has divided scholars over a period of nearly four decades is whether the use of the bomb was necessary to achieve victory in the war in the Pacific on terms satisfactory to the United States."

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 Operation Downfall, the planned invasion of Japan.

The U.S. side anticipated losing many soldiers in the planned invasion of Japan, although the actual number of expected fatalities and wounded is subject to some debate. 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 Joint Chiefs of Staff 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 laborers working in harsh conditions under a forced mobilization. Furthermore, he 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.

The list of causes of suffering continues: a submarine blockade and a mining operation, Operation Starvation, had effectively cut off Japan's imports. A complementary operation against Japan's railways was about to begin, with the goal of isolating the cities of southern Honshū from the food grown elsewhere in the Home Islands. “Immediately after the defeat, some estimated that 10 million people were likely to starve to death,” noted historian Daikichi Irokawa. Meanwhile, fighting continued in The Philippines, New Guinea and Borneo, and offensives were scheduled for September in southern China and Malaya. The Soviet invasion of Manchuria, had in the week before the surrender 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 promulgated 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.

Supporters of the bombings have emphasized the strategic significance 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 ordnance, ships, military equipment, and other war materials.

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.

In early July, on his way to Potsdam, Truman had re-examined the decision to use the bomb. In the end, Truman made the decision to drop the atomic bombs on Japan. His 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 "...an ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation..." In his Rescript to the Soldiers and Sailors, delivered on 17 August, he focused however on the impact of the Soviet invasion, omitting any reference to the atomic bombings.

Japan's leaders refused to surrender

Some historians see ancient Japanese warrior traditions as a major factor in the resistance in the Japanese military to the idea of surrender. According to one Air Force account,

> "The Japanese code of bushido—'the way of the warrior'—was deeply ingrained. The concept of Yamato-damashii equipped each soldier with a strict code: never be captured, never break down, and never surrender. Surrender was dishonorable. Each soldier was trained to fight to the death and was expected to die before suffering dishonor. Defeated Japanese leaders preferred to take their own lives in the painful samurai ritual of seppuku (called hara kiri in the West.). Warriors who surrendered were not deemed worthy of regard or respect."

Japanese militarism was aggravated by the Great Depression, and had resulted in countless assassinations of reformers attempting to check military power, among them Takahashi Korekiyo, Saitō Makoto, and Inukai Tsuyoshi. This created an environment in which opposition to war was a much riskier endeavor.

According to historian Richard B. Franklin,

> "The intercepts of Japanese Imperial Army and Navy messages disclosed without exception that Japan's armed forces were determined to fight a final Armageddon battle in the homeland against an Allied invasion. [...] American politicians would then gladly negotiate an end to the war far more generous than unconditional surrender."

The U.S. Department of Energy's 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.

A political stalemate developed between the military and civilian leaders of Japan, the military increasingly determined to fight despite all costs and odds and the civilian leadership seeking a way to negotiate an end to the war. Further complicating the decision was the fact that no cabinet could exist without the representative of the Imperial Japanese Army. This meant that the Army and the Navy could veto any decision by having its Minister resign, thus making it the most powerful posts on the SWC. In early August 1945 the cabinet was equally split between those who advocated an end to the war on one condition, the preservation of the Kokutai, and those who insisted on three other conditions : leave disarmament and demobilization to Imperial General Headquarters, no occupation of the Japanese Home Islands, Korea, or Formosa, and delegation to the Japanese government of the punishment of war criminals.

Japan had an example of unconditional surrender in the German Instrument of Surrender. On 26 July, Truman and other allied leaders issued The Potsdam Declaration outlining terms of surrender for Japan. The declaration stated that "The alternative for Japan is prompt and utter destruction." It was rejected. The Emperor, who was waiting for a Soviet reply to Japanese peace feelers, made no move to change the government position.

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.

Professor of history Robert James Maddox wrote that "Another myth that has attained wide attention is that at least several of Truman's top military advisers later informed him that using atomic bombs against Japan would be militarily unnecessary or immoral, or both. There is no persuasive evidence that any of them did so. None of the Joint Chiefs ever made such a claim." Further, "[n]either MacArthur nor Nimitz ever communicated to Truman any change of mind about the need for invasion or expressed reservations about using the bombs."

Maddox also wrote that "Even 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."

The "one condition" faction seized on the bombing as decisive justification of surrender. 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:

> "This policy of indiscriminate murder to shorten the war was considered to be a crime. In the Pacific war under our consideration, if there was anything approaching what is indicated in the above letter of the German Emperor, it is the decision coming from the Allied powers to use the bomb."

