

Dropping the bomb on Hiroshima

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This article explores the events preceding the 1945 bombing of Hiroshima, and what caused the USA to be the first nation to use a nuclear weapon in war

EXAM LINKS

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Summer 1943: the view from America

By spring 1945, American forces had moved close enough to Japan's home islands that B-29 bombers could fly over major cities like Tokyo and Osaka, dropping thousands of tons of oil, petro, phosphorus and napalm onto neighborhood buildings built largely of highly flammable wood and paper. Hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians died.

How to end the war?

Experiences like these affected American plans for ending the war. Would an assault on the Japanese home islands mean long months of mutual slaughter, tapering off into years of guerrilla warfare in cities and mountaintops? Or would a starving, broken population welcome liberation from their oppressive leadership?

Japan in wartime

War was sold to the Japanese public on the basis that America and the British Empire presented not just a military threat. It was also shown as a cultural and moral danger to traditional Japanese life. Schools, newspapers and children's magazines carried the message that European and American colonialism was shaping a modern world dominated by toxic training of Japanese soldiers. New recruits, often such ideas became highly influential in the built-in brutality in their barracks, were taught to regard Japan's cause as unquesitomably righteous, and its enemies — Asian and Western alike — as put Japan's very existence at risk, and would be an unforgivable insult to the Japanese emperor. His imperial symbol, a chrysanthemum, was stamped on the stock of every rifle, so that no soldier could forget why he was fighting.

Still, the tide of battle turned swiftly against Japan. From mid-1942, Allied forces pushed back in southeast Asia and the Pacific, and ordinary Japanese people felt the effects. Eventually venues were shut down, to save energy and focus minds on the

Harbor, in Hawaii.

The first propositions were made by Commodore Matthew C. Perry in 1853 and were anything but diplomatic. US-Japan friendship and trade treaties were signed, only after Perry made clear that failure would mean war. Other Western powers followed suit, sparking a revolution in Japan in 1868-69. The Shogun was overthrown and a new generation of leaders began to develop Japanese industry and military strength. Never would they be threatened in the same way again.

This process peaked under an authoritarian leadership in the 1930s that was increasingly influenced by aggressive military officers. Japan went to war with China in 1937, and then in December 1941 attacked American military facilities at Pearl Harbor.

Japan and America: Pacific rivals

On 20 marks the “...diminutary” of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, on 6 August 1945. This article explores the decision to drop the bomb, setting it in the longer-range context of US-Japanese relations.

It was impossible to know. The US government employed specialists in Japanese history and culture. But it was ultimately a guessing game, featuring crude psychological speculation based on interviews with Japanese-Americans living in internment camps in the USA.

In any case, the situation in Japan was unclear. Some kamikaze pilots, forcibly 'volunteered' for the role, drank and rioted in their barracks. A few shot at their own commanders after take-off, and crashed their planes into the sea rather than hit enemy vessels. Civilian graffiti and letters sent to the emperor brimmed with anger at Japan's leaders, for their lies and incompetence. However, the vast majority of Japanese people kept their thoughts and feelings to themselves, cooperating grimly with early-morning militia training using bamboo spears. How they would react if Allied boots hit Japanese soil was, frankly, anyone's guess.

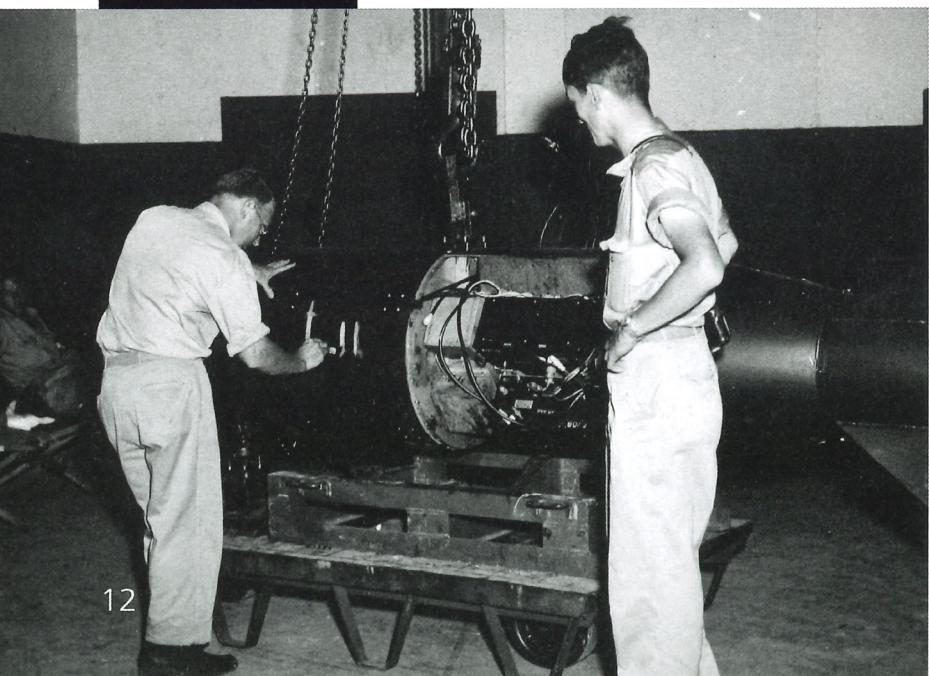
Decision time

President Harry S. Truman, secretary of war Harry L. Stimson and other senior figures in the US administration had lots to consider besides casualty levels in a Japanese invasion. Would a war-weary American public stand for the conflict dragging on? What would it mean for the postwar picture if the Soviet Union were to make a late, opportunistic entry into the war against Japan?

