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Nuclear Power: The End of the War Against Japan

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Was it right for the Americans to drop nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Conventional wisdom has it that the decision saved many lives in the long run, but this view has been frequently challenged.

Postwar Germany and Japan

Sixty years on, the end of the war against Japan is generally regarded by British historians very differently from the way they view the end of the war against Germany. Despite the firestorms in German cities, despite the murder and rape of millions of German women and children by the advancing Soviets, the defeat of Nazi Germany is still seen in terms that are morally unambiguous.

There is no such acceptance of war guilt in Japan.

In 1945 Hitler's regime was seen as the embodiment of human evil - and all the evidence that has emerged since that time has merely served to confirm that judgement. Any means that could bring Nazi rule to an end could be justified, which is why a statue of Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur 'Bomber' Harris now stands in Whitehall.

The vast majority of Germans today accept the guilt of the 'Hitler time', and are determined that nothing like it will ever occur again. Sometimes to non-Germans this national confessional even seems to go to an absurd extent - for example when the great furor erupted over the recent film depicting Hitler as an inadequate, demented human being, rather than the embodiment of Satanic evil.

There is no such acceptance of war guilt in Japan. It was only with the greatest difficulty that China managed to secure a grudging acknowledgement that 'regrettable' things may have happened in Nanking in December 1937, when Japanese troops went on the rampage - looting, raping and burning, and killing some 200,000 Chinese. Japanese school text-books still refer to the total war Japan waged against China between 1937 and 1945, in which some 20 million Chinese died, as the 'China incident'.

Similarly, the government of South Korea is making little progress in securing an apology from Japan for the enforced prostitution of tens of thousands of Korean girls as 'comfort women' for the Imperial armed forces. Most Japanese see themselves not as the perpetrators of a barbarous expansionist war in Asia and the Pacific, but as hapless victims of overwhelming and brutal American power. It is not, perhaps, surprising that collective denial should be the response of a defeated people; what is surprising is that the Japanese view is also widely held in the countries of the west that fought against Japan, namely the United States, and Britain and her Commonwealth.

Atomic bombs

The key to understanding the difference between Japan and Germany, and attitudes towards Japan and Germany, is the way in which the war against Japan came to an end. On 6 August 1945 an American B-29 bomber dropped an atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima. In a split second 100,000 people ceased to exist. Three days later another B-29 dropped a second bomb on Nagasaki, killing another 40,000.

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The city of Hiroshima after the nuclear blast ©

In vain would later apologists point out that the number killed -140,000 - was about the same as the number killed in the conventional B-29-created firestorm that devastated Tokyo-Yokohama on the night of 9 March 1945. There were two differences. First, the Tokyo-Yokohama raid required hundreds of aircraft delivering thousands of incendiary bombs in wave upon wave in very particular weather conditions. Hiroshima-Nagasaki required just two aircraft and two bombs, a quantum leap in destructive capacity.

Second, unlike those injured in conventional raids, about 100,000 of those people who had apparently survived in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in fact suffered radiation poisoning as a result of the bombs, and thus were condemned to a painful and lingering death.

Japan surrendered on 15 August, obviously as a result of the bombs, it was generally believed, and for a few months Americans and their allies could tell

themselves that though the bombs had been terrible, they had obviated the need for an invasion of Japan. This had been scheduled for December 1945, and in it many hundreds of thousands of Allied servicemen would have been killed and wounded. But very soon doubts arose in many quarters.

First doubts

The first Americans to reach Hiroshima and Nagasaki - servicemen, scientists and journalists - described in great



General Douglas MacArthur at Japanese surrender ceremony on USS 'Missouri', 2 September 1945 ©

detail the apocalyptic scenes they encountered. They saw a grey, blasted landscape, in which thousands of hideously burnt people were huddled in shanties, coughing up and urinating blood, with their hair falling out in clumps, waiting to die.

The writer and journalist John Hersey, one of the first to get to Hiroshima, wrote a powerful study of the plight of six of these survivors, and this was published in the *New Yorker* in 1946. Suddenly the talk of New York's literati, Hersey followed this up with a monograph, *Hiroshima*, published the following year, which was immediately a best-seller, and was translated into Japanese three years later.

