**Key Question:**

**Was the United States justified in dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?**

**Need to Know**

The United States' use of the atomic bomb on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima (August 6, 1945) and Nagasaki (August 9, 1945) constituted the first (and, to date, only) wartime use of a nuclear bomb. There are many strong arguments surrounding the issue of whether the bombing of these two cities was strategically necessary to bring about the end of World War II, and it is a debate that even today is not easily settled.

**Investigate**

During World War II, both the Allied and Axis powers had previously pursued policies of strategic bombing and the use of civilian targets to affect enemy morale. In several instances, strategic bombing caused huge numbers of civilian casualties. For example, in Germany, the Allied firebombing of Dresden resulted in roughly 30,000 deaths. The March 1945 firebombing of Tokyo killed over 70,000 people according to the Japan War History Office. By August 1945, when the atomic bomb was employed against Hiroshima and Nagasaki, roughly 60 Japanese cities had been destroyed through a massive aerial campaign, including extensive firebombing raids on the cities of Tokyo and Kobe.

Initially, the United States tried daylight precision bombing, as this had been successful in the European theater, but this proved ineffective due to the weather conditions (high winds would destabilize the bombs before they reached their targets). Because of this, the switch was made to nighttime firebombing. The high winds that had defeated the daylight precision bombing attempts were more favorable to incendiary bombing, as they could spread the flames quickly throughout the targeted city. Tokyo in particular proved to be a vulnerable target due to its preponderance of wooden structures, which burned quickly.

Unlike the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which were arguably intended to force Japan to surrender unconditionally, firebombing was carried out as a long-term strategy to destroy Japan's industrial ability to manufacture war materials. There was also the intention of demoralizing the Japanese people, as well as to undermine the government's willingness to continue the war. In addition, incendiary attacks killed more civilians overall than did the two atomic attacks combined.

Develop, with a partner or in a team, a pro and con debate about the effectiveness of incendiary bombing. Use the following questions to focus your argument:

* How effective was incendiary bombing in bringing Japan closer to unconditional surrender?
* Could the end to the war have been achieved through incendiary bombing alone?
* Account for the argument against incendiary bombing—that it killed more civilians and may have incurred more casualties in the long run—when developing your argument.

##### **MLA Citation**

"Dropping the Bomb: Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Investigate." *World History: The Modern Era*. ABC-CLIO, 2014. Web. 3 Dec. 2014.

**Dilemma: Was the United States justified in dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?**

**Opening**

The ramifications of the U.S. decision to use the atomic bomb against Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 are felt even today. Many saw the bomb as a solution to end the war quickly with the fewest number of casualties. Others worried about the moral obligations inherent in the use of the new weapon, while still others argued that a land invasion would be more effective than using the atomic bomb.

Dr. Spencer C. Tucker contends that the use of the atomic bomb was justified, as the United States did not have conclusive proof that Japan was ready to accept terms of unconditional surrender. Further, a land invasion would have resulted in unacceptably high numbers of casualties on both sides of the conflict. Taking this viewpoint a step further, Dr. J. Samuel Walker makes a distinction between justified and necessary, arguing that dropping the bomb was necessary to end the war much sooner than it otherwise would have ended, but pointing out that President Harry S. Truman was not given casualty estimates in the "hundreds of thousands" and therefore did not take this into account when he made the decision. Last, Dr. Gar Alperovitz is firm in his standpoint that dropping the bomb not only was unnecessary, but was also opposed by several key U.S. military figures at the time. He contends that Japan was on the brink of surrendering, and that a coordinated Soviet attack alone would have been sufficient to end the war. Alperovitz suggests that the United States should have waited until after November 1945, the time scheduled for a land invasion, before deployment, and believes that by that time the war would have ended without the use of the bomb.

##### **MLA Citation**

"Dropping the Bomb: Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Dilemma: Opening." *World History: The Modern Era*. ABC-CLIO, 2014. Web. 3 Dec. 2014.

**Perspective 1: Dropping the bomb saved lives.**

Dropping the atomic bombs on Japan saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of U.S. soldiers and was the only way to end the war quickly. In the summer of 1945, American planners hoped that a naval blockade and strategic bombing campaign of the Japanese home islands would bring the war to an end. The prospects for an actual invasion appeared dim, as Japanese leaders made major preparations to defend against such an attack. In light of the heavy casualties sustained by U.S. forces in the invasions of Iwo Jima and Okinawa earlier that year, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff were reluctant to carry out Operation DOWNFALL, the planned land invasion of Japan. The Japanese military had a million soldiers, 3,000 Kamikaze aircraft, and 5,000 suicide boats available to defend its home islands. Civilians were also being prepared to fight to the death. With the U.S. invasion scheduled for November 1, 1945, and well aware that the cost of such an enterprise was likely to be high, the Joint Chiefs of Staff pressed President Franklin D. Roosevelt at the February 1945 Yalta Conference to persuade the Soviet Union to enter the war against Japan at any cost.

