

## CHAPTER TWELVE

# THE DEFEAT OF JAPAN AND THE ATOMIC BOMBS, 1945

The day of 6 August 1945 began quietly in Hiroshima. Michiko Hachiya, a physician at a hospital in the city, went home in the morning after spending the night there acting as an air-raid warden. He recalled the occasion clearly:

The hour was early; the morning was still, warm and beautiful. . . . Suddenly, a strong flash of light startled me – and then another. So well does one recall little things that I remember vividly how a stone lantern in the garden became brilliantly lit and I debated whether this light was caused by a magnesium flare or sparks from a passing tram.

Hachiya was in fact witnessing the explosion of the first atomic bomb. What is striking about his account is its quiet, almost humdrum tone – ‘sparks from a passing tram’ seems an inadequate speculation on a world-shattering event.

Yet in some respects this was a true perspective. We now recognise the explosion of the two atomic bombs (the second, at Nagasaki, followed on 9 August) as a turning point in world history and the beginning of the nuclear age. But at the time, and in relation to the defeat of Japan and the end of the Second World War, the atomic bombs were simply weapons among many others. The defeat of Japan in 1945 was the result of an accumulation of events, rather than of two explosions, however powerful.

This accumulation began in August 1943, when the American Joint Chiefs of Staff presented an Anglo-American conference at Quebec (the QUADRANT Conference) with an outline plan for an offensive against Japan along two main lines: an advance across the South Pacific, by way of

the Solomon Islands and New Guinea to the Philippines; and another thrust across the Central Pacific, by way of the Marshall Islands and the Carolines to the Marianas, which would provide airbases within bombing range of the Japanese home islands. The conference accepted these proposals, and agreed that the two lines of attack should be pursued simultaneously.

The southern offensive was already under way in the summer of 1943, when American forces commanded by General MacArthur and Admiral Halsey advanced into the Solomon Islands and New Guinea. By the end of the year the Americans had reached New Britain, and went on to attack New Guinea. They then prepared for a large-scale invasion of the Philippines, beginning with landings on the island of Leyte in October 1944 and moving on to Luzon in January 1945. These operations proved long and costly. The Americans landed over 200,000 men on Leyte, and took more than two months to conquer the island. Luzon proved an even harder nut to crack. General MacArthur publicly (and rashly) claimed victory as early as 6 January 1945, but in fact the Japanese held on in the north of the island until the end of the war in August.

These campaigns proved a slow and painful route to a victory in the Philippines which in strict military terms was of only limited value to the Americans. In fact their main purposes were not military but political – to liberate American territory, and to allow General MacArthur to score a victory and return to the Philippines, as he had promised to do when he left in 1942. These were important objectives in a war that was about prestige as much as about material aims. The Americans wanted to demonstrate that they could defeat the Japanese on land; and even MacArthur's theatrical performance when he waded ashore on Leyte Island in front of newsmen and cameramen had a serious purpose. Even bad theatre had its value in a war being waged by a democracy under the eyes of a demanding press and public.

In the event, the invasion of the Philippines paid a material dividend in a massive American naval victory at the Battle of Leyte Gulf (23–26 October 1944). The Japanese gathered a strong fleet, made up of six battleships (including the giant *Yamato* and *Musashi*, the biggest battleships ever built), four fleet aircraft carriers, 16 cruisers, and a number of smaller warships, to intercept the American invasion forces at sea. In a long and confused battle, the Japanese lost three of their battleships (including the *Musashi*), all four carriers, ten cruisers and nine destroyers. The Americans, for their part, lost only three small carriers and three destroyers. It was a

crushing defeat for the Japanese, who had lost a large proportion of their remaining warships; and when all was over the American landing force got ashore safely.

The Battle of Leyte Gulf had another significance, introducing a new type of war at sea – the Japanese use of *kamikaze* tactics, suicide attacks, in which pilots crashed their aircraft and bomb-loads into American warships. In the long run, these tactics were suicidal in more ways than one, for trained pilots were hard to replace. But they scored some success in the battle (sinking a light aircraft carrier); and above all they brought home to the Americans the utter determination and fanaticism of their opponents – a factor that came to weigh heavily on their thinking.

All in all, the long campaigns in the South Pacific, from the Solomon Islands through to the Philippines, were much more than an ego-trip for MacArthur, as they sometimes appeared to be. They defeated strong Japanese land forces, destroying the aura of invincibility that had surrounded the Japanese since 1942; and at Leyte Gulf the Japanese lost a large part of their fleet. These were valuable gains, even if in themselves they were not going to win the war.

