

75 years since the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Bill Van Auken
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Today marks the 75th anniversary of one of the most terrible war crimes ever carried out by imperialism against a defenseless civilian population, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

There is little indication that the anniversary of this criminal act, which introduced humanity to the horrors of mushroom clouds, radiation poisoning and the prospect of global annihilation, will receive any significant official commemoration. Yet its relevance has never been greater, as, behind the backs of the people of the United States and the world, US imperialism steadily builds up a massive nuclear arsenal and pursues a doctrine of aggressive nuclear war.

At 8:15, out of the clear morning sky of August 6, 1945, the *Enola Gay*, a US B-29 Superfortress bomber, dropped an atomic bomb, code-named “Little Boy,” on the Japanese city of Hiroshima and its quarter of a million people.

Exploding with a force of between 15 and 20 kilotons of TNT, the bomb’s destructive power was several thousand times greater than any ordnance previously used in warfare. Its effects were horrific.

An estimated 80,000 died instantly or within a few hours, vaporized, incinerated or horribly burned by the firestorm set off by the bomb, which, together with the shock wave it produced, leveled the city. Just three days later, a US bomber dropped a second atomic bomb on the city of Nagasaki, killing another 40,000 outright. Between the two attacks, the number of victims who died instantly or over the course of days and weeks from burns, injuries and radiation sickness is estimated at between 250,000 and 300,000, 90 percent of them civilian men, women and children.

Accounts of Hiroshima’s survivors painted a hellish portrait of mass death and human suffering.

Dr. Michihiko Hachiya described the unimaginable scene after the bombing: “Streetcars were standing and inside were dozens of bodies, blackened beyond recognition. I saw fire reservoirs filled to the brim with dead bodies who looked as they had been boiled alive... There were the shadowy forms of people, some of whom looked like walking ghosts. Others moved as though in pain, like scarecrows, their arms held out from their bodies with forearms and hands dangling. These people puzzled me until I suddenly realized that they had been burned and they were holding their arms out to prevent the painful friction of raw surfaces rubbing together.”

Another survivor wrote how he witnessed “Hundreds of those still alive... wandering around vacantly. Some were half-dead, writhing in their misery... They were no more than living corpses.”

Father Wilhelm Kleinsorge, a German Jesuit priest, spoke of encountering a group of soldiers whose “faces were wholly burned, their eye-sockets were hollow, the fluid from their melted eyes had run down their cheeks... Their mouths were mere swollen, pus-covered wounds, which they could not bear to stretch enough to admit the spout of the teapot.”

The Second World War, the most brutal and bloody conflict in human

history, killed 70 million people. It saw atrocities that surpassed anything in humanity’s worst nightmares. Extermination of civilian populations was pursued as state policy, culminating in the Nazis’ murder of six million Jews.

Japan’s imperial regime was itself responsible for heinous war crimes in pursuit of Japanese imperialist hegemony over Asia. These included the Nanjing massacre, in which the Japanese army massacred as many as 300,000 captured Chinese soldiers and civilians in 1937.

A calculated war crime justified with lies

Still, the barbarism of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki stands out for the cold calculation in annihilating civilian populations in the absence of any military necessity and the barefaced lies that were used to justify the crime.

Among the first to denounce the bombings as war crimes were the American Trotskyists. James P. Cannon, the founder of the American Trotskyist movement, told an August 22, 1945 memorial meeting in New York for Leon Trotsky (assassinated by a Stalinist agent in Mexico on August 21, 1940): “In two calculated blows, with two atomic bombs, American imperialism killed or injured half a million human beings. The young and the old, the child in the cradle and the aged and infirm, the newly married, the well and the sick, men, women and children—they all had to die in two blows because of a quarrel between the imperialists of Wall Street and a similar gang in Japan... What an unspeakable atrocity! What a shame has come to America, the America that once placed in New York harbor a Statue of Liberty enlightening the world. Now the world recoils in horror from her name.”

He continued: “Long ago the revolutionary Marxists said that the alternative facing humanity was either socialism or a new barbarism, that capitalism threatens to go down in ruins and drag civilization with it. But in the light of what has been developed in this war and is projected for the future, I think we can say now that the alternative can be made even more precise: The alternative facing mankind is socialism or annihilation! It is a problem of whether capitalism is allowed to remain or whether the human race is to continue to survive on this planet.”

The administration of President Harry Truman, who ordered the atomic bombings, sold them to the US public as a necessary and even humanitarian means of forcing Tokyo’s surrender and thereby avoiding a bloody US invasion of Japan.