Following the successful test detonation of an atomic bomb at Alamogordo, New Mexico, on July 16, 1945, sharp debate arose among advisers to U.S. President Harry S. Truman (who had succeeded Roosevelt as president on the latter's death in April) regarding whether to employ the new weapon against Japan. The terror threshold had already been passed in the firebombing of Japanese cities. Indeed, the most destructive single air raid in history was not the atomic bombing of Hiroshima or Nagasaki, but the firebombing of Tokyo on the night of March 9–10, 1945. This was total war. It was always assumed that the bomb would be used if it became available. American planners believed that employing the bomb would, in all likelihood, bring the war to a speedy end, saving many American lives. It would also mean that the United States would not have to share occupation of Japan with the Soviet Union, and hopefully it would deter Soviet leader Joseph Stalin from future aggression. The atomic bomb was thus essentially a psychological weapon, rather than a purely military tool, the use of which was designed to influence Japanese political leaders. Dropping it appeared to be the only way to realize the American goal of unconditional surrender.

Revisionist historians have held that the Japanese government was trying desperately to leave the war and that employing the bomb was unnecessary. Intercepts of diplomatic messages indicated, however, that Japan had not yet reached the decision to surrender when the first bomb was dropped. While Emperor Hirohito and his principal advisers had concluded that Japan could not win the war, they still held out hope for a negotiated settlement and believed that a last decisive battle would force the Allies to grant more favorable peace terms.

Post atomic bomb estimates have claimed the possibility of up to a million casualties in a U.S. invasion of Japan. However, historian Ray Skates concludes in his authoritative study *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb*(1998) that Operation OLYMPIC, the first phase of the invasion of Japan (the conquest of the island of Kyushu planned for November 1945), would alone have taken two months and resulted in 75,000 to 100,000 U.S. casualties. Such losses, while they would not have affected the outcome of the war, might indeed have brought about the political goals sought by the Japanese leaders for more favorable surrender terms.

Prolonging the war would have meant a significantly higher cost in Japanese lives than those actually killed in the atomic bombings. During the war, the Japanese lost 323,495 dead on the home front, the vast majority of them from air attack. With continued strategic bombing this total would have swelled, and many other Japanese would simply have died of starvation. By August 1945, Japan's largest cities had been largely burned out. Waterborne transportation had been interdicted by airborne mining and submarines, and the Japanese nation was close to starvation. The reduced food supply was highly dependent on railroad distribution, and the railroads would have been the next major strategic bombing target. In effect, dropping the bomb resulted in a net saving of both Japanese and American lives.

The first bomb fell on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. On August 8, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan, Stalin honoring, to the day, his pledge at Yalta to enter the war against Japan "two or three months after the defeat of Germany," which had occurred on May 8, 1945. On August 9, a second atomic bomb fell on Nagasaki.

After prolonged meetings with his advisers, Hirohito made the decision for peace. The U.S. dropping of the atomic bombs enabled him to take this difficult step in the face of a sharply divided cabinet. Even so, his decision was not without danger, for fanatics determined to fight on to the end plotted to assassinate the emperor to prevent announcement of the decision. To forestall this, Hirohito communicated the decision over radio. On the afternoon of August 15, 1945, in a voice never heard before by the Japanese people, Hirohito told his people that Japan would accept the Potsdam Declaration and surrender. In so doing, he specifically mentioned the atomic bomb: "Moreover, the enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bomb, the power of which to do damage is indeed incalculable, taking the toll of many innocent lives." World War II had come to an end, and the atomic bomb played a major role in it, saving both Japanese and American lives.

#### **Works Cited**

Frank, Richard B. *Downfall: The End of the Japanese Empire.* New York: Random House, 1999; Mosley, Leonard. *Hirohito, Emperor of Japan.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966; Skates, John Ray. *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998.

