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# **An Exploration of the US Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki**

## **Was the United States Justified in Using the Atomic Bomb?**

On August 6, 1945 the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on the Japanese city, Hiroshima. To this day, this has been a controversial military strategy. Those who believe that the U.S. was justified in using the atomic bomb argue that more lives were saved, and that the Japanese's vigor and willingness to fight to the death forced the U.S. to extreme measures. On the other hand, those who thought using the atomic bomb was unjustified argue that the atomic bomb violated the principles of war, that it did not end World War II (WWII) sooner and it was not the ideal choice to use for WWII. Looking at proponents of the United States' usage of the atomic bomb such as Hugh A. Halliday and Richard Frank, military historians, and Michael Kort, a professor of Social Science at Boston University, as well as opponents including policy analyst, John Siebert, Martin J Sherwin, a professor at George Mason University, and Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, a professor emeritus of History at the University of California we intend to evaluate and summarize both sides of the discussion as to whether the United States was justified to drop the atomic bomb.

Proponents of employing the atomic bomb argue that had the atomic bomb not been dropped and the original ground invasion was implemented more lives from either side would have been lost. Japan's unwillingness to surrender forced the United States to the point that they did not know what it would take to end the war. To discuss these points, we will look at the arguments from Hugh A. Halliday, a military historian who served in the RCAF's Air Historian, Canadian Forces Directorate of History, and Canadian War Museum, Michael Kort, a professor of Social Science at Boston University, and Richard B. Frank a military historian who served almost four years in the United States Army.

Japan had an ingrained conviction that the purpose of life was to die for the Emperor which was seen in not only her militants but also in her civilians with civilian casualties ranging from 42,000 to 150,000 dead from suicide or battle. Ground invasion of Japanese home islands was an option that the U.S. government considered. However, estimates from General Douglas MacArthur, in favor of ground invasion, curbed the numbers to roughly 130,000 casualties; however, this did not include the 300,000 Allied prisoners of war (PoWs) nor the enemy civilian casualties. In addition to the ground invasion and bombardment, the U.S. planned to utilize a blockade that was projected to cause famine, ensuing thousands of civilian deaths. Though roughly 200,000 people were killed thru the atomic bomb, it was still the morally preferred choice compared to the estimated deaths via an invasion.

However, Michael Kort argues that it was never about deciding to use the atomic bomb versus implementing a ground invasion, but rather what it would take to have Japan surrender. The United States had been bombing Japan for three years prior to the Potsdam Declaration. She had already suffered an estimated 806,000 casualties in Okinawa and Tokyo. And yet when the U.S. had the Potsdam Declaration that gave Japan a chance to surrender, she not only chose to ignore it but also sought negotiations with the Soviet Union, to the extent of bargaining alliance benefits. Thus, the United States hoped that the sheer destructive power of the atomic

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bomb could persuade Japan to surrender and thus put an end to WWII.

Advocates against utilizing the atomic bomb contend that it was a violation of the principles of war as well as the Geneva Protocol, which banned the usage of chemical weapons in war. Furthermore, in response to the belief that the atomic bomb led to the shortening of WWII, the reason that Japan surrendered was because of the USSR declaring war against her as well as invading Japanese-occupied land. In addition, had the United States adjusted the Potsdam Declaration, Japan would have been more inclined to agree to its terms. In order to analyze these arguments, we will discuss the points of John Siebert, a policy analyst who served in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Human Rights and Aboriginal Justice with the United Church of Canada as well as a consultant to government and non-governmental organizations, Martin J. Sherwin, a Pulitzer winner and professor of History at George Mason University, and Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, a professor emeritus of History at the University of California.

Arguably there are principles of war that are commonly agreed upon such as not directly targeting non-military establishments and non-militants. However, the United States knowingly targeted civilian cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And had Henry L. Stimson, former U.S. Secretary of War, not opposed the Target Committee, they would have chosen Kyoto, the center of Japan's civilization for over a thousand years. Moreover, after the practice of mustard gas as well as other chemical weapons in World War I, the Geneva Protocol was created and signed by members of the League of Nations, banning the use of chemical weapons in war. But though the United States was aware of the radiation poisoning that would occur from the atomic bomb, it was still deployed. By exploiting the atomic bomb, the U.S. indicated that nuclear arms were valid weapons of war.