Selden mentions another critique of the nuclear bombing, which he says the U.S. government effectively suppressed for twenty-five years, as worth mention. 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, observing that:

> "Combatant and noncombatant men and women, old and young, are massacred without discrimination by the atmospheric pressure of the explosion, as well as by the radiating heat which result therefrom. Consequently there is involved a bomb having the most cruel effects humanity has ever known. . . . The bombs in question, used by the Americans, by their cruelty and by their terrorizing effects, surpass by far gas or any other arm, the use of which is prohibited. Japanese protests against U.S. desecration of international principles of war paired the use of the atomic bomb with the earlier firebombing, which massacred old people, women and children, destroying and burning down Shinto and Buddhist temples, schools, hospitals, living quarters, etc. . . . They now use this new bomb, having an uncontrollable and cruel effect much greater than any other arms or projectiles ever used to date. This constitutes a new crime against humanity and civilization."

Selden concludes that despite the war crimes committed by the Empire of Japan, nevertheless, "the Japanese protest correctly pointed to U.S. violations of internationally accepted principles of war with respect to the wholesale destruction of populations."

In 1963 the bombings were the subject of a judicial review in Ryuichi Shimoda et al. v. The State. On the 22nd anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the District Court of Tokyo declined to rule on the legality of nuclear weapons in general, but 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 of President Truman:

> "He knew he was beginning the process of annihilation of the species. It was not just a war crime; it was a crime against humanity."

Takashi Hiraoka, mayor of Hiroshima, upholding nuclear disarmament, said in a hearing to The Hague International Court of Justice (ICJ):

> "It is clear that the use of nuclear weapons, which cause indiscriminate mass murder that leaves [effects on] survivors for decades, is a violation of international law".

Itcho Itoh, the mayor of Nagasaki, declared in the same hearing:

> "It is said that the descendants of the atomic bomb survivors will have to be monitored for several generations to clarify the genetic impact, which means that the descendants will live in anxiety for [decades] to come. [...] with their colossal power and capacity for slaughter and destruction, nuclear weapons make no distinction between combatants and non-combatants or between military

installations and civilian communities [...] The use of nuclear weapons [...] therefore is a manifest infraction of international law."

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, University of Chicago 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 instead extends the definition of genocide to what he calls democide, and includes the major part of deaths from the atom bombings in these. His definition of democide includes not only genocide, but also an excessive killing of civilians in war, to the extent that this is against the agreed rules for warfare; he argues that indeed the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were war crimes, and thus democide. Rummel quotes among others an official protest from the US 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."

Rummel also considers excess deaths of civilians in firestorms caused by conventional means, such as in Tokyo, as acts of democide.

State terrorism

Historical accounts indicate that the decision to use the atomic bombs was made in order to provoke an early surrender of Japan by use of an awe-inspiring power. These observations have caused some commentators to state that the incident was an act of "war terrorism". Michael Walzer wrote, "... And, finally, there is war terrorism: the effort to kill civilians in such large numbers that their government is forced to surrender. Hiroshima seems

to me the classic case." This type of claim prompted historian Robert Newman, a supporter of the bombings, to argue that the practice of terrorism is justified in some cases.

Certain scholars and historians have characterized the atomic bombings of Japan as a form of state terrorism. This interpretation centers around a definition of terrorism as the targeting of innocents to achieve a political goal. As Frances V. Harbour points out, the meeting of the Target Committee in Los Alamos on 10 and 11 May 1945 suggested targeting the large population centers of Kyoto or Hiroshima for a "psychological effect" and to make "the initial use sufficiently spectacular for the importance of the weapon to be internationally recognized." As such, Professor Harbour suggests the goal was to create terror for political ends both in and beyond Japan. However, Burleigh Taylor Wilkins has written that it stretches the meaning of "terrorism" to include wartime acts.

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.

Historians, such as Bernstein, Hasegawa, and Newman, have criticized Nitze for drawing a conclusion that, they say, went far beyond what the available evidence warranted, in order to promote the reputation of the Air Force at the expense of the Army and Navy.

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”.

Other U.S. military officers who disagreed with the necessity of the bombings include General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, Fleet Admiral William D. Leahy (the Chief of Staff to the President), Brigadier General Carter Clarke (the military intelligence officer who prepared intercepted Japanese cables for U.S. officials), and Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet.

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.