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World War II: The Atomic Bomb

During World War II there were atrocities committed by most of the countries involved. Places like Nazi Germany committed genocide on Jewish people, China quelled rebellions and killed Christians. However, one of the most notable atrocities was committed by the United States on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the form of atomic bombs. Following a sneak-attack, on Pearl Harbor, the United States finally entered World War II directly. Their primary concern was stopping Hitler at all costs. This was further amplified by the close rivalry that was forming between Stalin both presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman. The outcome was fierce debates over how to end WWII quickly, and little if any thought was taken into consideration for the civilian populace in the countries involved. Although not evident at first, the atrocities committed on the civilian populaces in East Asia were detrimental to both war efforts and the outlook these countries had on the perpetrators of those atrocities. This is evident in the bombings of both Nagasaki, and Hiroshima which ended Japan’s involvement in World War II after death tolls skyrocketed as a result of the atomic bomb tests.

Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the United States sought to enact revenge for the unprovoked attack in addition to the execution of prisoners of war. Such acts were seen as atrocities committed on civilians, and as such, caused resentment from the American populace. According to J. Poolos, “After considering how the American people would accept such horrors, they concluded that such casualties were justified… The Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor unprovoked.” (Poolos 2008, 92). Due to the war fervor at the time the United States was seeking a quick way to end the war. During this time nuclear fission was being tested via the Manhattan Project. The result came in the form of two nuclear bombs. One being a plutonium bomb, the other a uranium bomb which both wrought destruction previously unseen in the world. The initial blast would kill 66,000 people and another 69,000 would succumb to their wounds the day Hiroshima was bombed. Similarly, the bombing of Nagasaki resulted in an estimated 120,000 with a third of those dying upon the bomb's impact.

Survivors would go on to describe the utter destruction and chaos that the bombs caused both to the infrastructure as well as the people themselves. Accounts of the debris and fires that ensued which resulted in many losing their lives and the aftermath of living with radiation poisoning. As J. Poolos wrote, “Thousands of Japanese civilians from Hiroshima and Nagasaki were now showing advanced signs of radiation sickness. Their hair and teeth had fallen out. Painful sores opened on their flesh.” (Poolos 2008, 104) While the initial blast caused blindness, severe burns, and death the aftermath left people with varying symptoms that included infertility, various ailments, leukemia, and other forms of cancer. For generations lucky enough to have kids following this event, these families suffered from birth defects, cancer, and the effects of radiation poisoning. But this was not the extent of the atrocities committed against the people that lived in these cities, it continued in the form of neglect.

Following the bombings of Nagasaki, and then Hiroshima the Japanese government admitted their surrender at which point it was expected that the United States government would offer aid and relief for those affected by their actions. However, this would not prove to be the case. J. Poolos writes, “Immediately following the surrender of Japan… Those who survived were given no special care or financial aid to help resume their lives.” (Poolos 2008, 104)

Without medical aid, equipment, and supplies the people afflicted by radiation poisoning or other wounds quickly succumbed to their injuries as families were torn apart. Fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters were forced to watch those they loved dying around them with virtually no way to help or save those around them. Fortunately for many, some of the medical staff around the area were able to take charge and initiate some relief for the victims.

There was direct evidence that suggested the president at the time not only knew about the potential effects caused by using nuclear weaponry but preferred it to conventional methods. Rather than blockading Japan and implementing trade bans or using traditional bombing to ensure that only key targets were destroyed the government authorized the development and usage of what can only be described as death itself. According to Paul Ham, “Byrnes remarked later in his memoir, ‘Notwithstanding Japan’s persistent refusal to surrender, I believed the atomic bomb would be successful and would force the Japanese to surrender on our terms. I feared what would happen when the Red Army entered Manchuria.’” (Ham 2014, 212) A secretary under president Truman notes his concerns were of Japan if Russia decided to invade Japan at the time, but on the other hand, he believed the use of such destructive means would ensure a swift surrender of Japan as well as the prevention of an invasion. This was clearly not the case as not one, but two nuclear bombs were dropped before Japan gave its surrender, highlighting both the neglect and oversight of the United States' government on their atrocities.

A doctor in the area of one of the bombs gave an account of the helplessness he felt to help any of the victims as they awaited their death. However, the people rallied together using makeshift flags to signify safe zones for triage and other medical services. As Paul Ham wrote, “The stricken area to treat 70 in-patients and more than 300 seriously wounded who later arrived… He toured the bomb shelters, ‘fighting hopelessness to administer treatment to the fatally wounded.’” (Ham 2014, 374) Without the assistance of medical staff and the willingness of the people to work together to negate the effects of this atrocity, the death tolls would have surely been higher. War atrocities like these on civilian populations are not only unnecessary but are immoral, and while all the superpowers in terms of governments were aware of this, nothing was done to ensure the safety of the people they swore to protect. As a result, the war crimes committed on both sides were used to bolster war fervor, rather than owning their actions. This is clear when Japanese officials meet to discuss their war efforts.