Meanwhile the Americans went ahead with the other prong of their offensive, across the Central Pacific towards the Mariana Islands. They began on a comparatively small scale with an attack on Tarawa, in the Gilbert Islands, in November 1943, which surprised the Americans by costing them about 3,000 killed and wounded to capture one small island – an ominous sign of the shape of things to come.

The next phase was an attack on the Marshall Islands in February 1944, which went more smoothly, and led to the capture of the Mariana Islands between February and August of the same year. The Marianas were about 1,200 miles from Tokyo, a long but feasible distance for the new B-29 bombers; and the Americans set themselves to build airfields at great speed, bringing them into active service in November.

This offensive across the Central Pacific culminated in two fiercely fought battles at Iwo Jima (February–March 1945) and Okinawa (April–June 1945). Iwo Jima was an island five miles long, heavily fortified and deeply tunnelled for defence. The Americans began their landings on 19 February, expecting to capture the island within 14 days. In fact they took 36 days. In all, 110,000 American marines landed on Iwo Jima, losing 5,931 killed and 17,372 wounded. The Japanese fought almost literally to the last man – out of a garrison of 22,000, all but a few hundred were killed. When all was over, the Americans had broken an important link in



Map 12 The Defeat of Japan, 1944-1945.

the defensive chain protecting the Japanese mainland and gained new airfields; but at terrible cost.

The next stage was an attack on Okinawa, in the Ryukyu Islands, about 350 miles south of Japan. This operation proved to be a re-run of the battle for Iwo Jima, on a larger scale. Okinawa was 60 miles long, and the fighting lasted 83 days, from 1 April to 22 June 1945. The Americans landed over 170,000 troops to attack about 77,000 Japanese. At the end of the battle, the American losses (land and naval forces together) totalled 12,513 dead and 36,631 wounded. The Japanese lost the enormous total of 70,000 killed and wounded. Only 7,000 surrendered. In the course of the fighting the Japanese threw in large numbers of *kamikaze* planes, sinking a number of warships and landing craft. All in all, it was an awe-inspiring demonstration of Japanese determination and fighting power.

Indeed, these two great battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa made a profound impression on the Americans, of all arms and all ranks. To capture two islands of no great size they had lost about 18,000 dead and 54,000 wounded. The prospect of invading the Japanese home islands, where these losses might well be multiplied many times over, was daunting in the extreme, and weighed heavily on American minds and spirits.

In sum, these American offensives in the South and Central Pacific achieved great successes, regaining some of the territories lost in 1942, and breaching the Japanese defensive perimeter, designed to protect the home islands. The way was now open for the aerial bombardment of Japan and eventually for an invasion of the mainland.

These results had been achieved through almost complete command of the oceans and the air. By the end of 1944 the American Pacific Fleet outnumbered the Japanese Navy by about four to one in numbers of ships and more than that in striking power, a superiority which enabled the Americans to carry out their vast amphibious operations across the Pacific. In a less spectacular way American sea power was also able to cripple the Japanese economy, almost to the point of destruction, by means of submarine warfare.

In this submarine campaign against Japanese merchant shipping, the Americans got off to a slow start, partly because their submarine commanders were keen to attack Japanese warships rather than merchant ships. Not until 1943 did they seriously turn their efforts to merchantmen, and it was only in 1944 that they were actually ordered to concentrate on sinking oil tankers, a crucial element in the Japanese supply system. Fortunately for the Americans, the Japanese were even slower in organising

their defences. The Japanese naval commanders were primarily concerned to engage their main enemy, the American fleet, rather than protecting merchant ships, which seemed a defensive and unheroic occupation for the Imperial Navy. Not until late 1943 did the Japanese begin to establish a convoy system, which they extended widely in March 1944; though at no time did they have enough escorts to protect convoys even when they were formed.

When the American submarines settled to their task, the results were devastating. In 1943 the Americans sank 1.8 million tons of Japanese merchant shipping; and in 1944 they sank a massive total of 3.9 million tons. In 1945, up to 15 August, their sinkings totalled another 1.8 million tons. Japanese losses of oil tankers during the whole war numbered 259 vessels, bringing oil traffic down to a trickle, so that by 1945 their warships were immobilised and aircraft grounded. Even this was not the whole story. In March 1945 the US Army Air Force was instructed to divert some of its heavy bombers from aerial bombardment to the less spectacular but useful task of laying mines in Japanese home waters. The Japanese had few minesweepers to counter this attack, and had to close one of their main sea routes for a fortnight, with disastrous results for their imports. The Americans code-named this mine-laying campaign Operation STARVATION, a warning of the hardships they could inflict on the Japanese population, almost at will.

