

Sixty years since the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings

Part two: American imperialism and the atom bomb

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The following is the second in a three-part series marking 60 years since the dropping of atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Part one, describing the destructive effects of the bomb on the population of the two cities, was published on August 6. Part three will be published on August 9.

The destruction wreaked upon the populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has long been justified by the American government on the grounds that it was necessary “to save American lives.” This rationale has not ceased to be the officially sanctioned historical truth even though it has been thoroughly debunked by evidence that has come out over the past sixty years.

To cite one example, the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal* wrote on August 5, 2005 that the bombs averted an invasion of the Japanese mainland, “for which the Truman Administration anticipated casualties of between 200,000 and one million.” Moreover, “a mainland invasion could have resulted in millions of Japanese deaths.” According to this calculus, the hundreds of thousands of Japanese citizens, mainly civilians, who suffered an inexpressible agony and death from the atom bomb were sacrificed in the interest of preserving as many lives as possible.

Even if one were to accept the premises of this argument, it would not mitigate the fundamental criminality—legal and moral—involved in the annihilation of these urban centers. However, the premises are entirely mythical. Not only have the estimated casualty figures been exaggerated [1], but the main reasons for the US government’s decision to drop the bombs had nothing to do with avoiding an American invasion of Japan.

As with any great historical question, there were a number of different factors that went into the decision to drop the bomb, and it will be impossible to deal with all of them here. We will confine ourselves to touching on some of the basic issues and documents.

It is first of all necessary to note that the dropping of the atomic bombs on largely defenseless cities—which, while they held military headquarters or military-related industries, were predominantly civilian in character—had a certain continuity with the manner in which the United States was carrying out the war in the Pacific.

Once it had gained control of Japanese airspace, the American military increasingly turned to what can only be described as terrorist methods—indiscriminate attacks on civilian populations for the purpose of spreading fear and panic. Before Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the most devastating example of these methods was the firebombing of Tokyo on March 9, 1945, which killed some 87,000 people [2]. This followed by less than a month the infamous firebombing of the German city of Dresden, on February 13-14, 1945.

Despite its humanitarian pretenses, the American military was demonstrating in these actions that it was capable of acting just as brutally as Germany or Japan in the conduct of war. There was an interesting

exchange, during a discussion between President Harry Truman and Secretary of War Henry Stimson on June 6, 1945 that gives a sense of the manner in which the American government considered the question of the mass annihilation of Japanese civilians.

Stimson records in a memorandum that he raised certain pragmatic concerns with the area bombing of Japanese cities being carried out by the US Air Force: “I told [Truman] I was anxious about this feature of the war for two reasons: first, because I did not want to have the United States get the reputation of outdoing Hitler in atrocities; and second, I was a little fearful that before we could get ready the Air Force might have Japan so thoroughly bombed out that the new weapon [the atom bomb] would not have a fair background to show its strength. He laughed and said he understood” [3]. Stimson was concerned that the wanton destruction of Japanese cities would disrupt plans for the use of the atom bomb because there would be no “fair background,” that is, a suitably populated and intact urban center. The conversation also demonstrates that at this point the United States completely dominated Japan militarily, able to destroy its cities virtually at will.

The use of the bomb as a terrorist weapon—that is, as a means of instilling mass terror among the Japanese population—was underscored in a meeting of the Interim Committee on May 31, 1945. The Interim Committee consisted of those directly involved in the Manhattan Project, such as Robert Oppenheimer and other scientists, as well as Truman administration officials, including Secretary of State James Byrnes and Secretary of War Stimson. It was set up to discuss the use of the atomic bomb, propose targets and consider related issues. According to a transcript of that meeting, “After much discussion concerning various types of targets and the effects to be produced, the Secretary [of War Stimson] expressed the conclusion, on which there was general agreement, that we could not give the Japanese any warning; that we could not concentrate on a civilian area; but that we should seek to make a profound *psychological impression* on as many of the inhabitants as possible. At the suggestion of Dr. [James] Conant, the Secretary agreed that the most desirable target would be a vital war plant employing a large number of workers and *closely surrounded by workers’ houses*”[4] (emphasis added).