**Perspective 2: Dropping the bomb was necessary to end the war.**

The simple answer to the question "Was the United States justified in dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II?" is *yes*, the United States was justified in using atomic bombs to end World War II in the Pacific at the earliest possible moment. The answer to a closely related question—"Was the use of the bomb necessary?"—is more ambiguous. In my view, the answer to this question is yes, it was necessary in some ways, and no, it was not necessary in other ways.

By the summer of 1945, after three-and-a-half years of cruel and bloody war, American leaders knew that Japan was defeated. It was running desperately short of vital supplies and faced the prospect of mass starvation. But that did not mean that Japan was ready to surrender. Although its leaders recognized that they could not win the war, they fought on in hopes of securing surrender terms that they would find acceptable. President Harry S. Truman and his advisers considered various methods of forcing the Japanese to surrender, including, in the worst case, an invasion of the Japanese home islands that would claim the lives of large numbers of U.S. soldiers, sailors, and Marines. The invasion, if it became necessary, was scheduled to begin around November 1, 1945.

The success of the Manhattan Project in building atomic bombs that became available for the first time in the summer of 1945 greatly eased the dilemma that Truman faced. Here, he hoped, was a means to force the Japanese to quit the war without having to confront the ghastly prospect of an invasion or risk the major drawbacks of the other possible but highly uncertain alternatives. The alternatives included continuing the firebombing of Japanese cities that had already caused massive destruction and loss of life, modifying the U.S. demand for unconditional surrender by allowing the emperor to remain on his throne, and waiting for Soviet entry into the war against Japan. Those options might have brought about a Japanese surrender but they ran the risks of prolonging the war in the first two cases and expanding Soviet influence in East Asia in the third.

Although some Japanese leaders sought to persuade Emperor Hirohito to surrender, he vacillated while the war continued. Therefore, the use of the atomic bomb was essential, and justified, to compel Japan to capitulate promptly. The shock of the bombing of Hiroshima, followed immediately by a Soviet attack on Japanese forces in Manchuria, finally convinced Hirohito that the war must end quickly. After agonizing deliberations in Tokyo, the Japanese government surrendered on the sole condition that the institution of the emperor be preserved.

For many years after the end of World War II, Americans embraced the view that the use of the bomb was necessary because the only alternative was an invasion of Japan that would have cost hundreds of thousands of American lives. But this categorical position has been discredited by the opening of new American and Japanese sources. They show that neither the president nor top military advisers regarded an invasion as inevitable. Further, Truman was not told by his most trusted advisers that an invasion, if it became necessary, would cost hundreds of thousands of lives. The idea that Truman had to choose between the bomb and an invasion to defeat Japan is a myth that took hold in the United States after World War II.

Truman was committed to ending the war at the earliest possible moment, and he wanted to save as many American lives as he could. He did not need estimates of potential losses in the hundreds of thousands to authorize the use of the bomb, and in fact, there is no contemporaneous evidence that he received projections of such staggering losses. For Truman, his advisers, and the vast majority of the American people, ending the war and sparing the lives of a smaller but far from inconsequential number of Americans was ample reason to drop atomic bombs. The Japanese government could have avoided the terrible effects of the atomic bombs by electing to surrender sooner than it did, but it was too divided and too indecisive to take the proper action.

There are many uncertainties and complexities surrounding the end of World War II. But the answer to the fundamental question of whether the use of the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was necessary appears to be: yes . . . and no. Yes, it was necessary to end the war as quickly as possible. And yes, it was necessary to save the lives of American troops, perhaps numbering in the several thousands. But no, the bomb probably was not necessary to end the war within a fairly short time without an invasion because Japan was in such dire straits. And no, it was not necessary to save the lives of *hundreds* of thousands of American troops.

#### **Works Cited**

Walker, Samuel J. *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs against Japan.* 2nd Ed. University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

**Perspective 3: Dropping the bomb was unjustified.**

The United States was not justified in using atomic bombs against Japanese cities in 1945. United States and British intelligence had already advised that Japan was likely to surrender when the Soviet Union entered the war in early August—and on terms which, in fact, would have been very close to those ultimately accepted by the United States. There are also reasons to believe the decision had as much to do with geopolitics connected with the Soviet Union as it did with the war against Japan.

The conventional wisdom that the atomic bomb saved a million lives is so widespread that most Americans haven't paused to ponder something rather striking to anyone seriously concerned with the issue: Most American military leaders didn't think the bombings were either necessary or justified—and many were morally offended by Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Here is how Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower reacted when he was told by Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson that the atomic bomb would be used: "During his recitation of the relevant facts, I had been conscious of a feeling of depression and so I voiced to him my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary, and secondly because I thought that our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer mandatory as a measure to save American lives."