The effects of the blockade affected the bulk of the Japanese people, especially the millions of city-dwellers. Factory workers spent time looking for food instead of being on the production lines, and weariness took its toll. The standard individual civilian ration in 1944 was a mere 1,900 calories per day, and in 1945 it was reduced to 1,680; for comparison, the British ration never fell below 2,800 calories. Gas and electricity supplies were often cut off except for a few hours each day. At the same time, military personnel in the home islands received higher rations, attracting a good deal of resentment.

The consequences of the Japanese losses in merchant ships and oil tankers were plain to more realistic members of the Japanese high command as early as 1944. Rear Admiral Tagaki, on the naval staff, argued in May 1944 that the current rate of shipping losses meant that Japan had no chance of winning the war and should therefore try for a compromise peace. Some members of the military general staff took a similar line in June, arguing that the war situation was getting steadily worse, and that Japan should try to end the war. No one explained exactly *how* Japan could

end the war, or what sort of compromise might be considered – never mind whether the Allies would accept any sort of compromise at all. But doubts were growing in at least some Japanese military minds.

While submarines and mines were strangling the Japanese economy and threatening to starve the population, American bombers were subjecting Japanese cities to devastating air attacks. In 1944 the new B-29 Superfortress bomber came into service – a massive aircraft with a long range and a heavy bomb-load. At first these giant bombers could only reach Japan by flying from bases in India, refuelling in China en route. It was a long and hazardous flight which was wearing on the aircrews and proved almost useless in terms of bombs actually delivered. It was not until airfields were completed on the Mariana Islands that the Americans were able to begin serious bombing raids on Japan. The first B-29 attack took place on 29 November 1944, against an aircraft factory in Tokyo. The commander of the bombing force at that time, Brigadier-General Hansell, adopted a strategy of precision bombing by daylight against military targets; but General Arnold, commander of the US Army Air Force, had no faith in precision bombing, preferring instead night-time attacks against whole cities. The first operation of this kind was carried out against the city of Nagoya on 3 January 1945. On 20 January Arnold replaced Hansell by General Curtis LeMay, who had commanded American bombers operating against Germany from England, and now used that experience to introduce a strategy of large-scale night attacks on Japanese cities, using a high proportion of incendiary bombs, highly effective against towns that were largely made up of wooden buildings.

General LeMay launched the first big raid in this new strategy on the night of 9–10 March 1945, when over 300 B-29s dropped nearly half a million incendiary bombs on Tokyo in three hours, causing a fire-storm that destroyed about a quarter of the city (industrial and residential areas together), and killing somewhere between 85,000 and 100,000 people. An American airman described the scene from the bombers' point of view: 'The whole city of Tokyo was below us . . . ablaze in one enormous fire with yet more fountains of flame pouring down from the B-29s. The black smoke billowed up thousands of feet causing powerful thermal currents that buffeted our plane severely . . .'. The effects on the ground were devastating. An officer in attendance on Emperor Hirohito during a visit to the ruins of Tokyo found people 'digging through the rubble with empty expressions on their faces that became reproachful as the imperial motorcade went by'.

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35 American B-29 bombers drop incendiary bombs on Yokohama, 29 May 1945. These 'conventional' raids caused more casualties and destruction than the atomic bombs dropped later.

General LeMay followed this raid up with a series of attacks in the next ten days, striking twice more at Tokyo, as well as at the cities of Nagoya, Kobe and Osaka. There was then a pause, while the B-29s switched their efforts to supporting the attack on Okinawa; but they resumed their offensive in mid-May, with nine raids on six major cities, including Tokyo yet again. In June LeMay varied his targeting by attacking no fewer than 60 smaller cities, spreading fire and ruin across the whole country.

By the end of July 1945 all but a very few cities in Japan had been bombed, with devastating results. War production had been drastically reduced, perhaps by a half. Many oil refineries had been put out of action. Civilian casualties were heavy – estimates varied between 300,000 and 800,000 dead, which meant that a true count was impossible. About eight million people had lost their homes. This destruction was on a scale greater than that which was wrought later by the atomic bombs, and it is not surprising that American strategists did not regard these new weapons as being exceptionally destructive, or their use as something very different from that of 'conventional' weapons.

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Taken all together, these cumulative blows were almost fatal, leaving no doubt that Japan had lost the war on all fronts by the end of July 1945. Some of Japan's early conquests had been lost, and others cut off from the homeland. The fleet had been virtually destroyed. (Almost symbolically, the giant battleship *Yamato* had been sunk in the course of a suicidal attempt to help the defence of Okinawa, setting off with only enough fuel for the outward voyage, which she did not even complete.) Blockade had cut off most of Japan's imports, and threatened the population with starvation. Cities had been reduced to burned-out wrecks.

