

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.

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

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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