

The Atomic Bombs: Were They Justified?

No episode of the World War II era has provoked sharper controversy than the atomic bombings of Japan in August 1945. Lingering moral misgivings about the nuclear incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have long threatened to tarnish America's crown of military victory. Some critics have accused the United States of racist motives because the bombs were dropped on a nonwhite people. Other commentators note that the Japanese were already reeling on the verge of collapse by 1945, and therefore history's most awful weapons—especially the second bomb, on Nagasaki—were unnecessary to bring the war to a conclusion. Still other scholars, notably Gar Alperovitz, have further charged that the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were not the last shots of World War II, but the first salvos in the emerging Cold War. Alperovitz argues that President Truman willfully ignored Tokyo's attempts to negotiate a surrender in the summer of 1945 and rejected all alternatives to dropping the bomb because he wanted

to intimidate and isolate the Soviet Union. He unleashed his horrible new weapons, so this argument goes, not simply to defeat Japan, but to end the Far Eastern conflict before the Soviets could enter it, and thereby freeze them out of any role in formulating postwar reconstruction policy in Asia.

Each of these accusations has been vigorously rebutted. Richard Rhodes's exhaustive history of the making of the atomic bomb emphasizes that the Anglo-American atomic project began as a race against the Germans, who were known to be actively pursuing a nuclear weapons program. (Unknown to the Americans, Germany effectively terminated its effort in 1942, just as the Anglo-American project went into high gear.) From the outset both British and American planners believed that the bomb, if successful, would be not just another weapon, but the ultimate instrument of destruction that would decisively deliver victory into the hands of whomever possessed it. They consequently assumed that it

would be used at the earliest possible moment. There is, therefore, no credible reason to conclude that German cities would not have suffered the fate of Hiroshima and Nagasaki if nuclear weapons had become available sooner or if the European phase of the war had lasted longer.

It is true that American intelligence sources in the early summer of 1945 reported that some Japanese statesmen were trying to enlist the still-neutral Russians' good offices to negotiate a surrender. But as R. J. C. Butow's fine-grained study of Japan's decision to surrender demonstrates, it was unclear whether those initiatives had the full backing of the Japanese government. Moreover, the Japanese clung to several unacceptable conditions, including protection for their imperial system of government, the right to disarm and repatriate their own troops, no military occupation of the home islands, no international trials of alleged war criminals, and possible retention of some of their conquered territories. All this flew squarely in the face of America's repeatedly declared intention to settle for nothing less than *unconditional* surrender. As for the Nagasaki bomb (dropped on August 9), Butow also notes that it conclusively dispelled the Japanese government's original assessment that the Hiroshima attack (on August 6) was a one-time-only stunt, with little likelihood of further nuclear strikes to follow. (Even then, some diehard military officers, refusing to acknowledge defeat, tried, on the night of August 14, to storm the Imperial Palace to seize the recording of the emperor's surrender announcement before it could be broadcast the following day.)

Could the use of the atomic bombs have been avoided? Studies by Martin J. Sherwin, Barton J.

Bernstein, and McGeorge Bundy have shown that few policymakers at the time seriously asked that question. As Winston Churchill later wrote, "The decision whether or not to use the atomic bomb to compel the surrender of Japan was never even an issue. There was unanimous, automatic, unquestioned agreement around our table; nor did I ever hear the slightest suggestion that we should do otherwise." In fact, the "decision" to use the bomb was not made in 1945, but in 1942, when the United States committed itself to a crash program to build—and use—a nuclear weapon as swiftly as possible. Intimidating the Soviets might have been a "bonus" to using the bomb against Japan, but influencing Soviet behavior was never the *primary* reason for the fateful decision. American leaders wanted to end the war as soon as possible. To that end they had always assumed the atomic bomb would be dropped as soon as it was available. That moment came on August 6, 1945.

Doubt and remorse about the atomic conclusion of World War II have plagued the American conscience ever since. Less often remarked on are the deaths of four times more Japanese noncombatants than died at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the so-called conventional fire-bombing of some five dozen Japanese cities in 1945. Those deaths suggest that the deeper moral question should perhaps be addressed not to the particular technology of nuclear weaponry and the fate of those two unfortunate Japanese cities, but to the quite deliberate decision, made by several combatants—including the Germans, the British, the Americans, and the Japanese themselves—to designate civilian populations as legitimate military targets.

EXPANDING THE “VARYING VIEWPOINTS”

- Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy* (rev. ed., 1985).

A view of the atomic bomb as aimed at Russia rather than Japan:

“The decision to use the weapon did not derive from overriding military considerations.... *Before the atomic bomb was dropped each of the Joint Chiefs of Staff advised that it was highly likely that Japan could be forced to surrender ‘unconditionally,’ without use of the bomb and without an invasion....* Unquestionably, political considerations related to Russia played a major role in the decision; from at least mid-May American policy makers hoped to end the hostilities before the Red Army entered Manchuria.... A combat demonstration was needed to convince the Russians to accept the American plan for a stable peace.”

- Martin Sherwin, *A World Destroyed* (1975).

A view of the atomic bomb as primarily aimed at Japan:

“Caught between the remnants of war and the uncertainties of peace, policymakers and scientists were trapped by their own unquestioned assumptions.... The secret development of this terrible weapon, during a war fought for a total victory, created a logic of its own: a quest for a total solution of a set of related problems that appeared incapable of being resolved incrementally.... As Szilard first suggested in January 1944, the bomb might provide its own solution.... The decision to use the bomb to end the war could no longer be distinguished from the desire to use it to stabilize the peace.”