Japan had lost the war by a series of defeats, and yet the Japanese government had not *accepted* defeat, and was determined to continue the struggle, partly because surrender was unthinkable to the Japanese military mind, and partly in the slender hope that the Americans would refuse to accept the scale of casualties that would be involved in an invasion, and would prefer to reach some form of compromise peace. In effect, Japan was dead but would not lie down. What then could the Americans do to bring the Japanese to accept defeat? In theory they could continue with more of the same – more bombing raids and an intensified blockade – until the Japanese cracked. But in practice this was an unlikely course, partly because the Japanese might well hold on rather than crack, and partly because it would take too long. By mid-1945 the overwhelming sentiment in the United States (among political leaders, the high command, servicemen and citizens alike) was that the war must be brought to a speedy end. It had lasted too long already. A slow victory by 'more of the same' was not a serious option.

Another possibility – indeed, the logical outcome to the whole trans-Pacific offensive – was to invade the Japanese home islands. The Americans were in fact preparing plans, first for an attack on Kyushu, the southernmost island of Japan (Operation OLYMPIC); and next for the invasion of Honshu, the main island and the location of the capital, Tokyo (Operation CORONET). Under these plans, Kyushu was scheduled for November 1945, and Honshu for March 1946. The US First Army was actually being withdrawn from Europe and sent to the Far East, where its headquarters was reopened in Manila on 1 August. It was a grim prospect for men who had already fought from Normandy to Germany, and now faced the task of landing in Japan. The anticipated level of casualties in an invasion was terrifyingly high. The most recent evidence was that of the battles for Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Admiral Leahy, who provided the main liaison between the President and the Chiefs of Staff,

put the American casualties at Okinawa at 35 per cent of the men involved. The force to invade Kyushu was to be 767,000, which at the same rate of losses would mean about 268,000 killed and wounded – a terrifying thought. Moreover, whatever the cost, results would be slow in coming, and a land battle on mainland Japan might stretch well into 1946.

The Americans therefore had good reason to look for some help in the invasion of Japan. They had long been seeking for Soviet intervention against Japan, and had secured general undertakings of Soviet participation in the war at the Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers in October 1943, and again at the Teheran Conference in November. At Yalta in February 1945 Stalin had given a definite commitment that the Soviet Union would enter the war against Japan two or three months after the end of the war against Germany, and by the end of July 1945 the Soviet Union stood ready with an army of a million and a half men and an air force of 5,000 planes, ready to attack the Japanese in Inner Mongolia, Manchuria and Korea. Their assault, when it came, would be formidable.

There was more to come, in the shape of a completely new weapon: the atomic bomb. The idea of such a weapon had been in the air as early as 1939–40. In August 1939 a small group of American scientists persuaded Albert Einstein to write to President Roosevelt to warn him that Germany might be working on a bomb using nuclear fission; but even with the weight of Einstein's reputation behind it, this warning was not followed up with any urgency. In Britain, at the turn of the years 1939–40, two refugee scientists, Otto Frisch and Rudolf Peierls, made a strong case to the government that a bomb using nuclear fission was a feasible proposition, and that the Germans might well build one. The government was impressed, and in April 1940 set up a committee (code-named the MAUD Committee) to examine the whole matter.

The MAUD Committee reported in July 1941 that an atomic bomb could be built, and when built would probably decide the war. The British government (meaning in practice those very few people directly concerned) decided that they must build such a bomb before the Germans did; and they set up an organisation (code-named TUBE ALLOYS) to concentrate research and press on with the project as quickly and intensively as possible. American scientists who visited Britain in 1941 were so impressed by these British efforts that they strongly advised their own government to initiate a similar programme; and the German declaration of war in December 1941 concentrated American minds wonderfully. The United States government set about creating what became a vast

organisation, code-named the MANHATTAN PROJECT, which at its full strength employed a workforce of over 600,000, and cost a total of over two thousand million dollars. The British recognised that they could not deploy anything like this weight of resources, and transferred their own atomic efforts to the United States, accepting their subordination to the vast American programme.

In the event, the Germans were much less successful in developing an atomic bomb than the Allies had feared. The Germans calculated (mistakenly, as it turned out) that it would not be feasible for them to assemble a uranium bomb. Instead, they concentrated their efforts on synthesising, in a nuclear reactor, a critical mass of plutonium 239. To control this process, they needed a 'moderator', and after early failed attempts with other materials, they settled on the use of heavy water – 'heavy' because the hydrogen in the water was replaced by a heavier isotope. For this purpose they used a plant for the manufacture of heavy water, a plant already in existence at Vemork, in Norway; but their project was seriously hampered and delayed by interventions from the Special Operations Executive, one against the plant itself, and another against a transport vessel carrying heavy water to Germany. As a result of these various setbacks, the German effort to build an atomic bomb fell far behind the progress being made by the Allies. In any case, it was doubtful whether the Germans could have found the resources, in terms of money, scientists or engineers to match the American effort; but it was not until the defeat of Germany in May 1945 that the fear of a German bomb was finally dispelled.

