

Japan, WWII: The Firebombing of Tokyo

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Seventy years ago today, the United States needlessly killed almost 100,000 people in a single air raid.

Today marks the seventieth anniversary of the American firebombing of Tokyo, World War II's deadliest day. More people died that night from napalm bombs than in the atomic strikes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But few in the United States are aware that the attack even took place.

The lack of ceremonies or official state apologies for the firebombing [1] is unsurprising considering that many Americans see World War II as the "just war" fought by the "greatest generation." These labels leave the war and the atrocities Americans committed during it largely untouched by critique.

The little that is available to study on the firebombing, at least here in the US, is told from the perspective of American crewmen and brass, through usually biased American military historians [2]. Those seeking better understanding of the March 9 tragedy must wade through reams of history primarily devoted to strategy; the heroics of American soldiers; the awesome power behind the bombs unleashed that day; and a cult-like devotion to the B-29 Superfortress, the plane that dropped the napalm over Tokyo and the atomic bombs, and was the inspiration for George Lucas's Millennium Falcon.

The overriding narrative surrounding the events of March 9, 1945 is that the American pilots and military strategists such as Gen. Curtis LeMay, the architect of the firebombing, had no other option but to carry out the mission. The Americans had "no choice" but to burn to death nearly one hundred thousand Japanese civilians.

Most historians seem to believe that LeMay should be commended for making "tough choices" in wartime, for it was these tough choices that allegedly saved lives on both sides by ending the war sooner.

What little criticism that exists of the firebombing is attacked for failing to put the bombing in proper context and not providing alternate solutions for ending the war. These attacks are also riddled with "they did it too" justifications.

World War II was carried out with brutality on all fronts. The Japanese military murdered nearly six million Chinese, Korean, and Filipino civilians by the end of it. However, to argue that Japanese civilians deserved to die — that children deserved to die — at the hands of the US military because their government killed civilians in other Asian countries is an indefensible position, in any moral or ethical framework.

Operation Meetinghouse saw more than three hundred B-29 bombers flying at ten thousand (as opposed to their usual thirty thousand feet) to avoid the effects of a 100 to 200 MPH jet stream, and setting Tokyo ablaze in the late hours of March 9. The American planes dropped five hundred thousand M-69 bombs (nicknamed "Tokyo Calling Card"), which were designed specially to consume the largely wooden residential structures of Tokyo.

Clustered in groups of thirty-eight, each M-69 weighed six pounds. The five hundred-pound clusters would disperse at two thousand feet. A white phosphorus fuse that looked like a gym sock ignited flaming jellied gasoline that spurted one hundred feet in the air on impact.

Like a sticky fiery plague, the globs of napalm clung to everything it touched. The M-69s were so effective at starting fires in Tokyo that night that gale force winds turned thousands of individual fires into one massive firestorm. Temperatures around the city raged between 600 and 1800 degrees Fahrenheit. In some areas, the fires melted asphalt.

LeMay planned the attack to coincide with 30 MPH winds in order to intensify the effect of the bombs. Ultimately, sixteen square miles of Tokyo were reduced to ash.

LeMay claimed that the Japanese government relied on residential “cottage” war production, thus making the civilians living in Tokyo a legitimate military target. However, by 1944 the Japanese had essentially terminated its home war production. A full 97 percent of the country’s military supplies were protected underground in facilities not vulnerable to air attack the day of the bombing [3]. The Americans knew this.

The United States had broken Japan’s Red [4] and Purple cipher machines [5] well before 1945, allowing them access to the most classified enemy intelligence. American generals understood the war would soon be materially impossible for the Japanese.

The US Naval blockade [6] had also prevented oil, metal, and other essential goods from entering Japan long before March 9. Japan was so cut off from basic supplies that it was constructing its planes partially out of wood.

The Japanese population at this point in the war was most concerned with starvation. The 1945 rice harvest was the worst since 1909. Surveys commissioned by Japan’s government in April 1945 reported the population was “too preoccupied with the problems of food” to worry about fighting a war. Victory for the Allies was guaranteed by the start of the year.

The most damning evidence against the firebombing can be traced to August 19, 1945, when Walter Trohan of the *Chicago Tribune* finally published a piece gracefully titled “Roosevelt Ignored M’Arthur Report on Nip Proposals” that he had been sitting on for seven months [7].

Trohan wrote:

Release of all censorship restrictions in the United States makes it possible to report that the first Japanese peace bid was relayed to the White House seven months ago...