For a war-weary American population, which celebrated VE-Day (Victory in Europe) and the defeat of Nazism three months before the bombing, Truman’s argument proved effective. Orders had been made public for the transfer of up to a million GIs from the battlefields of Europe to the war in the Pacific. Moreover, the US military concealed the

extent of the carnage in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

But Truman's claims that the bombings had saved what he variously described as a "quarter-million," "half a million" and even "a million" American lives were a lie. This was not merely the conclusion of left-wing critics of US imperialism or "revisionist" historians, but that of top officials within his own administration and the US military, who were certain that Japan was prepared to surrender without either atomic attacks or an invasion.

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, the supreme allied commander in Europe and future US president, wrote in his memoirs of his reaction when Secretary of War Henry Lewis Stimson told him of the planned bombings: "During his recitation of the relevant facts, I had been conscious of a feeling of depression and so I voiced to him my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary, and secondly because I thought that our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer mandatory as a measure to save American lives."

Adm. William Leahy, President Truman's chief of staff, was even more blunt, writing in 1950: "The use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan... [I]n being the first to use it, we... adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages. I was not taught to make war in that fashion and wars cannot be won by destroying women and children."

And, in 1949, Army Air Forces commander Gen. Henry "Hap" Arnold confided: "It always appeared to us that atomic bomb or no atomic bomb the Japanese were already on the verge of collapse."

By 1945, Washington was intercepting Japanese cable traffic and was well aware that the imperial regime was from the spring of that year searching for an acceptable form of surrender, with the Japanese emperor himself prepared to intervene with his military in support of an end to the war. The US, however, rebuffed Japanese peace feelers, demanding an "unconditional surrender." The sole condition upon which Japan had insisted was that the emperor, Hirohito, would be left on the throne and not tried, like the surviving leaders of Germany's Third Reich, as a war criminal. In the end, the US agreed to this concession in any case.

In 1946 the United States Strategic Bombing Survey, an advisory board created by the Department of War, concluded: "Even without the atomic bombing attacks, air supremacy over Japan could have exerted sufficient pressure to bring about unconditional surrender and obviate the need for invasion... Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war [against Japan] and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated."

The atomic bomb and the drive for US hegemony

If the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were not required to end the Second World War, they represented decisive steps on the road to a Third, driven by US imperialism's relentless attempt to impose its global hegemony.

The bombings were in a literal sense acts of terror. Hiroshima was chosen as a target precisely because its population had not been subjected to conventional bombings and could therefore serve as guinea pigs in demonstrating the appalling effects of the new weapon. The minutes of the Interim Committee formed to determine the use of the bomb state that there was agreement that it should be deployed with the aim of producing "a profound psychological impression" and that "the most desirable target would be a vital war plant employing a large number of workers and closely surrounded by workers' houses."

This terror was directed at intimidating not merely the people of Japan, but the entire world, and, first and foremost, the Soviet Union, along with the working class and oppressed peoples of every country.

The US, Britain and the Soviet Union had been allies in the war against Nazi Germany. Yet, while the US and Britain were at war with Japan, Moscow and Tokyo maintained a neutrality pact from 1941 until 1945.

At the Yalta conference, attended by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin in February of 1945, Stalin agreed to break the neutrality pact and go to war against Japan within three months of the defeat of Nazi Germany. Soviet intervention was seen as decisive in assuring a swift defeat of Japan. Basing himself on the military sacrifices and gains of the Red Army, Stalin pressed for recognition of a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern and Central Europe, as well as control over Mongolia and Asian territories taken from Moscow in the 1905 Russo-Japanese War.

In April 1945, Moscow informed Tokyo that it was ending its neutrality agreement and set August 8 as the date for entering the war against Japan.

While now ostensibly on the same side in the war against Japan, as they had been in the war with Germany, tensions between the imperialist powers, the US and the UK, and the Soviet Union were steadily growing. In spite of the Stalinist degeneration of the USSR, in which the Stalinist bureaucracy usurped political power from the working class, the nationalized property relations established by the October Revolution of 1917 remained. And in spite of Stalin's best efforts to accommodate the imperialist powers, neither the British nor the American ruling elite ever reconciled itself to the existence of these property relations, which they feared could still inspire revolution internationally.

In July 1945, the leaders of the US, Britain and the Soviet Union met again at Potsdam, Germany. The conference had been postponed at the instigation of Truman, who assumed the US presidency after Roosevelt's death in April of 1945. Truman was playing for time, wanting a successful test of the atomic bomb under his belt before dealing with Stalin.

The tone of the new American president at Potsdam shifted markedly from that of Roosevelt at Yalta. Truman exulted that the atomic bomb—first successfully tested at Alamogordo, New Mexico on July 16, 1945—had given him "a hammer on those boys," referring to the Soviets, and he became more aggressive and arrogant in his dealings with Stalin, who was well informed of the new US weapon by Soviet informants working on the Manhattan Project.