At the same time as Hersey's article, the United States Army Air Force published a survey of the effects of strategic bombing on Japan. The Air Force argued that conventional B-29 attacks had all but brought Japan to its knees, and concluded,

'... it is the Survey's opinion that certainly prior to 31 December 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945 (well before the date of the invasion) Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped.'

Not to be outdone, the United States Navy produced its own assessment, stating that its submarine campaign had also brought Japan to its knees, that the Home Islands were on the verge of starvation, and that this alone would have produced surrender, thereby obviating the need for an atomic bomb, or an invasion.

And then the State Department added its assessment. Joseph Grew - America's last ambassador to Japan before the war started - claimed that Japanese diplomats had been trying to open surrender negotiations with the United States via the then still neutral Soviet Union. These were overtures that the Truman administration knew about, thanks to decrypts of Japanese diplomatic codes, but which they nevertheless chose to ignore. Grew added that if the United States had modified the demand for unconditional surrender, made on 26 July at Potsdam, if it had simply guaranteed the continuation of the imperial system in Japan, the Japanese would almost certainly have capitulated within days.

Growing criticism

By early 1947 criticism of the decision to use the bomb had become so pervasive in the United States, that Secretary of War Henry L Stimson felt compelled to have an article published in *Harper's* magazine, defending the administration. He reminded Americans that if an invasion had proved necessary, up to a million American servicemen would have died. The bombs, then, were a necessary evil. But very soon other figures were discovered.

By the mid 1960s historians ... had drawn up ... a belated indictment for war crimes.

General Douglas MacArthur's army headquarters in the Philippines, for example, had calculated that the maximum number of dead in the event of an invasion would be around 47,000. Bad enough, but perhaps not bad enough to justify the immolation and irradiation of tens of thousands of Japanese women and children. Such figures led people to believe that Stimson might have lied, and to wonder, if so, how many other lies the administration had told.

The emergence of the Cold War, the development of the hydrogen bomb, and American's involvement in Vietnam, saw the development of a sustained critique in American academia of the decision to use the bomb. By the mid 1960s historians such as Gar Alperovitz had drawn up what was virtually a charge sheet, a belated indictment for war crimes.

It went like this. When the successful test firing of the first atomic bomb took place on 16 July 1945, Truman, negotiating with the Russians at Potsdam, decided to demonstrate America's new power to the Soviets by bombing Japanese cities, even though he knew the Japanese were trying to surrender. To ensure the Japanese would not capitulate before the bombs could be used, he deliberately refused to guarantee the emperor's safety, the only condition which, Alperovitz and others argued, was a sticking-point for the Japanese.

In the event, it was not the bombs that produced Japan's surrender - the Japanese military seemed willing to take them in their stride - but the Soviet invasion of Manchuria on 9 August. Truman and his administration, then, had been guilty of an act of callous, wanton brutality, the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of civilians, including innocent women and children, to no purpose other than to intimidate the Soviet Union and establish American hegemony.

Challenge to the critics

Versions of this argument were widely believed in the last decades of the 20th century, and not just by those to the left of the political spectrum, who were incapable of believing that the United States could be anything other than evil. However, during the 1990s and after the collapse of the USSR, discoveries made upon the opening of hitherto restricted archives, and the work of British- and American-educated Japanese historians, have caused many to challenge the Alperovitz thesis.

... the Japanese were demanding ... a guarantee of no Allied occupation of Japan ...

American scholars have shown that the Air Force's Strategic Bombing Survey was a tendentious piece of special pleading, designed to secure a large independent air force, which many believed would have been in danger if it had been shown that the atomic bombs alone produced the surrender. Similarly, the navy's assertions were exposed as over-exaggerations of the efficacy of the submarine blockade. Many Japanese were certainly starving, but it did not follow that the Japanese were therefore prepared to surrender.

The most damning research exploded the very low estimates of invasion casualties prepared by the army. These were shown to be the product of General MacArthur's desire that an invasion should take place, one that he would command, which did not take into account the actual casualties (49,000) suffered by US forces in the two-month battle (April-June 1945) for Okinawa. The army's real position was revealed in the discovery of a memorandum by Army Chief Of Staff General George C Marshall, advocating the use of atomic bombs to support an invasion.