Despite the reference to not concentrating on a civilian area, the committee explicitly rejected the use of the bomb first on a purely military or uninhabited region, as some of the scientists who had worked with the panel recommended [5].

Many of the scientists who worked or supported the Manhattan Project did so because of their intense hatred of Hitler and the Nazi regime. The project was originally justified on the grounds that if Hitler were to acquire the bomb first the consequences would be absolutely devastating. But by the time the United States had perfected the technology, Germany

had been defeated. Nevertheless, the Truman administration not only decided to use the bomb, but did so with evident glee. Truman famously declared that he did not lose a night's sleep over the decision. According to one account, when he heard the news about Hiroshima while crossing the Atlantic, he declared, "This is the greatest thing in history," and then "raced about the ship to spread the news, insisting that he had never made a happier announcement. 'We have won the gamble,' he told the assembled and cheering crew" [6].

Commenting on this phenomenon, the historian Gabriel Jackson remarked, "In the specific circumstances of August 1945, the use of the atom bomb showed that a psychologically very normal and democratically elected chief executive could use the weapon just as the Nazi dictator would have used it. In this way, the United States—for anyone concerned with moral distinctions in the different types of government—blurred the difference between fascism and democracy" [7].

The atomic bomb and the drive for American hegemony

Prior to World War II, it would have been taken for granted that any civilized society could use a weapon such as the atomic bomb only under the most desperate conditions. The idea that such a weapon could be used against a civilian population would have been considered incomprehensible unless done by a society thoroughly debased and morally corrupted. And yet the United States has the singular distinction of being the only country ever to use an atomic bomb. Moreover, it used it not out of military necessity, but for political and strategic reasons, above all, as a tool in its conflict with the Soviet Union. To understand the broader interests involved, it is necessary to place the events of August 6 and August 9, 1945 in their historical context.

By early 1945, the war in Europe, begun in 1939, was coming to an end, though Germany's final surrender did not take place until May. The turning point of the war had been the German defeat at the Battle of Stalingrad in February 1943, followed by the American-British invasion of Europe in the spring of 1944.

While the Soviet Union was allied with the United States and Britain, there were enormous divisions within the Allied camp. In spite of the Stalinist degeneration of the USSR, the Soviet bureaucracy still based itself on the property relations established in the October revolution of 1917. And in spite of Stalin's best efforts to accommodate the imperialist powers, neither the British nor the American ruling elite ever reconciled themselves to the existence of these property relations.

But at the time, the United States and Britain required the help of the Soviet Union in the war against both Germany and Japan. The leading role of the Red Army in defeating Germany meant that the other powers were forced to grant it concessions, particularly in Eastern Europe. At the conference at Yalta in February 1945, the "Big Three" essentially agreed to the division of Europe between them, including the joint control of Germany. Moreover, the administration of US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt felt that it was critical to gain Soviet participation in the war against Japan in order to bring it to a quick conclusion. Since 1941, the Soviet Union and Japan had maintained what has been called a "strange neutrality": while the Soviet Union was at war with Japan's ally Germany and Japan was at war with the Soviet Union's ally the United States, the two countries had agreed to a neutrality pact in 1941, which stipulated that they not engage in war with each other.

At Yalta, in return for an agreement that the Soviet Union would join the war against Japan "in two or three months" after Germany's surrender, Roosevelt and Churchill accepted several territorial and commercial concessions, including Soviet control of much of Mongolia and several islands and ports near Japan that were considered crucial to Soviet interests.

By the spring of 1945, the Truman administration—Roosevelt died on April 12—was looking to the possession of the atomic bomb as a way to alter the equation and shift the balance of forces toward the US. In his

diary of May 14, 1945, Secretary of War Stimson reported a conversation with General George Marshall, the President's chief of staff, in which Stimson warned against getting in a confrontation with the Soviet Union before possession of the atom bomb was certain. Stimson writes that he told Marshall "that my own opinion was that the time now and the method now to deal with Russia was to keep our mouths shut and let our actions speak for words...It is a case where we have got to regain the lead and perhaps do it in a pretty rough and realistic way. They have rather taken it away from us because we have talked too much and have been too lavish with our beneficences to them. I told him this was a place where we really held all the cards. I called it a royal straight flush and we mustn't be a fool about the way we play it. They can't get along without our help and industries and we have coming into action a weapon which will be unique" [8].