The Potsdam Conference ended with an ultimatum that Japan surrender immediately and unconditionally or face "prompt and utter destruction." It was worded in such a way as to ensure that it would not be accepted by Tokyo. It was signed by the US, the UK and China's Chiang Kai-shek, but not the Soviet Union.

What followed was a rush to deploy and drop the bombs. The target dates were chosen not out of any military necessity in terms of defeating Japan, but rather to preempt the impact of the Soviet Union's entering the war in the Pacific. Washington wanted to prevent an expansion of Soviet influence in Asia and Japan itself. Thus, the first bomb was dropped on August 6, two days before the Soviets launched their military operations, and the second on August 9, one day after the Soviet intervention and before the Japanese government even had time to comprehend or respond to the annihilation of Hiroshima.

In ending World War II with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, US imperialism gave the lie to all the claims that America had entered the war to fight for democracy and defeat fascism and militarism. While millions of American workers went to war motivated by such democratic sentiments, the ruling capitalist elite had very different objectives in mind.

As the historian Gabriel Jackson aptly noted: "... 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.”

Whatever the stark political contrasts between the bourgeois democratic setup in Washington and the Nazi regime in Berlin, both were pursuing imperialist war aims: for Berlin, it was hegemony over Europe; for Washington, it was hegemony over the world.

In the end, the atomic bomb proved less the “hammer” that Truman had hoped. By August 1949, the Soviet Union had tested its own atomic bomb. The US attempt at atomic terrorism likewise failed to halt the Chinese Revolution of 1949 or stem the tide of mass anti-colonial struggles that followed World War II.

The threat of nuclear war

While the Truman administration had considered using atomic bombs in the Korean War, it held back for fear of triggering a nuclear war with Russia. Gen. Douglas MacArthur, the commander of US forces in Korea, continued to press for the use of these weapons.

In both the Berlin Crisis of 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, the US administration of President John Kennedy brought the world to the brink of an apocalyptic nuclear war. Similarly, threats of nuclear exchanges that could have put an end to human society were narrowly averted on several occasions during the US arms buildup at the height of the Cold War in the early 1980s.

The reality is that for every US administration since Truman’s, Democratic and Republican alike, the option of nuclear war has always been “on the table.”

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War nearly three decades ago, there has been a widespread conception that the threat of a nuclear holocaust has receded into the background. There could be no more dangerous illusion.

After decades of wars that have killed millions in former colonial countries, from Korea and Vietnam to Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, US imperialism has shifted its military doctrine from the so-called “war on terror” to the preparation for “great power” conflict with nuclear-armed Russia and China.

The Obama administration launched a \$1 trillion nuclear weapons modernization program that has only been accelerated under Trump, even as virtually every nuclear weapons control treaty has been scrapped.

The recklessness of US foreign policy, driven by American capitalism’s domestic crisis and Washington’s desperate bid to claw back global hegemony by military means, has dangerously escalated, from the provocative US naval deployments in the South China Sea to the threat to station US troops on the Polish-Russian border.

Today’s US military strategists take the view that nuclear war is not only legitimate, but winnable. Low-yield, so-called tactical nuclear weapons, smaller than those unleashed upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki, are being produced and deployed on the pretext that they can be used to annihilate armies without triggering a full-scale nuclear war. However, the logic of a conflict involving the use of any nuclear weapon is that of escalation spiraling out of control into a global conflagration.

The production of such weapons poses a threat not only to Washington’s external enemies. With US officials already responding to mass protests by describing American streets as a “battlespace” to be “dominated” with militarized force, it can by no means be excluded that the US ruling class would attempt to turn such hideous weapons against a revolutionary upsurge of the American working class.

In an August 3 article in the authoritative US foreign policy journal

Foreign Affairs, former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd pointed to the recent closures of consulates and calls by US officials for the overthrow of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), writing:

“The question now being asked, quietly but nervously, in capitals around the world is, where will this end? The once unthinkable outcome—actual armed conflict between the United States and China—now appears possible for the first time since the end of the Korean War. In other words, we are confronting the prospect of not just a new Cold War, but a hot one as well.”

If this is what is being “quietly but nervously” asked in every capital, clearly the real question is not whether such a war—against China, Russia or even US imperialism’s erstwhile allies in Europe—will come, but when, and what can be done to stop it.

The COVID-19 pandemic and deepening economic crisis have only intensified the desperation and recklessness of the American ruling class. War threats and war itself become a means for directing outwards the immense social and political pressures building up within the United States.

The threat of a new world war and nuclear annihilation is greater today than at any time since the atrocities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A genuine commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Japan and honoring of their hundreds of thousands of innocent victims is possible only through the building of a powerful anti-war movement of the American and international working class as part of the global fight for socialism.



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