

80 years since the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

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Eighty years ago, the US government carried out one of world imperialism's most horrific war crimes: the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. The bombings, on August 6 and 9, 1945, instantly killed 120,000 people and led to between 250,000 and 300,000 deaths.

There was barely any international commemoration of the Hiroshima bombing yesterday, and there is no indication that the Nagasaki bombing will receive more on Saturday. Yet today, as US President Donald Trump threatens Iran and Russia with nuclear weapons, and governments across Europe call to prepare for "high-intensity warfare" between nuclear-armed states, this war crime takes on terrible contemporary significance. It is a warning to workers around the world as to where the policies of the most powerful capitalist governments are leading, if they are not stopped.

On August 6, 1945, the B-29 bomber *Enola Gay* dropped an atomic bomb code-named "Little Boy" on Hiroshima. Detonating with the force of around 15,000 tons of TNT, it killed 80,000 people immediately—burned to ashes by the nuclear explosion or killed by the shockwaves and firestorm it unleashed, which leveled the city. Three days later, another B-29, *Bockscar*, dropped the "Fat Man" bomb on Nagasaki, killing another 40,000 people outright.

Doctors in Hiroshima testified to the horrific burn injuries suffered by the civilian population, after the temperature in the city reached several thousand degrees Celsius during the blast. One doctor said he found "fire reservoirs filled to the brim with dead people who looked as though they had been boiled alive." Another recounted how he saw

the form of a man but it was completely naked, bloody and covered with mud. The body was completely swollen. Rags hung from its bare breast and waist. The hands were held before the breasts with palms turned down. Water dripped from the rags. Indeed, what I took to be rags were in fact pieces of human skin and the water drops were human blood. ... I looked at the road before me. Denuded, burnt and bloody, numberless survivors stood in my path.

A week later, doctors were shocked as many survivors began dying of high fevers and internal bleeding from an as yet little-known illness: radiation poisoning. Scientists later found the gamma radiation from the bombs had killed survivors' bone marrow, ending the production of new blood cells—so that their blood became dangerously thin and incapable of fighting off infections. Among those who did not die, many more would later die of cancer.

The Trotskyist movement denounced the bombings as a war crime. Socialist Workers Party (SWP) leader James P. Cannon addressed the subject on August 22, 1945 at a memorial meeting in New York, marking five years since the assassination of Leon Trotsky by Stalinist agent Ramon Mercader. The inhabitants of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he said,

died "in two blows because of a quarrel between the imperialists of Wall Street and a similar gang in Japan." He issued a warning that remains as true today as in 1945:

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, ... 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.

Cannon's remark illuminated the issues facing workers not only in World War II but also in the emerging Cold War. The world war had not been, as imperialist and Stalinist war propagandists had claimed, a war to make democracy safe against fascism. As in World War I, the leading capitalist powers were ruthlessly fighting to redivide the world among themselves.

Geopolitical interests behind the atom bombing: Washington gets "a hammer" on the USSR

For decades, schoolchildren in the United States were taught the lie that the atom bombing aimed to "save lives" and was the only way to force Japan to surrender. The incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in this narrative, averted the even greater bloodshed of a US-led land invasion of Japan. In reality, Japan—its military cut off by Allied navies from its sources of oil in what is today Indonesia, and its cities relentlessly firebombed—was by then seeking to surrender.

Having cracked Japan's "Purple Code," US officials knew that Japanese Ambassador to the USSR Sato Naotake was already discussing surrender terms in Moscow. On June 30, 1945, Sato had received orders to tell the Kremlin that Japanese Emperor Hirohito wanted the war to be "quickly terminated," but that this was impossible "so long as England and the United States insist upon unconditional surrender." Tokyo wanted assurances that the victorious Allies would leave the imperial family in power after the war, to prevent revolution at home.

But the August 2, 1945 Potsdam Agreement between the United States, Britain and the Soviet Union kept the demand for "unconditional surrender" by Japan. It was not that Washington was unwilling to keep the Japanese emperor in power after horrific Japanese war crimes, including a

genocidal war of occupation in China that cost 20 million lives. In fact, postwar US occupation officials in Japan ultimately left Hirohito in power. Rather, US officials aimed to use the atom bomb to intimidate the Soviet Union with a demonstration of ruthlessness.