The Jap offer, based on five separate overtures, was relayed to the White House by Gen. MacArthur in a 40-page communication, [who] urged negotiations on the basis of the Jap overtures...

The offer, as relayed by MacArthur, contemplated abject surrender of everything but the person of the Emperor. President Roosevelt dismissed the general’s communication, which was studded with solemn references to the deity, after a casual reading with the remark, “MacArthur is our greatest general and our poorest politician.”

The MacArthur report was not even taken to Yalta.

In January 1945 — two days before Franklin Roosevelt was to meet with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in Yalta — the Japanese were offering surrender terms almost identical to what was accepted by the Americans on the USS Missouri in the Japan Bay

on September 2, 1945.

The Japanese population was famished, the country's war machine was out of gas, and the government had capitulated. The Americans were unmoved. The firebombing and the nuclear attacks were heartlessly carried out. If anyone is guilty of disregarding the "context" of the firebombing of Tokyo, it's the sycophantic and biased American historians who deride these critical facts.

Let us not forget what actually happened on the ground that day. It has been too easy to bury the stories. Largely ignored by mainstream reviewers, Edwin P. Hoyet's *Inferno: The Fire Bombing of Japan, March 9 - August 15, 1945* [8] is one of the only oral histories from March 9.

Toshiko Higashikawa, who was twelve at the time of the bombing, recalled: "There was fire everywhere. I saw one person caught by the claws of the fire dragon before you could say Jack Robinson! Her clothes just went up in flames. Another two people were caught and burned up. The bombers just kept coming." Toshiko and her family fled to a neighborhood school, seeking shelter from fire. The family bottlenecked in a doorway, and Toshiko could hear children shouting: "Gya. Help! Its Hot! Moma! Uwa! Daddy! It hurts! Help!"

Moments later, Toshiko lost the grip of her father's hand in the frantic crowd. Her father was holding her younger brother Eichi in his other arm. Toshiko and her sister made it out of the schoolhouse alive. She never saw her father and brother again.

Koji Kikushima, who was thirteen at the time, tells the story of running down a street as fire chased her family and hundreds of others. The heat was so intense she instinctively jumped off a bridge into a river below. She survived the fall. In the morning she emerged from the river to see a "mountain of corpses" on the bridge. She never saw her family again.

Sumiko Morikawa was twenty-four that day. Her husband was off fighting in the war. She had a four-year-old son Kiichi, and twin eight-month-old girls Atsuko and Ryoko. As the fire began to burn the homes in her neighborhood, Sumiko ran towards a park pool with her kids. Nearing the pool's edge, four-year-old Kiichi's jacket caught fire.

"It's hot, mom. It's hot," he cried. Sumiko jumped into the pool with the twin girls and Kiichi. Then a fireball hit the boy in the head, and his mother doused him with water. But his head slumped over.

Sumiko fainted and woke to find her twins dead and son breathing faintly. The water in the pool had evaporated from the heat. Sumiko ran Kiichi to an aid station and began to give him tea from her own mouth. He opened his eyes for a moment and said "Mama" before dying.

There were nearly a million casualties that day in Tokyo and countless stories like the ones above. However what is mostly absent from Hoyet's book are personal reflections from men about what it was like that day. It's because cities like Tokyo and Nagasaki were essentially devoid of them.

"We rarely saw any fathers in the town," a women from Nagaski recalled for Paul Hamm in his book *Hiroshima Nagasaki*. "There were a lot of grandmothers, mothers, and children. I remember seeing one father-like person in my town but he was ill."

The remaining population, and hence the main targets of the bombing, were disproportionately women, children, and the elderly. The majority of the military-age men were away fighting in the war.

So why did the Americans continue to raid and terrorize the Japanese civilian population knowing

the war could have been over? Many argue that the Americans were flexing their muscles for Russia in anticipation of the ensuing Cold War. Countless pages have been written about this.

But what is too often overlooked is the racism of the day. It is America's racism that best explains the extent of the firebombing and the nuclear attacks. The racist mindset that all too many Americans were comfortable with in the Jim Crow era easily bled onto the Japanese. The horror stories of the almost two hundred thousand Japanese Americans who lost their livelihoods as a result of Roosevelt's internment camps are just one example of how Americans saw not only the Japanese but Japanese-Americans.