Japanese officials met sometime after Nagasaki was bombed, and it was during this meeting that the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. At this point, officials began to consider the surrender of Japan to preserve their culture through the people and the government. Without some give the outcome was beginning to unveil itself, with islands and cities being decimated, troops began to lose hope and the people of Japan were helpless to change the outcome. But, as Paul Ham mentioned, “News of the destruction of Nagasaki – by another ‘special bomb’… Only the fate of the Imperial Household was ‘non-negotiable’” (Ham 2014, 381-382). Several generals of the Japanese army expressed to the emperor Hirohito that they did not consider surrender an option, to which multiple cabinet members and retainers would remind them that what mattered was their government. And without a people to govern the emperor would rule over nothing. This did not initially sway the generals, but after the bombing of Nagasaki there was little left to wonder about. Again, the neglect of the people reflects on the government of a nation charged with protecting them and reflects in the writings of their adversaries, the United States Engineer Corps.

Reports from the United States Engineer Corps. Would downplay the results of the atomic bombs in terms of both structural destructions as well as death counts. In part, this lends itself to the idea that the government did not want its people to know the loss of life that was tied with their victory over Japan. Or that people not so different from them were snuffed from existence because of a government that made the wrong choice. A recurring theme of World War II was that of atrocities being committed upon the victims of opposing nations.

As the United States Engineer Corps wrote, “The first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. More than… 66,000 people were killed, and 69,000 injured.” (United States 1946, II) There was no report of the radiation effects that these people would endure both initially and over time. Without this knowledge, the government was robbed of the opportunity to offer aid or relief to those suffering in Japan. Furthermore, many would succumb as a result of both their injuries as well as the radiation effects caused by the bombs.

After the second bombing the United States Engineer Corps began recording more accurate statistics in terms of victims and destruction that the bombs caused on the populace. While the first bomb was dropped into a valley that held the majority of the city of Nagasaki, with Hiroshima the bomb hit a level area which amplified the effects. As noted by the United States Engineer Corps, “Hiroshima’s identity as a city. Over a fourth of the population was killed in one stroke and an additional fourth seriously injured.” (United States 1946, 4) Injuries were caused by the effects of the bomb as well as debris that was thrown from where it stood. People were crushed, burned, and cut by a plethora of objects but one thing remains constant, the death and destruction imposed upon the residents of both Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a result of the bombs being dropped. With little warning and virtually nowhere to go the residents were forced to seek cover and await their fate. In the days to follow more people would die as a result of neglect and a lack of medical assistance that attribute to these events being considered war crimes.

Similar to the bombing of Hiroshima the people of Nagasaki were given little to no warning of their impending doom. Furthermore, the events that followed Hiroshima could have prevented further bloodshed which included the bombing of Nagasaki. However, both the United States and the Japanese government refused to yield or come to an agreement. As the United States Engineer Corps mentioned, “On August 10, the day after the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, the Japanese government requested that it be permitted to surrender.” (United States 1946, II) Following the second bomb being dropped the Japanese government met to discern a clear course of action. Initially, the generals of Japan were against surrender under any circumstance, which to the dismay of the United States caused the second bombing in the first place. However, emperor Hirohito’s advisors convinced him that the nation’s welfare could be ensured with his safety, which could no longer be ensured after two unprecedented bombings.

After reviewing the various war crimes committed on a civilian populace which caused tension between the perpetrators and their victims. A few examples in history gave this situation precedent. These included Nazi Germany and their use of gas chambers on Jewish people as well as internment camps. Another example is that of the Chinese Boxer Rebellion, which persecuted Christians, and the use of internment camps in the United States before the end of World War II. All of these events are seen as atrocities being committed upon civilian populaces to qualify as war crimes, but the sheer level of destruction and the lingering effects of the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima serve to elevate this Furthermore, these vile acts although common in history are often marked by extreme situations and only serve to further exacerbate tension between the two groups. The outcome of the war was decided through sheer determination and the use of less than unethical tactics, without the use of atomic bombs the future may have held a different light. However, the swift surrender of Japan and a victory for the United States has not erased nor healed the wound both physically and emotionally to the victims of these crimes in Japan and other nations throughout time.

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