In all the work carried out by the Americans and British in the MANHATTAN PROJECT, there was no doubt that they were developing a weapon that was to be used, like other weapons and means of waging warfare that were constantly being introduced. It would have been used against Germany if it had been ready, and later it would be used against Japan. When Harry Truman suddenly became President of the United States on the death of Roosevelt in April 1945, he was informed by the Secretary for War, Henry Stimson, and the head of the MANHATTAN PROJECT, General Groves, of the tremendous secret of the atomic bomb, of which he had known nothing. In their discussions, there was no indication that they had to make any decision about the use of the bomb, but rather a tacit assumption that if the weapon was tested successfully it would be used against Japan, like the incendiary bombs and high explosives that were already destroying Japanese cities. The committee did debate whether to bring the Soviet Union into the atomic

secret, and invite Soviet representatives to the testing of the new weapon; and whether to show the Japanese the immense power of the bomb by exploding it at some deserted site or island. Both suggestions were rejected. The Americans preferred to keep the secret of the atom bomb; and they ruled out a demonstration, mainly because it would not be effective; in the existing Japanese frame of mind, only the actual use of a bomb against a real target would work. On 1 June the Interim Committee recommended that the bomb should be used as soon as possible, the target being left to a military choice. This in effect let the existing assumption stand: the bomb was built to be used, and this would now be done.

At the end of July 1945 a tremendous array of forces were gathering against Japan. Naval blockade was exerting relentless pressure. Aerial bombardment had been almost incessant since March, with appalling results. The invasions of Kyushu and Honshu were being prepared. The Soviet Union was about to intervene with massive force. An atomic bomb had been successfully tested, and was ready for use. At that stage the Americans also made an effort to apply rough diplomatic pressure.

At the Three-Power Conference held in Potsdam in July 1945 a Declaration was drawn up to be presented to Japan. It began abruptly: 'Following are our terms. We will not deviate from them. There are no alternatives.' The most important points that followed were: the elimination of the authority of those who had misled the Japanese people into an attempt at world conquest; Japanese sovereignty to be limited to the home islands (that is, not Manchuria or Korea); the occupation of parts of Japan until a new political order was established; stern justice to be meted out to all war criminals; the establishment of a peacefully inclined and responsible government, 'in accordance with the freely expressed will of the Japanese people'. The Declaration concluded: 'We call upon the government of Japan to proclaim now the unconditional surrender of all Japanese armed forces. . . . The alternative for Japan is prompt and utter destruction.' This Declaration was issued on 26 July, signed by Truman and Churchill (and nominally by a Chinese representative), but not by Stalin – technically because the Soviet Union was not yet at war with Japan, in practice to keep the document in American hands. The Declaration was not communicated formally to the Japanese government through a neutral intermediary, but simply broadcast on the radio and published in the press.

Japanese ministers, military and naval leaders, and officials discussed this document on 27 July, to decide what (if any) reply to make. The Japanese

noted that Stalin had not signed the Declaration, and thought that this kept open the chance of mediation by the Soviet Union. The prospect of unconditional surrender was unwelcome even to the so-called peace party, made up of ministers who did not wish to fight to the death, as the Army leaders did, but still hoped to secure favourable terms, allowing Japan to retain Manchuria and Korea, to avoid any military occupation, and to hold any war crimes trials in Japanese courts. Eventually the Prime Minister, Admiral Suzuki, held a brief press conference on 28 July, claiming that the government had no choice but to ignore the Declaration and fight on. It seems that the Declaration's final threat of 'prompt and utter destruction' was too vague to carry any serious weight.

There followed three hammer-blows against Japan, all delivered within four days between 6 and 9 August. The first was the atomic attack on Hiroshima. On 25 July General Carl Spaatz, commanding the US Army Strategic Air Force in the Pacific, received orders to drop two atomic bombs on cities in Japan, as soon as weather permitted after 3 August. Hiroshima was the first of four possible targets for the first bomb, and was put at the top of the list because it had not suffered from earlier 'conventional' attacks, and so provided a clear demonstration of the destructive power of the bomb; and also because Spaatz had received information that there were no prisoner-of-war camps in the area. So the first atomic bomb, based on uranium, was dropped by parachute from a solitary B-29 bomber at 08.15 on 6 August 1945. Its explosive power was equivalent to 12,500 tons

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36 A city destroyed. View from the air of the devastation caused at Hiroshima by the first atomic bomb, dropped on 6 August 1945.