Aside from the moral discretions of implementing the atomic bomb, the argument that the atomic bomb led to the end of WWII sooner is invalid. Because the USSR declared war against Japan and invaded Japanese-controlled land, Japan could not ensure success in fighting both fronts and thus surrendered. Ward Wilson, Senior Fellow and Director of the Re-thinking Nuclear Weapons, remarked that Japanese leaders said it was the atomic bomb that led to their surrender as it was less embarrassing to lose against a miracle weapon. Not only that but Japan's military officials argued that they could convince the USSR to negotiate for better surrender terms than the unconditional surrender in the Potsdam Declaration. However, with the declaration of war, they no longer had a case to continue the war.

Along with this, had the United States adjusted their Potsdam Declaration to indicate that the Emperor would not be held liable for the war under the unconditional surrender then perhaps Japan would have agreed. This is because her term for surrender was to preserve their imperial system and Japan was already known to hold her Emperor to a high-degree. Though Secretary of War Stimson did recommend this adjustment; unfortunately, Secretary of State, James Byrnes, vetoed it. Though the amendment was attempted yet vetoed, the U.S. could have invited the USSR to sign the Potsdam Declaration in doing so would show Japan that she could not rely on the USSR to aid her.

Supporters of using the atomic bomb argue that the bomb saved more lives than the planned ground invasion and because of Japan's disinclination to surrender the war despite heavily unfavorable odds provoked the U.S. to undergo drastic measures. Japanese people's disposition to perish for their Emperor was unsettling and led to a high civilian casualty even prior to considerations of dropping the atomic bomb. This temperament to die rather than to be

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a prisoner is one of the teachings in bushido, a samurai heritage and code of ethics. The Japanese were taught from a young age bushido and to worship the Emperor, a descendent from the Sun Goddess. Because of this contempt of being PoWs, many times the Japanese would fight until they were killed or committed suicide. American soldiers would witness the horror of Japanese mothers holding their children and choosing to jump to their deaths rather than to be taken as prisoners.

The U.S. estimated that a ground invasion would not only lead to losses on the Allied powers but also to a high casualty rate due to the extreme devotion the Japanese had to their Emperor. The Joint Chiefs of Staff assessed that the United States would experience 1.2 million casualties for the entire ground invasion operation, while personnel in the Navy Department estimated 1.7-4 million casualties (Trueman). These estimates were significantly larger than the roughly 200,000 people killed by the atomic bomb. Not known at the time, it was later found that the Japanese Army had trained a civilian militia of around 28 million men and women to defend the home islands should a ground invasion occur (Giangreco). A year after the dropping of the atomic bomb, Karl T. Compton, a member of Truman's Interim Committee — “a committee to advise the president about matters pertaining to the use of nuclear energy and weapons” (Harry S Truman National Historic Site) —interviewed a Japanese Army officer asking him if they could have repelled Operation Downfall to which the officer responded “... I do not think we could have stopped you.” When asked what the Japanese would have done, the officer responded “We would have kept on fighting until all Japanese were killed, but we would not have been defeated,” in which defeat meant the disgrace of surrendering (Compton).

Not only that but the Japanese imperial system was corrupted by the influence of military officials who strongly desired to continue fighting despite the extremely detrimental predicament the country was in. Despite suffering 806,000 casualties in Okinawa and Tokyo, when the U.S. issued her Potsdam Declaration, Japan chose to try and invoke the aid of the USSR, who had a delicate relationship with the United States. And after the atomic bomb dropping on Hiroshima and given a three-day grace period to respond, significant Japanese military officials thought it unlikely that the U.S. would have another bomb. Even when Nagasaki was bombed, military officials refused to accept surrendering though the Emperor now suggested to accept the U.S. terms. It was not till days of continuous bombing after the atomic bombs usage that the Emperor firmly declared that Japan would indeed surrender the war. Thus, though there may have been implications of the Japanese surrendering, it was unlikely that they would have surrendered given the military's obstinacy.