The next day, Stimson expressed concerns that an upcoming meeting between Truman, Stalin and Churchill at Potsdam would take place before the first atomic test. "It may be necessary," Stimson wrote, "to have it out with Russia on her relations to Manchuria and Port Arthur and various other parts of North China, and also the relations of China to us. Over any such tangled wave of problems the S-1 [code name for atomic bomb] secret would be dominant and yet we will not know until after that time probably, until after that meeting, whether this is a weapon in our hands or not. We think it will be shortly afterwards, but it seems a terrible thing to gamble with such big stakes in diplomacy without having your master card in your hand" [9].

In the end, Truman had the Potsdam conference postponed for several weeks in order to give the Manhattan Project more time. On May 21, Joseph Davies, the former ambassador to the Soviet Union, reported on a meeting with Truman in which Truman said he "did not want to meet [at Potsdam] until July. He had his budget (*) on his hands. The test was set for June, but had been postponed until July." At the bottom of the page, Davies added later an explanation of what he meant by "budget": "Footnote (*): the atomic bomb. He told me then of the atomic bomb experiment in Nevada. Charged me with the utmost secrecy" [10].

Thus officials in the Truman administration quite consciously saw the atomic bomb as the "master card" in its dealings with the Soviet Union. Because of uncertainty that the test would succeed, Truman went to Potsdam with his Secretary of State James Byrnes with the aim of again gaining a promise from the Soviet Union that it would enter the war against Japan. Truman wrote in his diary, "If the test [of the atomic bomb] should fail, then it would be even more important to us to bring about a surrender [through a Soviet invasion] before we had to make a physical conquest of Japan" [11].

The successful test of the atom bomb on July 16, shortly before the formal opening of the Potsdam Conference, gave Truman what he later called "a hammer on those boys" [12]. Truman's demeanor at Potsdam completely changed, and he became much more aggressive and arrogant in negotiations with Stalin. During the initial days of the Potsdam Conference, Truman was still seeking to get assurance from the Soviet Union that it would join the war with Japan. However over the next several weeks, it is clear that administration officials hoped that use of the bomb would bring a quick end to the war before the Soviet invasion progressed very far and before Japan made a separate deal with Stalin.

This was certainly the position of Secretary of State Byrnes. Responding to a statement by Secretary of Navy James Forrestal that Truman had said "his principal objective at Potsdam would be to get Russia in the war," Byrnes declared that "it was most probable that the President's views changed; certainly that was not my view" [13].

Truman and Byrnes became worried that Japan would try to reach a deal with the Soviet Union and sue for peace through the Soviet Union rather than through a neutral power or through the United States. These concerns were amplified by communications from Japan that were intercepted by

the Americans. For example, the diplomatic summary of one intercepted Japanese message notes, “On 11 July [Japanese] Foreign Minister Togo sent the following ‘extremely urgent’ message to Ambassador [to the Soviet Union] Sato: ‘We are now secretly giving consideration to the termination of the war because of the pressing situation which confronts Japan both at home and abroad. Therefore, when you have your interview with [Soviet Foreign Minister] Molotov in accordance with previous instructions you should not confine yourself to the objective of a rapprochement between Russia and Japan but should also sound him out on the extent to which it is possible to make use of Russia in ending the war.’” The message went on to indicate that Japan was willing to give large concessions to Russia in order to prevent a Russian invasion [14]. At this point Japan still hoped that it could forestall a Soviet invasion.

A significant July 24 diary entry of Walter Brown, assistant to Secretary of State James Byrnes, records that, “JFB [Byrnes] still hoping for time, believing after atomic bomb Japan will surrender and Russia will not get in so much on the kill, thereby being in a position to press for claims against China”[15]. Later, on August 3, three days before Hiroshima, Brown writes, “Aboard Agusta/President, Leahy, JFB [Byrnes] agreed [sic] Japas [sic] looking for peace...President afraid they will sue for peace through Russia instead of some country like Sweden” [16].