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37 Soviet tanks drive into Manchuria, August 1945 – a surprise blow to the Japanese army and government.

of TNT. Its destructive effects were enormous, leaving no more than about 6,000 buildings standing out of a total of 76,000 in the city. Estimates of the dead varied widely between 70,000 and 130,000; and more followed as radiation and other long-term effects took their toll.

Japan then suffered another blow, of a different kind. On 8 August 1945 the Soviet Union declared war on Japan, and in the early hours of 9 August Soviet military attacks began, on a vast front of some 2,700 miles across Mongolia, Manchuria and Korea. The Soviet armies outnumbered their opponents by about three to one in men, and far outmatched them in tanks and guns. Despite these advantages, the Soviets expected heavy fighting, and (just like the Americans as they prepared to invade Japan) anticipated casualties of up to half a million dead and wounded. In the event, the Japanese resistance was patchy, and the Soviet forces made rapid progress, reaching Mukden (the capital of Manchuria) on 20 August. For the Japanese government, this was a political as well as a military disaster. As late as 8 August, the Japanese were still hoping that the Soviet Union would act as a mediator in peace talks with the United States, and the Japanese Ambassador in Moscow was still hoping to pursue this line when Molotov informed him of the Soviet declaration of war.

The third blow was the explosion of another atomic bomb, this time at Nagasaki, again by parachute from a lone B-29, at approximately 11 a.m. on 9 August. (The original target had been the city of Kokura, but thick cloud

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caused the attack to be diverted to Nagasaki – so thousands of lives were changed by a weather feature.) This second bomb, based on plutonium and of a more complex design, was more powerful than that used at Hiroshima, equivalent to about 22,000 tons of TNT; but the destruction was somewhat less because Nagasaki was split up by ridges and narrow valleys, which mitigated the effects of the blast. Even so, about two-thirds of the city's buildings were destroyed; and deaths were variously estimated at between 30,000 and 74,000. The near-annihilation of a second city conjured up an appalling prospect – how many more of these assaults were yet to come?

The first response in Tokyo to these disastrous events was a strange silence. There was a period of stunned hesitation while the Japanese leaders made up their minds what to do. In this last desperate crisis, the Japanese reactions were largely decided by two key elements: the military cast of mind, and the personal role of Emperor Hirohito. For Japanese officers, surrender was simply out of the question, and the defence of the homeland was a supreme duty. The battles for Iwo Jima and Okinawa had shown what this meant. The Japanese had never understood the British surrender at Singapore, and would never incur that kind of disgrace. Moreover, the armed forces held a powerful position within the government, in that the posts of Army and Navy ministers were by law held by serving officers, who had the right of direct access to the Emperor in case of need.

The Emperor himself held a crucial position, by long custom and also by the immediate force of circumstances. In August 1945, Hirohito was 44 years old. He had been Emperor since 1926, and regent for his predecessor from 1921 to 1926. He was therefore an experienced monarch, and it appears that he was accustomed to following the rules of the political system as he understood them. During the war, he took an active interest in operations, generally on the side of a hard line. In July 1944, when the Americans captured the Mariana Islands and so came within bombing range of Japan, his reaction to defeat was obstinate – in the words of one of his biographers, 'he dug in his heels and refused to accept it'. Similarly, during the battle for Iwo Jima, Hirohito advocated resistance to the last, buying time to prepare for the defence of the home islands. In June 1945, after Germany had been defeated and Japan was left alone, he began to consider the possibility of peace; but only on favourable terms, and not by surrender. If the Japanese military had their own cast of mind, which excluded the idea of surrender, the Emperor too was entrenched in an attitude of resistance to the last. It was therefore of crucial importance that Hirohito changed his mind in the face of the disasters of early August.

It was on 9 August, after the Soviet invasion and the bomb on Nagasaki, that the Japanese Cabinet and Supreme War Council discussed whether to surrender. The hard liners, and especially senior Army officers, were determined to fight on, whereas the peace party, including the former Premier Konoe and the former Foreign Minister Shigemitsu, advocated immediate surrender, conditional only on the maintenance of the status of the Emperor. The debate remained deadlocked, until an Imperial Conference met at ten minutes to midnight on the same day, with the Emperor present in person. At the close of a further discussion, the Foreign Minister, Shigenori Togo, proposed that Japan should surrender, subject to the condition that there should be no change in the status of the Emperor under Japanese laws. The Prime Minister, Suzuki, invited the Emperor to speak, contrary to precedent, which prescribed that he should remain silent. Hirohito declared in favour of surrender, and then left the room. All those present (including the military commanders) then signed their acceptance of the Emperor's decision, though with a stiffening of the Japanese condition, to the effect that there should be nothing to prejudice the Emperor's prerogative as a sovereign ruler.