As they prepared the July 17-August 2 Potsdam Conference, US officials were increasingly angry with Moscow. The American bourgeoisie, then the world's leading industrial power, aimed to dominate the Middle East, Eastern Europe and seize China and use it as a colony rivaling Britain's empire in India. The Red Army's wartime presence in Eastern Europe and Iran, and the offensive it was to launch against Japanese armies in China, posed a serious obstacle to US interests.

The successful Trinity test of the US atom bomb on July 16, 1945 filled US President Harry Truman with enthusiasm. As he said later, it gave him "a hammer on those boys." This echoed the view of many top US officials in the run-up to the Potsdam Conference.

It was time to "deal with the Russians," Secretary of War Henry Stimson wrote in one such memo to General George Marshall, then Truman's chief of staff. This could be done "in a pretty rough and realistic way," Stimson added, as "we have coming into action a weapon which will be unique."

Truman's criminal resort to the atomic bomb failed to establish US world domination. The Red Army handed over the defeated Japanese army's weapons to Chinese Communist Party armies in northern China, in what became a major contribution to the 1949 Chinese Revolution, and Stalinist regimes emerged across Eastern Europe. While Soviet troops left Iran and Washington backed the bloody dictatorship of the Shah there, that regime was toppled by the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

However, the danger of a nuclear holocaust has hung like a Sword of Damocles over humanity ever since 1945. US officials discussed using nuclear weapons against North Korean and Chinese troops in the 1950-1953 Korean War. Several times, most notoriously when US officials called for the bombing of Soviet missiles in Cuba during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, a civilization-ending nuclear war nearly broke out.

Nuclear weapons in the emerging Third World War

Eighty years after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the world again directly faces the danger of nuclear war. The Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 did not resolve but ultimately exacerbated the geopolitical conflicts of the Cold War era. US-led wars waged since 1991 against countries including Iraq, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Libya and Syria, have coalesced into a new global war for domination of Eurasia and the world.

Significantly, the countries that are currently the top targets of US imperialism and its European allies—Russia, China and Iran—are those that topped Truman's list of concerns as he decided upon the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Today, however, all the world's nuclear powers are spending billions on upgrading their nuclear arsenals and hold weapons dwarfing the bombs dropped on Japan. Their intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) hold multiple warheads, each exploding with a force of hundreds of thousands or millions of tons of TNT. If dropped on a city, each warhead's initial blast could kill not tens of thousands, but millions, so that scientists now project that a single Russian ICBM with multiple warheads could devastate a country the size of France.

For decades, the irrationality and reactionary character of the nation-state system was exemplified by the fact that it rested upon the theory of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). No major nuclear power would

threaten another, this argument went, because each could destroy the other with nuclear bombs. However, it is apparent that fear of a nuclear holocaust no longer in any way restrains the imperialist powers.

Last week, Trump highlighted the possibility of a NATO-Russia nuclear war by announcing the deployment of two nuclear-armed submarines to threaten Russia. US-NATO intelligence officials calculate, according to an account by investigative journalist Bob Woodward, that at various points during the three-year war with Russia in Ukraine, the likelihood of Russia using nuclear weapons was as high as 50 percent. Nonetheless, the US and NATO pressed ahead, with European countries giving the Ukrainian regimes long-range missiles to carry out strikes deep into Russia.

As a mood of genocidal recklessness seizes the ruling oligarchy, its representatives look back fondly on the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as an example of how to use mass murder to try resolve political and social problems for which they saw no solution. Trump hailed the US-Israeli bombing of Iran's nuclear installations earlier this year amid the Israeli genocide in Gaza with his usual veiled, mafia-style threats, declaring that they recalled Truman's use of the bomb. He said:

It reminded people of a certain other event, and Harry Truman's picture is now in the lobby in a nice location where it should have been. But that stopped a lot of fighting, and this stopped a lot of fighting. When that happened, it was a whole different ball game.

But capitalist governments are playing Russian roulette with nuclear weapons. Amid a mortal crisis of the entire capitalist system, they are prepared to resort to any crime, including using nuclear weapons.

Eighty years after the dropping of atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, human civilization is threatened by annihilation through imperialist war. It is necessary to build a mass, international anti-war movement in the working class, armed with a perspective to take power out of the hands of the capitalist oligarchy and overthrow the capitalist system that is the root cause of imperialist war.



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