What these and other documents make clear is that not only were American leaders concerned that the war would end in a way favorable to the Soviet Union, but also that they knew Japan was very close to suing for peace. In his book *The Decision to Use the Atom Bomb*, Gar Alperovitz makes a convincing case for a “two-step” theory of Japanese surrender. According to Alperovitz, the combination of the Soviet invasion, which eventually took place on August 8, and a guarantee to the Japanese state that the position of the emperor would not be threatened, would have put an end to the war without an invasion and without the use of the atom bomb.

This indeed was the conclusion of a Joint Intelligence Committee report to the Joint Chiefs of Staff on April 29, 1945: “The increasing effects of air-sea blockade, the progressive and cumulative devastation wrought by strategic bombing, and the collapse of Germany (with its implications regarding redeployment) should make this realization [that absolute defeat is inevitable] widespread within the year...The entry of the USSR into the war, would, together with the foregoing factors, convince most Japanese at once of the inevitability of complete defeat...If...the Japanese people, as well as their leaders, were persuaded both that absolute defeat was inevitable and that unconditional surrender did not imply national annihilation [that is, the removal of the emperor], surrender might follow fairly quickly” [17].

Under the direction of Byrnes, the Potsdam Proclamation—an ultimatum to Japan demanding unconditional surrender—was worded in such a way that the guarantee to the emperor was not given. Moreover the US and Britain decided not to invite the Soviet Union to sign the proclamation. On the one hand, this made it clear that the US and Britain were taking their own route to a Japanese surrender. On the other hand, it made the threat of a Soviet invasion ambiguous, thus sustaining Japanese hopes of an eventual Soviet mediation. This made Japanese rejection of the proclamation a certainty, opening the way for the use of the bomb [18].

Furthermore, the invasion of Japan by American troops was scheduled for November. If the American government used the bomb primarily to avoid the necessity of an invasion, it is impossible to explain why Truman did not wait longer before making the decision, particularly given the mountain of intelligence indicating the desperate position of Japan at the time.

Another question that emerges is why the second bomb was dropped so quickly, before the Japanese had a chance to understand what had happened in Hiroshima and to respond. Again, the question of the Soviet invasion is central. The bombing of Nagasaki occurred one day after this

invasion began. Moreover, Alperovitz notes, “Truman declared that Rumania, Bulgaria, and Hungary were ‘not to be spheres of influence of any one power’ on August 9—the day of the Nagasaki bombing” [19].

Bound up with the immediate interests of the United States in curtailing Soviet influence in Eastern Europe and East Asia was the general aim of the Truman administration to establish America’s hegemonic position following the end of the war. Historian Thomas McCormick summed it up well when he wrote, “In two blinding glares—a horrible end to a war waged horribly by all parties—the United States finally found the combination that would unlock the door to American hegemony.”

To achieve this hegemonic aim, it was necessary to sacrifice the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. McCormick notes, “A prearranged demonstration of the atomic bomb on a noninhabited target, as some scientists had recommended, would not do. That could demonstrate the power of the bomb, but it could not demonstrate the American will to use the awful power. One reason, therefore, for American unwillingness to pursue Japanese peace feelers in mid-summer 1945 was that the United States did not want the war to end before it had had a chance to use the atomic bomb” [20].

There is a certain naïveté on the part of the American people with regard to the utter ruthlessness of the American ruling class, particularly in relation to the Second World War. That war has long been presented by the American media and political establishment as a great war for democracy, against fascism and tyranny. In fact, the principal reason that the United States entered the war—and the underlying motivation behind all its actions in prosecuting the war—was to establish itself as the dominant and unchallenged world power. In pursuit of this aim the lives of hundreds of thousands of Japanese were of little consequence.

Notes:

[1] Figures given after the war about the number of American lives that would have been lost in an invasion were entirely mythical, and were conjured up largely post facto to justify the use of the bombs. This question will not be dealt with in this article, however an analysis can be found in Barton Bernstein’s essay “A Postwar myth: 500,000 US lives saved” in *Hiroshima’s Shadow*, edited by Kai Bird and Lawrence Lifschultz, The Pamphleteer’s Press, Stony Creek, Connecticut: 1998.