In Washington, the Secretary of State, James Byrnes, insisted on rejecting the Japanese condition, and instead drew up a statement that, after the surrender, the authority of the Emperor and the Japanese state must be subject to the Supreme Allied Commander, and that a form of government should be established by the will of the Japanese people. This accepted that the Emperor should retain some position, though subject to Allied authority, which offered the Japanese government at least a small part of their condition, and so kept the door open for a compromise. The United States government despatched this reply to their allies in Britain, the USSR and China on 10 August; and then to Tokyo on the 11th, where it was received on the 12th.

In Tokyo, the Emperor himself insisted that the American terms must be accepted, and he actually called a meeting of the imperial family (including no fewer than 13 princes), at which he reaffirmed his conclusion. But in the Cabinet the deadlock between the peace party and the hardliners remained unresolved, and for two days (12 and 13 August) the Japanese government made no reply to Byrnes's note.

The drama came to a head on 14 August, at a meeting of all the members of the Cabinet and the Supreme War Council, in the presence of the Emperor. Hirohito declared that Japan could not continue the war, and asked everyone to respect his decision to accept the Byrnes note, adding that he believed the Americans would in the event retain the essence of the Emperor's position. He instructed the government to prepare an Imperial



Rescript bringing the war to an end. This was signed by all members of the Cabinet, and despatched to the Allied powers by way of neutral countries (Switzerland and Sweden). Hirohito also announced that he would broadcast to the Japanese people; and he wisely ensured that two recordings of this broadcast were made in advance, and concealed in secure hiding places.

The importance of this became plain during the night of 14/15 August, when a clash developed between the 'no surrender' attitude of army officers and the now twice-declared intention of the Emperor to capitulate. In the hours of darkness, some middle-ranking officers attempted a palace coup to prevent a surrender. They also tried to find the recording of the Emperor, to prevent it being broadcast. They failed. The coup collapsed, and its leaders committed suicide. So did General Anami, the Minister for War, who had refused either to approve or disapprove of the conspiracy, but who was fundamentally opposed to surrender.

The Emperor survived the confused events of the night, and his pre-recorded speech was broadcast at noon on 15 August, including the Rescript (imperial statement) declaring the war at an end. It was the first time that the Japanese people had heard the voice of their Emperor, who spoke in a form of old Japanese almost incomprehensible to many of his listeners. Indeed, after the broadcast a radio announcer read the speech again in current speech.

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38 After the Japanese surrender. Hirohito, still Emperor of Japan, and General MacArthur, the American Supreme Commander and effectively ruler of the country.

Suicides were expected among the armed forces, and in fact some thousands of Japanese officers took their own lives rather than surrender, even on the authority of the Emperor himself. One dramatic episode may stand as an example. Vice-Admiral Ugaki, the commander of the Navy's 'special attack forces' (including *kamikazes*) led a squadron of 11 dive-bombers from an airfield on Kyushu Island on a flight to certain death. Three pilots turned back, claiming that they were having engine trouble. All the others were shot down by American fighters.

On the whole, however, and in view of the Japanese military mindset at the time, it was striking that the vast majority of the armed services agreed to capitulate and lay down their arms. This could only have been achieved by the express and publicly declared will of the Emperor. In turn, the Emperor would only have acted as he did in the situation created by the atomic bombs and the Soviet intervention in the war. Hirohito himself referred to these different events in two different speeches. In his broadcast of 15 August, to the Japanese people as a whole, he spoke of the Americans using 'a most cruel explosive' – that is, the atomic bombs. In a later broadcast on 17 August, addressed specifically to the armed forces, he did not mention the bombs, but stressed the Soviet entry into the war.

The fact was that events crowded closely on one another. The two atomic bombs, the Soviet intervention, and the almost tacit acceptance by the Americans that the Emperor should keep his position – all occurred in quick succession. And yet affairs also moved with painful slowness. Nine days passed between the explosion of the bomb at Hiroshima on 6 August and the Japanese surrender on 15 August; and *two* imperial interventions were necessary before Hirohito's authority prevailed. Considering the scale and nature of the step that surrender represented for the Japanese, this was not so lengthy a time; and yet it doubtless seemed an eternity to those involved. (Incidentally, this was very close to the same length of time that elapsed between Hitler's suicide on 30 April and the German surrender at Reims on 7 May.)

