

Opinion

## **August 6, 2015: Exploding the American myth of Hiroshima**

Did history's first atomic bomb, dropped on Japan 70 years ago today, really end World War II?

Friday 7 August 2015, by [REBER Pat](#) (Date first published: 6 August 2015).

The worst US bombings of Japanese cities began in the spring of 1945, marked by the firebombing of Tokyo on March 9-10 that killed an estimated 120,000 Japanese. So total was the destruction of more than 60 large cities by August that Japan's leaders had long accepted that massive amounts of urban deaths were part of the country's patriotic duty.

In fact, the US had to search for an undestroyed city large enough to fully demonstrate the power of its doomsday weapon, before the Boeing B-29 Superfortress Enola Gay dropped the world's first nuclear bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, according to historian Ward Wilson of the Rethinking Nuclear Weapons Project.

Seventy years on, many in the US still agree with their government's argument that the Hiroshima bomb - and Nagasaki's on August 9 - brought the Japanese to surrender, ended the Pacific war, saved the lives of half a million US troops at risk in the planned October/November land invasion and spared the lives of tens of thousands of Japanese civilians.

But some are starting to question the idea that Hiroshima alone moved Japan's Emperor Hirohito and his military to unconditional surrender on August 15.

US historian Tsuyoshi Hasegawa argues that the chief precipitating factor was the surprise Soviet invasion of Japan-held Manchuria early on August 9.

"There was no emergency meeting after Hiroshima," Wilson says.

"It was treated as just the latest in the firebombings of Japanese cities." Hasegawa, a professor at University of California at Santa Barbara, who speaks Russian and Japanese and who witnessed the firebombing of Tokyo as a child, lays out the timeline in his 2005 book, "Racing the Enemy".

The Japanese Supreme War Council did not convene in response to the Hiroshima bombing, but swung into immediate action on August 9 to consider surrender terms after "shock and crisis upon learning that Russia had declared war and invaded," Wilson explains.

The US dropped the second nuclear bomb on Nagasaki the same day, but Hasegawa argues that it had little effect on the surrender decision.

"What has been most [feared] has finally come into reality," he cites Kawabe Torashiro, Japan's deputy chief of staff, describing the inner circle's reaction to the Soviet invasion to a US interrogator in 1949.

On August 10, 1945, Hirohito declared: "It seems obvious that the nation is no longer able to wage

war, and its ability to defend its own shores is doubtful.”

Five days later, Japan surrendered unconditionally, renouncing its pursuit of favourable terms after rejecting the July 26 Potsdam Declaration’s US-British demand for unconditional surrender. It had hoped to keep its imperial system, its military and as much territory as possible while avoiding prosecution for war crimes by trying to convince the Soviet Union, treaty-bound to neutrality until 1946, to mediate a favourable settlement with the US in exchange for Asian territory.

Although its navy and air force were practically destroyed, Japan’s military leaders felt in a strong negotiating position, as armed civilians and ground troops were prepared to inflict heavy casualties on the US during the expected autumn land invasion.

But despite Tokyo’s diplomatic overtures, Stalin was preparing to invade Japan as agreed in February 1945 at the three-power Allied conference in Yalta.

“The Soviet entry into the war played a greater role than the atomic bombs in inducing Japan to surrender,” Hasegawa writes in “Racing the Enemy”.

Similar interpretations have been put forward by US historians like Gar Alperovitz, who first mooted the idea in the late 1960s, Martin Sherwin and Richard Rhodes.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki set the fearful tone for the Cold War and provoked lasting debate about the morality and strategic necessity of president Harry Truman’s decision to drop the bombs.

Pulitzer-prize winning historian Herbert Bix of New York’s Binghamton University argues that Truman was keen to send a warning to the Soviets. Others quote a letter Truman wrote later to a church organisation, saying the bomb was revenge for Pearl Harbour.

“When you have to deal with a beast, you have to treat him as a beast,” he wrote.

An estimated 60,000 to 80,000 Japanese died in Hiroshima the day the bomb fell, and around 40,000 in Nagasaki. Tens of thousands died or suffered from exposure to the bomb and radiation in following years.

Truman repeatedly insisted the bombs were needed to end the war in the Pacific and save half a million US military lives. Most Americans still see it that way, even though World War II military commanders have said that number was exaggerated.

Anti-nuclear campaigner Wilson says the storyline persists because it reduces US guilt, and “fits our national mythology of Yankee ingenuity, that we build devices that change the world”.

He also says the international shock at the world’s first atomic bombs “had a way of turning the entire sympathy toward Japan” after the country’s wartime aggression.

“It’s a useful idea for presenting Japan as a peaceful, unaggressive country.”

**Pat Reber**

Deutsche Presse-Agentur

Washington August 6, 2015 1:00 am

---

---

**P.S.**

\*

<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/opinion/Exploding-the-American-myth-of-Hiroshima-30265990.htm>  
l