In another public statement the man who later became president was blunt: "It wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing."

Gen. Curtis LeMay, the tough cigar-smoking air force "hawk," was also dismayed. Shortly after the bombings he stated: "The war would have been over in two weeks... The atomic bomb had nothing to do with the end of the war at all."

And Fleet Adm. Chester W. Nimitz, commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet, went public with this statement: "The Japanese had, in fact, already sued for peace...The atomic bomb played no decisive part, from a purely military standpoint, in the defeat of Japan."

The reasons these and many, many military leaders felt this way are both clear and instructive: Japan was essentially defeated, its navy at the bottom of the ocean; its air force limited by fuel, equipment, and other shortages; its army facing defeat on all fronts; and its cities subjected to bombing that was all but impossible to challenge. With Germany out of the war, the United States and Britain were about to bring their full power to bear on what was left of the Japanese military. Moreover, the Soviet Army was getting ready to attack on the Asian mainland.

American intelligence had broken Japanese codes and had advised as early as April 1945 that although a hardline faction wished to continue the war, when the Soviet Union attacked—expected roughly in the first week of August—Japan would likely surrender as long as assurances were given concerning the fate of the emperor. Combined U.S. and British intelligence reaffirmed this advice a month before the bombings. One reason this option—using the shock of the Soviet attack and giving assurances to the emperor—appeared highly likely to work was that Japanese leaders feared the political consequences of Soviet power. Moreover, there was also little to lose: An invasion could not in any event begin until November, three months after the Soviet attack. If the war didn't end as expected, the bomb could still be used.

Instead, the United States rushed to use two bombs on August 6 and August 9, at almost exactly the time the Soviet attack was scheduled. Numerous studies suggest this was done in part because they "preferred," as Pulitzer Prize–winning historian Martin Sherwin has put it, to end the war in this way. Although the available evidence is not as yet absolutely conclusive, impressing the Soviets also appears to have been a factor.

Many military leaders were offended not only because the bombs were used in these circumstances but because they were used against Japanese cities—essentially civilian targets. William D. Leahy, President Truman's friend, his chief of staff, and a five star admiral who presided over meetings of both the U.S. Chiefs of Staff and the Combined U.S.-British Chiefs of Staff, wrote this after the war: "[T]he use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender... [I]n being the first to use it, we . . . adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages."

President Richard Nixon recalled: "[General Douglas] MacArthur once spoke to me very eloquently about it, pacing the floor of his apartment in the Waldorf. He thought it a tragedy that the Bomb was ever exploded. MacArthur believed that the same restrictions ought to apply to atomic weapons as to conventional weapons, that the military objective should always be limited damage to noncombatants. . . . MacArthur, you see, was a soldier. He believed in using force only against military targets, and that is why the nuclear thing turned him off."

#### **Works Cited**

Alperovitz, Gar. *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb.* Knopf, 1995.

**Closing:**

The United States' use of the atomic bomb on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki remains the only wartime detonation of an atomic bomb in the history of warfare. No other country has used an atomic weapon against another. Given this, the debate surrounding the necessity of using the atomic bomb is not surprisingly an intense and highly opinionated one. Did the United States weigh all of its options before dropping the bomb? Should Japan have held out for better terms of surrender, or should Emperor Hirohito have recognized that "unconditional surrender," no matter how undesirable, was necessary? And was the result—the end of the war—worth the cost in lives?

Dr. Spencer Tucker, citing historian Ray Skates, contends that a Soviet invasion of Japan would have taken too long, resulted in extremely high casualty rates, and would not have achieved the goal—a quick end to the war—efficiently. Dr. J. Samuel Walker reminds us that the decision to drop the atomic bomb was controversial but, he says, ultimately correct. The main goal was to end the war *quickly,* Dr. Walker states, and the use of the bombs enabled Truman to do just that. Opposing both viewpoints, Dr. Gar Alperovitz contends that the Soviet Union's entry into the war in the Pacific would have been sufficient to induce Japan to yield so that the use of the bomb would not have been necessary. Dr. Alperovitz also highlights the fact that several key U.S. military figures, including future president Dwight D. Eisenhower, made public statements against the use of the bomb.

##### **MLA Citation**

"Dropping the Bomb: Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Dilemma: Closing." *World History: The Modern Era*. ABC-CLIO, 2014. Web. 3 Dec. 2014.