That said those against the United States exploitation of the atomic bomb dispute that the United States not only violated the Geneva Protocol and principles of war but also legitimized the usage of the atomic bomb in wars to come. Though the United States targeted civilian cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, these cities were chosen because they centered around military production (“Hiroshima and Nagasaki Death Toll”). And though the Geneva Protocol banned chemical weapons use during war, the atomic bomb is not categorized under chemical weapons but rather as a nuclear weapon. However, in spite of not breaching the Geneva Protocol, the U.S. set the precedence for future countries to use nuclear weapons in future wars.

It was also argued that the usage of the atomic bomb was not the reason for Japan's surrender in its place it was the entry of the USSR into WWII. Japanese military officials used the USSR as a means of stalling Japan from agreeing to the terms of surrender, but when the USSR declared war against Japan, rather than concede and surrender, they came up with a different

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reason to avoid surrendering. Instead of teaming with the USSR to discuss better terms of surrender, Japanese militant officials argued that the U.S. did not have another atomic bomb and that even if she did she would be under public pressure to not use it. No matter what deleterious situation Japan came under, her military officials refused to surrender, whether it be the entry of the USSR or the dropping of the atomic bombs. However, the catastrophe from the atomic bombs was able to move the Emperor from his onlooker position into actively striving for Japan's surrender.

In addition to this proponents against the usage of the atomic bomb also reasoned that had the U.S. invited the USSR to sign the Potsdam Declaration then Japan military officers could not have tried to incite help from the USSR. However, the relationship of the U.S. and the USSR were already on shaky grounds and President Truman did not want to invite the USSR into the war as her objectives for involvement were unknown. And if the U.S. did add the USSR to the Potsdam Declaration then following Japan's surrender, the USSR would be allowed to occupy a portion of Japan's land (Heads of Governments). Robert Frank estimated that roughly 300,000 to 500,000 Japanese people, mostly civilians, would have died or vanished in Soviet captivity.

Historians have debated over whether the United States was justified in using the atomic bomb against Japan in World War II. Proponents argue that the ingrained bushido in Japanese citizens led to the risk of substantial civilian casualties as well as the necessity to use catastrophic means to shake their conviction to not capitulate. Opponents assert that the U.S. broke principles of war and allowed a precedence to use nuclear weapons in war. As well as arguing that the atomic bomb was not the reason that WWII ended sooner and thus led to lives being saved, instead it was the entrance of the USSR that forced the Japanese to surrender. After evaluation of both sides of the discussion, the strongest argument for the usage of the atomic bomb is that the bushido in Japanese culture startled the U.S. and led her to believe that extreme measures would be necessary to put an end to the war. While the strongest contention against the usage of the atomic bomb is that it legitimized the usage of nuclear weapons in war.

Subsequently, though the United States ethically should not have used the atomic bomb since it established the allowance of nuclear weapons in war, given the situation the U.S. was in it is justifiable that the atomic bomb was implemented. Opponents that argue against the U.S. deploying the atomic bomb are not realizing that hindsight is 20/20. After six years of long, gruesome battle the U.S. would want to put an end to the war as quickly and effectively as possible and it would be unlikely that they would carefully consider what the usage of the atomic bomb would entail in future war policies. The options from those who dissented the usage of the bomb are impractical and unrealistic. Perhaps invitation of the Soviet Union onto the Potsdam Declaration would have led to Japan's surrender, but without knowing whether the USSR would hold up their promise it would be a risky compromise. And the U.S. was right to think that it would take a significant force to make Japan surrender as the corruption from the military officials would continue to thwart any notions of surrendering. The dropping of the atomic bombs was a necessity to influence the Emperor to take control and finally end WWII.