[2] One historian described the firebombing of Tokyo as follows: “The first planes that reached the Japanese capital dropped incendiaries designed to start fires that would serve as markers in the target area for the bombers that followed. The target zone included industrial and commercial sites and densely populated residential districts with flimsy and highly flammable housing. Once the area was clearly delineated by flames, waves of B-29s dropped hundreds of tons of firebombs. They created a conflagration of monumental proportions, which was intensified by the winds that swept Tokyo that night. The fires consumed an area of about sixteen square miles, created so much turbulence that they tossed low-flying planes around in the air, and killed so many Japanese that the stench of burning flesh sickened crews in the B-29s.” (Walker, J. Samuel, *Prompt & Utter Destruction: Truman and the use of Atomic bombs against Japan*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill: 2004. p. 27)

[3] Stimson, Henry. *Henry Stimson Papers*, Sterling Library, Yale University. Available at the National Security Archive: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB162/15.pdf>.

[4] “Notes of the Interim Committee Meeting Thursday, 31 May 1945, 10:00 A.M. to 1:15 P.M.—2:15 P.M. to 4:15 P.M.” p. 13-14. Available at the National Security Archive: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB162/12.pdf>.

[5] Among these scientists was the great Hungarian physicist Leo Szilard, who while helping to develop the bomb came to have strong doubts about using it. In one passage of the minutes to the same meeting of the Interim Committee quoted above, General Leslie Groves, the general in charge of

the Manhattan Project, warns of certain “undesirable scientists...of doubtful discretion and uncertain loyalty,” no doubt referring primarily to those concerned about the use of the bomb (Ibid. p. 14). The Interim Committee also rejected the idea that the nuclear technology should be shared with the international community in order to avoid a nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union, another position held by many of the scientists working on the project.

[6] Offner, Arnold. Another such victory: President Truman and the Cold War, 1945-1953, Stanford University Press, Stanford: 2002. p. 92.

[7] Jackson, Gabriel. Civilization & Barbarity in 20th-Century Europe, Humanity Books, Amherst, New York: 1999. p. 176-77. Szilard noted pointedly in 1960: “If the Germans had dropped atomic bombs on cities instead of us, we would have defined the dropping of atomic bombs on cities as a war crime, and we would have sentenced the Germans who were guilty of this crime to death at Nuremberg and hanged them.” (From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki.)

[8] Stimson, Henry. Henry Stimson Diary. May 14, 1945. p. 2 Available at the National Security Archive: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB162/7.pdf>

[9] Ibid., May 15, 1945. p. 1.

[10] Davies, Joseph. Diary entry for May 21, 1945 Available at the National Security Archive: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB162/8.pdf>.

[11] Quoted from Alperovitz, Gar. The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb, Vintage Books, New York: 1995. p. 124.

[12] Truman interview with Jonathan Daniels, November 12, 1949. Quoted from Alperovitz, p 239.

[13] Quoted from Hasegawa, Tsuyoshi. Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman and the Surrender of Japan, Harvard University Press, Cambridge: 2005. p. 158.

[14] “‘Magic’—Diplomatic Summary, War Department, Office of Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2, No. 1204—July 12, 1945, Top Secret Ultra.” Available at the National Security Archive: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB162/29.pdf>

[15] Quoted from Alperovitz, p. 268.

[16] Quoted from Alperovitz, p. 415.

[17] Quoted from Alperovitz, p. 113-114.

[18] In his diary Truman wrote that he was “sure” that Japan will not accept the Potsdam Proclamation, “but we will have given them the chance.” That is, the proclamation was a pro forma statement meant to give some sort of justification for a decision that had already been made: the use of the atomic bomb. For a partial transcript of Truman’s diary see, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB162/38.pdf>.

[19] Alperovitz, p. 429-30.

[20] McCormick, Thomas J. America’s Half-Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War and After, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore: 1995. p. 44 -45.



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