The firebombing of Japan was about testing new technologies on a civilian population. Significant funds had gone into the development of American military technology — 36 billion in 2015 dollars funded the creation of the atomic bomb. Napalm was new as well. The firebombing of Tokyo marked the first time it was used on a dense civilian population. The Americans wanted to assay their new inventions on a group of people who they thought were less than human.

LeMay famously remarked, "Killing Japanese didn't bother me very much at that time . . . I suppose if I had lost the war, I would have been tried as a war criminal." LeMay later leveraged his war credentials and racism to earn a spot on segregationist Gov. George Wallace's 1968 presidential ticket.

Terms like "greatest generation" betray Americans by keeping them willfully disconnected from their past. These labels flatten complex legacies, and prevent a thorough questioning of power.

Why did no one from the greatest generation stop these needless bombings? How can a country whose leaders constantly invoke its "exceptionalism" regularly fall back on the platitude "All sides were committing atrocities so why focus on the Americans?" These are the questions our high school textbooks need to be asking.

As Howard Zinn put it in "Three Holy Wars," [\[9\]](#) his final speech before he died:

This idea of good wars helps justify other wars which are obviously awful, obviously evil. And though they're obviously awful — I'm talking about Vietnam, I'm talking about Iraq, I'm talking about Afghanistan, I'm talking about Panama, I'm talking about Grenada, one of our most heroic of wars — the fact that you can have the historic experience of good wars creates a basis for believing, well, you know, there's such a thing as a good war, and maybe you can find, oh, parallels between the good wars and this war, even though you don't understand this war.

But, oh, yes, the parallels. Saddam Hussein is Hitler. That makes it clear. We have to fight against him. To not fight in the war means surrender, like Munich. There are all the analogies. . . . You compare something to World War II, you immediately infuse it with goodness.

After the war US Marine Joe O'Donnell was sent to document the destruction of Japan. His book *Japan 1945: A U.S. Marine's Photographs from Ground Zero* is something everyone who labels World War II good and just should see [\[10\]](#).

"The people I met," O'Donnell recalls, "the suffering I witnessed, and the scenes of incredible devastation taken by my camera caused me to question every belief I had previously held about my so-called enemies."

The ubiquity of America's national security state, its commitment to war without end, and the chauvinism of our leadership demands that we be ever-vigilant about propaganda that maintains the American war mindset.

Connecting with the transformation of Marines like Joe O'Donnell and Howard Zinn is the way forward. Destroying our war myths will help unravel the mentality that keeps America to this day fighting for the benefit of a few at the great expense of the many.

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P.S.

* Jacobin. 03.09.2015:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/03/tokyo-firebombing-world-war-ii/>

* Rory Fanning is the author of *Worth Fighting For: An Army Ranger's Journey Out of the Military and Across America*.

Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 43033), [Japan, WWII: Tokyo firebombing and unfinished U.S. business](#).

[2] <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB124234559143121723>

[3] https://books.google.fr/books?id=7jsYAgAAQBAJ&pg=PA138&lpg=PA138&dq=97+percent+of+Japan's+military+supplies+were+protected+underground+in+facilities+not+vulnerable+to+air+attack&source=bl&ots=oRcUTS6TtL&sig=-I_KfH7uOjaAGTypJe13ljirpog&hl=en&sa=X&ei=hNn0VMzEKcqBU6eHgggB&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=97%20percent%20of%20Japan's%20military%20supplies%20were%20protected%20underground%20in%20facilities%20not%20vulnerable%20to%20air%20attack&f=false

[4] <https://io9.gizmodo.com/how-the-u-s-cracked-japans-purple-encryption-machine-458385664>

[5] <http://ovid.cs.depaul.edu/Classes/CS233-W04/Papers/PurpleMagic.pdf>

[6] https://books.google.fr/books?id=5FZGAAQBAJ&pg=PA134&lpg=PA134&dq=The+1945+rice+harvest+was+the+worst+since+1909&source=bl&ots=hV1RUMMue9&sig=ErDh8IPxdosiOLuBJAAKjsqqCG8&hl=en&sa=X&ei=3r3zVKbWHcyryATE9IGoDg&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=The%201945%20rice%20harvest%20was%20the%20worst%20since%201909&f=false

[7] https://books.google.fr/books/about/Inferno.html?id=xo_tAAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y

[8] https://books.google.fr/books/about/Inferno.html?id=xo_tAAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y

[9] <https://www.haymarketbooks.org/search?q=Howard-Zinn-Speaks-Paperback>

[10] https://books.google.fr/books/about/Japan_1945.html?id=BWXhAAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y