The work by American historians has been reinforced by the labours of their Japanese counterparts. The Japanese peace feelers directed at the Soviet Union

have been exposed as belated attempts to delay a Soviet entry into the war, not genuine attempts at negotiation. It has also been shown that the Japanese were demanding very much more than a guarantee of the emperor's safety, for example a guarantee of no Allied occupation of Japan, before they would consider serious negotiations.

Also thanks to the work of Japanese historians, we now know much more about Japanese plans in the summer of 1945. Japan had no intention of surrendering. It had husbanded over 8,000 aircraft, many of them Kamikazes, hundreds of explosive-packed suicide boats, and over two million well equipped regular soldiers, backed by a huge citizen's militia. When the Americans landed, the Japanese intended to hit them with everything they had, to impose on them casualties that might break their will. If this did not do it, then the remnants of the army and the militias would fight on as guerrillas, protected by the mountains and by the civilian population.

Japanese and American historians have also shown that at the centre of the military system was the Emperor Hirohito, not the hapless prisoner of militarist generals, the version promulgated by MacArthur in 1945 to save him from a war crimes trial, but an all-powerful warlord, who had guided Japan's aggressive expansion at every turn. Hirohito's will had not been broken by defeats at land or sea, it had not been broken by the firestorms or by the effects of the blockade, and it would certainly not have been broken by the Soviet invasion of Manchuria, something the Japanese had anticipated for months.

What broke Hirohito's will was the terrible new weapon, a single bomb which could kill a hundred thousand at a time. Suddenly Japan was no longer fighting other men, but the very forces of the universe. The most important target the bombs hit was Hirohito's mind - it shocked him into acknowledging that he could not win the final, climatic battle.

Growing consensus

There is a growing consensus among modern historians that the views as to the utility of the bomb held in August 1945 were correct. We now know that if the bomb had not been used, the invasion of Japan would have gone ahead. The best indication we have of the casualties that might have occurred are the actual figures for the eight-week campaign on Okinawa, in which 12,500 Americans died, and 39,000 were wounded.

If we conduct the same calculation for an invasion of the Japanese Home Islands, we arrive at a figure of at least two million Japanese dead.

Fighting at the same intensity (it could not have been less) on Kyushu and Honshu, campaigns which would have lasted some 50 weeks, would have produced 80 to 100,000 American dead, and some 300 to 320,000 wounded. Are these casualties enough to justify Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

If morality is based on numbers, and in this case it must be, then perhaps not. But what is usually overlooked in this numbers game, is the number of Japanese killed on Okinawa, which amounts to a staggering 250,000 military and civilian, about 20 Japanese killed for every dead American. If we conduct the same calculation for an invasion of the Japanese Home Islands, we arrive at a figure of at least two million Japanese dead.

The losses in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were terrible, but not as terrible as the number of Japanese who would have died as the result of an invasion. The revisionist historians of the 1960s - and their disciples - are quite wrong to depict the decision to use the bombs as immoral. It would have been immoral if they had not been used.

Find out more

Books

Truman and the Hiroshima Cult by Robert P Newman (Michigan State University Press, 2004)

Rain of Ruin: Photographic History of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by Donald M Goldstein, Katherine V Dillon, J Michael Wenger (Brassey's Inc, 1995)

Hiroshima in History and Memory edited by Michael J Hogan (Cambridge University Press, 1995)

Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision by Robert James Maddox (University of Missouri Press, 2004)

Hiroshima by John Hersey (Alfred A Knopf, 1985)

Hiroshima: Three Witnesses edited by Richard H Minear (Princeton University Press, 1990)

Nagasaki, 1945 by Tatsuichiro Akizuki (Quartet Books, 1981)

The Bells of Nagasaki by Takashi Nagai (Kodansha Europe, 1984)

About the author

Duncan Anderson joined the War Studies Department at Sandhurst as a senior lecturer in 1987, and has been Head of Department since 1997. He has written several books on World War Two, and worked for the British Army and other NATO forces in Germany, both lecturing and conducting staff tours.