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The Decision to employ Nuclear Weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki



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1. Introduction

“The facts of history are indeed facts about individuals, but not about actions of individuals performed in isolation, and not about the motives [...] from which individuals suppose themselves to have acted. They are facts about the relations of individuals to one another in society and about the social forces which produce from the actions of individuals results often at variance with, and sometimes opposite to, the results which they themselves intended.”¹

This fundamental statement by E.H. Carr essentially refers to the pivotal methodological necessity of the historian to not merely relate specific historical events, developments and processes to a single rational decision deliberately taken at a given point in the past by certain individuals in complete knowledge of the implications their actions might entail, but rather that as result of their at times catatonic entrenchment in static decision-making structures and the formative influence exerted upon their reasoning by a multitude of governing factors borne out of various political, economical, military, social and ideological considerations (and possibly even personal predispositions), the actions of individual human beings – in particular those vested with profound and extraordinary political powers - should accordingly not merely be attributed to the preponderance of a single and clearly defined motive presumably guiding their ability to judge. Theirs often are decisions which, although usually only arrived at after long and thorough deliberation, are regularly informed by considerations and calculations inferred from such an intricate interaction of determining influences that any attempt to expose one principal or predominant motive would essentially be to disregard all those other factors and aspects which to a more or lesser degree ultimately bore as well as upon the adoption of a given course of action. Accordingly it is by starting from this very premise that the subsequent analysis sets out to critically illuminate and elaborate upon one of the arguably most consequential and controversial single decisions taken in recent modern history, namely the dropping of Nuclear Weapons upon the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6th, respectively August 9th 1945, by American Air Force Bombers within the overriding context of hostilities between these countries in the Pacific Theatre of the Second World War.

In so doing, the paper at hand does, however, not merely attempt to offer a conclusive and exhaustive answer to the question as to what primary factors and/or ostensibly ulterior motives ultimately led American decision makers to issue the order to detonate Atomic Bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but on a more profound scale it essentially also aspires to determine whether any of the given reasons might indeed be said of having considerably outweighed all

¹ E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (Cambridge, 1961). Available at: <http://library.universalhistory.net/wpcontent/uploads/2011/05/What-is-history.pdf> [revised 29 March 2012], p. 30.

other considerations contemplated at the time, or in other words whether in effect there truly existed such a thing as a solitary, pre-eminent motive among American policy-makers which clearly and undeniably reduced all other potential influences and motivations to the status of at best complementary, yet ultimately far less significant incitements for dropping the bombs. In accordance with E.C. Carr's statement, the following analysis consequently endeavours to demonstrate that the decision to release nuclear weapons over Hiroshima and Nagasaki was in fact anything *but* the result of a premeditated action on the part of leading American authorities, but rather that it evolved out of a unique combination of interrelated strategic and socio-political considerations, inter-personal relationships as well as practical exigencies. To that end the matter at hand will essentially be approached by means of a systematic two-step methodological examination, one which will in a first instance explore in depth the special circumstances under which US officials operated in the weeks and months prior to the actual dropping of nuclear weapons and which, as a consequence, undoubtedly had a profound and eminently decisive impact upon their decision-making. Following that, it will be analysed how their reasoning was furthermore also substantially affected by reflections and objectives of a slightly less tangible yet nevertheless equally important order, influential determinants which especially when reviewed against the contextual background of their time ultimately figured all the more pertinently in deliberations dealing with the seminal issue of employing Nuclear Weapons against Japan.

The dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, frequently and unjustifiably reduced to the preponderance of a single motive, has ever since been a matter of fierce contention in scholarly debates attempting to provide a definite and incontrovertible answer to the question of why both of these Japanese cities and their inhabitants ultimately had to be submitted to the horrors of nuclear warfare. Historians today still fiercely dispute the alleged plurality of motives underlying this momentous decision, the result being a polarized scholarly discord which by now virtually abounds in a multitude of different theories and competing suppositions.² At one end of the spectrum there are those scholars who argue that the decision solely rested upon grounds of military expediency, foremost the necessity to shorten a gruelling war and to save the lives of American soldiers.³ An entirely different explanation is, on the other hand, offered by those historians who contend that American policy makers above all wanted to exhibit their country's enormous military potency, with Hiroshima and Nagasaki basically serving to counter post-war ambitions of the Soviet Union by demonstrating the vast

² J. Samuel Walker, 'Recent Literature on Truman's Atomic Bomb Decision: A Search for the Middle Ground', *Diplomatic History*, 29, no. 2 (2005), pp. 311–334.

³ Robert J. Maddox, *Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later* (Columbia, 1995); J. Samuel Walker, *Prompt and utter destruction* (Chapel Hill, 1997).

destructive potential which presently solely the United States had at its command.⁴

Somewhere in between these diametrically opposed viewpoints there also figure contentions pertaining to the apparent need of American politicians to recover the costs of an expensive nuclear development programme; as well as to considerations of public sentiment and the desire of a retaliatory revenge at Japanese aggression.⁵ Still, it was only fairly recently that historians, notably Barton J. Bernstein, have aspired to strike a middle ground between these two argumentative extremes, emphasizing on the one hand the primarily military value of the Atomic Bomb while at the same time also giving due credit to its additional purpose as an instrument of diplomatic power politics, as well as to the issue of anticipated American Army casualties in the event of ongoing hostilities in the Pacific.⁶

2. The **War** against **Japan**

2.1 **Imperial Resistance**

To begin with, it is eminently important to first clarify what primary objective the United States actually sought to achieve at the time by issuing the order of releasing nuclear devices over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as only a clear and sound analysis of its overall agenda may effectively explain why its leaders ultimately resorted to the use of atomic warfare. As it were, ever since a correspondent public statement made by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, the principal and foremost aim of that agenda was and always had been none other than the complete and „unconditional surrender“ of the enemies of the Anglo-American alliance.⁷ It was the unfaltering abidance by that policy which had widely informed the decisions of the Roosevelt Administration in their dealings with both Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, one which Henry Truman after assuming the presidential office following Franklin D. Roosevelt's death on April 12th 1945 ultimately had every intention of pursuing just as staunchly as his predecessor had done.⁸ Consequently the very key to understanding the intricacies underlying the deliberations and decision-making process of employing nuclear warfare essentially boils down to the fact that *at the time* the American government was altogether firmly convinced that eventually only a complete and uncontested defeat of the Japanese Empire would ensure that never again would there spread

⁴Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy. Hiroshima and Potsdam* (New York, 1965); Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge, 2005).

⁵Ronald Takaki, *Hiroshima: Why America dropped the Atomic Bomb* (Boston, 1995); Walker, pp. 94-97.

⁶Barton J. Bernstein, 'Eclipsed by Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Early Thinking about Tactical Nuclear Weapons', *International Security* 12 (Spring 1991), pp. 149-173.

⁷Maddox, pp. 6-19.

⁸Ibid, p. 13; Henry L. Stimson, 'The decision to use the atomic bomb', *Harper's Magazine* (February 1947), p. 101.