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE “VARYING VIEWPOINTS”

1. What does each of these historians see as American officials’ thinking about the relationship between the bomb and the ending of the war against Japan?
2. What does each regard as the primary reason for the use of the bomb?
3. What conclusions might be drawn from each of these views about the political and moral justifications for dropping the bomb?

VARYING VIEWPOINTS

Who Was to Blame for the Cold War?

Whose fault was the Cold War? (And, for that matter, who should get credit for ending it?) For two decades after World War II, American historians generally agreed that the aggressive Soviets were solely responsible. This "orthodox" or "official" appraisal squared with the traditional view of the United States as a virtuous, innocent land with an idealistic foreign policy. This point of view also justified America's Cold War containment policy, which cast the Soviet Union as the aggressor that must be confined by an ever-vigilant United States. America supposedly had only defensive intentions, with no expansionary ambitions of its own.

In the 1960s a vigorous revisionist interpretation flowered, powerfully influenced by disillusion over U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The revisionists stood the orthodox view on its head. The Soviets, they argued, had only defensive intentions at the end of World War II; it was the Americans who had behaved provocatively by brandishing their new atomic weaponry. Some of these critics pointed an accusing finger at President Truman, alleging that he abandoned Roosevelt's conciliatory approach to the Soviets and adopted a bullying attitude, emboldened by the American atomic monopoly.

More radical revisionists like Gabriel and Joyce Kolko even claimed to have found the roots of Truman's alleged belligerence in long-standing American policies of economic imperialism—policies that eventually resulted in the tragedy of Vietnam (see pp. 928–930). In this view the Vietnam War followed logically from America's insatiable "need" for overseas markets and raw materials. Vietnam itself may have been economically unimportant, but, so the argument ran, a communist Vietnam represented an intolerable challenge to American hegemony. Ironically, revisionists thus endorsed the so-called domino theory, which official apologists often cited in defense of America's Vietnam policy. According to the domino theory, if the United States declined to fight in Vietnam, other countries would lose their faith in America's will (or their fear of American power) and would tumble one after the other like "dominoes" into the Soviet camp. Revisionists stressed what they saw as the *economic necessity* behind the domino theory: losing in Vietnam, they claimed, would unravel the American economy.

In the 1970s a "postrevisionist" interpretation emerged that is widely agreed upon today. Historians such as John Lewis Gaddis and Melvyn Leffler pooh-pooh the economic determinism of the revisionists, while frankly acknowledging that the United States did have vital security interests at stake in the post-World War II era. The postrevisionists analyze the ways in which inherited ideas (like isolationism) and the contentious nature of postwar domestic pol-

itics, as well as miscalculations by American leaders, led a nation in search of security into seeking not simply a sufficiency but a "preponderance" of power. The American *overreaction* to its security needs, these scholars suggest, exacerbated U.S.-Soviet relations and precipitated the four-decade-long nuclear arms race that formed the centerpiece of the Cold War.

In the case of Vietnam, the postrevisionist historians focus not on economic necessity, but on a failure of political intelligence, induced by the stressful conditions of the Cold War, that made the dubious domino theory seem plausible. Misunderstanding Vietnamese intentions, exaggerating Soviet ambitions, and fearing to appear "soft on communism" in the eyes of their domestic political rivals, American leaders plunged into Vietnam, sadly misguided by their own Cold War obsessions.

Most postrevisionists, however, still lay the lion's share of the blame for the Cold War on the Soviet Union. By the same token, they credit the Soviets with ending the Cold War—a view hotly disputed by Ronald Reagan's champions, who claim that it was his anti-Soviet policies in the 1980s that brought the Russians to their knees (see pp. 973–974). The great unknown, of course, is the precise nature of Soviet thinking in the Cold War years. Were Soviet aims predominantly defensive, or did the Kremlin incessantly plot world conquest? Was there an opportunity for reconciliation with the West following Stalin's death in 1953? Should Mikhail Gorbachev or Ronald Reagan be remembered as the leader who ended the Cold War? With the opening of Soviet archives, scholars are eagerly pursuing answers to such questions.

EXPANDING THE "VARYING VIEWPOINTS"

- Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945–1984* (1985).

A view of the United States as primarily responsible for the Cold War:

"Having failed to budge the Russians in face-to-face negotiations, even when backed by atomic bombs, the State Department next tried to buckle Stalin's iron fence with economic pressures.... More important, it made American officials ponder the awful possibility that Stalin's ambitions included not only strategic positions in Eastern Europe, but the imposition of Communist regimes upon Asia and the Middle East. Stating the Soviet dictator's alternatives in this way no doubt badly distorts his true policies.... Stalin's thrusts after 1944 were rooted more in the Soviets' desire to secure certain specific strategic bases, raw materials, and above all, to break up what

Stalin considered to be the growing Western encirclement of Russia.... However, American officials saw little reason to worry about such distinctions."

- John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War* (1972).

A view of the Cold War as caused primarily by Soviet aggression:

"If one must assign responsibility for the Cold War, the most meaningful way to proceed is to ask which side had the greater opportunity to accommodate itself, at least in part, to the other's position, given the range of alternatives as they appeared at the time. Revisionists have argued that American policy-makers possessed greater freedom of action, but their view ignores the constraints imposed by domestic policies.... The Russian dictator was immune from pressures of Congress, public opinion, or the press.... This is not to say that Stalin wanted a Cold War.... But his absolute powers did give him more chances to surmount the internal restraints on his policy than were available to his democratic counterparts in the West."

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE "VARYING VIEWPOINTS"

1. How does each of these historians see American and Soviet motives in the Cold War?
2. On what basis does each assign primary responsibility for initiating Cold War conflicts?
3. How would each of these historians likely interpret the confrontation over Greece and the Truman Doctrine?