In the story of these nine days, it is difficult to compare and evaluate the different elements that brought about the Japanese surrender. One Japanese historian emphasises the Soviet entry into the war, arguing that this 'had a greater effect on the decision by Japanese leaders to end the Pacific war' than the atomic bombs. The author of a recent history of the Second World War writes simply that the question of whether the bombs or the Soviet intervention was more important 'cannot be answered'. One of President Truman's

most distinguished biographers concludes that: 'In such a welter of events and decisions it is not possible to describe any single factor as a sine qua non.' But despite such testimony, it seems right to single out the two atomic bombs as bearing the greatest weight in the final Japanese decision. The Soviet invasion, however formidable, was after all a military campaign like many others, and it was not directed against the Japanese homeland. The atomic bombs produced a shock of a different order, and had a psychological as well as a material effect. Complete proof cannot be established, but in the balance of probabilities it is surely most likely that the atomic bombs finally brought Japan to the point of surrender and the Second World War to an end.

Moreover, the first atomic bombs were beyond all doubt a turning point in the history of the world. The actual use of the bombs against cities, rather than by a demonstration upon some deserted island, was of crucial importance. The ruins of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the long-term effects of the atomic explosions, were a warning that no one has yet dared to ignore. Without the appalling facts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki before the eyes of the world, it is surely likely that at some point in the following years *someone* would have used a nuclear weapon. So far, the events of 6 and 9 August 1945 have saved the world from that disaster.

Since the war, much of the discussion on the use of the atomic bombs against Japan has concentrated on questions of morality; on the possibility of alternative strategies; and on political motives for the use of the bombs. These matters impinge only slightly on the effect of the bombs as a turning point in the Second World War, but they are so important that they require at least brief consideration, which must largely take the form of personal opinion.

On moral issues, it seems likely that *in the circumstances of the time* (especially taking into account the length and nature of the Pacific War) and *in the existing state of knowledge* (notably on the long-term effects of radiation) there was no significant moral difference between the destruction of Japanese cities and the killing of their people by 'conventional' bombing and the use of atomic bombs for the same purpose. The destruction and casualties previously caused by three or four hundred aircraft could now be achieved by one; but that did not constitute a moral issue. Similarly, it is hard to find a *moral* difference between starving people to death by blockade and killing them by bombing. The moral issues were therefore those raised by the waging of total war as a whole rather than by the use of these specific weapons. To deal with this would raise the whole question of morality in warfare, which would require a longer and deeper treatment than can be offered here.

One alternative strategy open to the Americans was to demonstrate the power of the atomic bombs by exploding one over a deserted island or some other uninhabited place. This seems quite unrealistic. The device might have failed, or the aircraft might have been attacked by *kamikazes*. Even if the drop had been successful, it was highly unlikely that the Japanese government would have been brought to the point of surrender by a demonstration. Even the bomb on Hiroshima did not have that effect, so anything less would have been useless.

The principal alternative strategy available was the invasion of the home islands of Japan, and specifically Kyushu and Honshu; and the casualties caused by the atomic bombs are often measured against the likely losses (American and Japanese) that would have resulted from such an invasion. This was of necessity a speculative matter. American estimates of casualties varied according to the information available about the strength of the Japanese defending forces; and their forecasts were also heavily – and very reasonably – influenced by the recent experiences of Iwo Jima and Okinawa. In any case, no one doubted that the death toll of an invasion would have been heavy, and that the losses would have fallen on the Japanese civilian population as well as on the armed forces on both sides. No one can tell how this grim form of accounting would have worked out in practice. In the nature of things, it is hard to compare the actual casualties at Hiroshima and Nagasaki with the hypothetical casualties of an invasion. At the time, the Americans did not wish to put the matter to the proof; and it is surely hard to blame them.

Finally, there has been much discussion, especially among American historians, as to how far the motive behind the use of the atomic bombs was to save lives (and principally American lives), and how far the purpose was to impress the Soviet Union and strengthen the American hand in securing a favourable peace settlement. In this interpretation, the atomic bombs appear as the first shots in the Cold War rather than the final round of the Pacific War. This dispute tells us more about American politics and historiography than about events in August 1945, and has now largely run its course, leaving the way open for a common-sense answer. The bombs were built to be used, and they would have been used against Germany or Japan irrespective of the state of American relations with the Soviet Union – they were ‘weapons for victory’, as Robert Maddox’s book on the matter is entitled. It is also true that the Americans believed that their possession of atomic weapons would impress the Soviet Union and strengthen their diplomatic hand – a significant but essentially secondary purpose.

These various matters, though weighty in their own way, bear only a minor relation to the role of the atomic bombs as a turning point in the defeat of Japan. The main conclusion remains, irrespective of our views on the morality or politics of the use of the bombs. The defeat of Japan was achieved by the cumulative use of conventional force, at sea, on land and in the air. The translation of that defeat into surrender came about by a succession of events in early August 1945: the atomic bombs; the Soviet entry into the war; and a degree of diplomatic flexibility in the American treatment of the status of the Japanese Emperor. Among these influences, it is reasonable, but in the nature of things not certain, to conclude that the atomic bombs had the greatest impact.

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