Stimson confided in his diary in May 1945 that the way to deal with the Russians, in Asia and over arrangements for postwar Europe, was to 'let our actions speak... perhaps in a pretty rough and realistic way'. The atom bomb, currently being readied for testing in the deserts of New Mexico, was perfectly suited to the task: a 'royal straight flush', a diplomatic 'master card'.

In America's political and scientific establishments, some wondered whether a demonstration of the bomb, perhaps out in the Pacific Ocean, might be

The atomic bomb, named 'Little Boy', being prepared



enough to end the war. No-one would be harmed. America's reputation as a 'great humanitarian nation' would be preserved, as the under secretary of the navy put it. It would also be easier in moral and political terms for the USA to control the coming nuclear arms race if it avoided deploying the weapon in war.

But would a mere demonstration really convince the Japanese, whom Truman regarded by now as 'savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic'? Perhaps it would merely give Japan's military a chance to work out how to disrupt the use of a still-experimental weapon.

Atomic testing

The atomic bomb was successfully tested just as the Allies were gathering for a conference in Potsdam, on 16 July. Truman wrote in a 25 July diary entry that the decision had now been taken to use it — against 'military objectives' only, not 'women and children'. Either he was poorly informed about the weapon's power, which is unlikely, or he preferred not to think about civilian casualties.

British agreement to use of the bomb had already been secured, and its existence was strongly hinted at to Stalin at Potsdam. So, when the Potsdam Declaration of 26 July threatened Japan with 'prompt and utter destruction' if it did not surrender, the Americans, British and Soviets knew what was meant. The Japanese did not. With no mention made in the declaration about the fate of the emperor should they surrender — an all-important consideration — Japan decided to avoid either accepting or rejecting it. This was interpreted as a flat 'no' in Washington. The stage was set.

The bomb

Five major urban centres in Japan had so far survived the American fire-bombing. The reason was simple: they were on the target shortlist for the atom bomb, whose destructive potential could only accurately be measured by deploying it against an undamaged area.

Kokura, Niigata, Yokohama and Hiroshima all possessed industrial or military value as targets. Kyoto

EXAM-STYLE QUESTIONS

- 1 How important, in America's decision to use the bomb, were casualty predictions for a full-scale invasion? What other considerations were in play?
- 2 Can the rights and wrongs of the American decision be judged purely on considerations at the time? Or should its impact on the history of nuclear weapons since 1945 also be factored in?
- 3 What degree of responsibility do Japan's leaders bear for the use of the atomic bomb?
- 4 Are there circumstances in which the use of nuclear weapons would be justified?



FURTHER READING

Hiroshima after the atomic bombing

1

Key text: Hogan, M., J. (ed.). (1996) Hiroshima in History and Memory, Cambridge University Press. See especially Walker, J., Samuel, 'The Decision to Use the Bomb', and Dowler, J. W., 'The Bombed: Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japanese Memory.'

The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II; A Collection of Primary Sources; Available at <https://tinyurl.com/y5tf64ty>

The Hiroshima Panels (Fifteen Paintings), by Maruki Iri and Maruki Toshi, depicting the aftermath of the bomb. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/unkzod>

Heresy, J. (1946). Hiroshima. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/cyklksj5f>

Dower, J. (1987) War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War.

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Japanese nervousness about the forced imposition of Western standards and values. The people of Japan owe America much, from doing away with tyrannical leadership to creating a sense of Japanese national identity, recently brought to a murderous head, would help the country rebuild. Still, a century-old Pacific rivalry, recently brought to a murderous head, would go on. It would then play out in trade and cultural wars, as a resurgent Japan prepended its old American Joe with Sonny television, Nissan cars, manga, anime, and video games.

Box | Chronology

- 1868-69. Overthrow of the Shogun; new Japanese leaders take power
- 7 December 1941. Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor
- April-June 1945. Battle of Okinawa
- 16 July 1945. Successful test of the atomic bomb
- 26 July 1945. Potsdam Declaration
- 6 August 1945. Atomic bombing of Hiroshima
- 9 August 1945. Atomic bombing of Nagasaki
- 9 August 1945. Soviet troops attack Japanese army

Japan's Surrender

15 August 1945. Emperor Hirohito announces

PRINCIPAL III

9 August 1943. Soviet troops attack Japanese army

• **Arguments:** Axiomatic posturing or negation

9 August 1945 Atomic bombing of Nagasaki

6 August 1945. Atomic bombing of Hiroshima

26 July 1945, Potsdam Declaration

16 July 1945. Successful test of the atomic bomb

April-June 1945. Battle of Okinawa

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2 December 1941, message 442, as described in the paper.

1922-23: Overthrow of the Shogun, new Japanese leaders take power

1868-69 Overthrow of the Zapatista new leadership

July 1853. Arrival of Commodore Matthew C. Perry

Box 1 | Cytology

Buy | Change

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Figure 1. A schematic diagram of the experimental setup for the measurement of the absorption coefficient of the sample.