

UNIT 5 -
THE LEGACY OF
HIROSHIMA AND
NAGASAKI
BBS 717-26

The Crossroads: The End of World War II, The Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War

This exhibit contains graphic photographs of the horrors of war.
Parental discretion is advised.

[*Editor's Note:* The following is the verbatim text of the original Smithsonian script including a few parenthetical indications of material that was to come. This reproduction omits all photographs and their captions, but retains an illustration, a chart and a few facsimiles of documents from the planned exhibition.]

cranes. When she died in October 1955, she had completed only 964. Her classmates finished the rest.

Determined to raise funds for a monument to Sadako and the other child victims of the atomic bomb, the young people of Hiroshima began a letter writing campaign to schools across Japan. The effort captured the public imagination, raised seven million yen (\$20,000) and established Sadako as a symbol of the cost of war in the nuclear age. Today her statue stands in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, adorned with thousands of the paper cranes that arrive each year from school children around the world.

UNIT 5: THE LEGACY OF HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI

The introduction of nuclear weapons into the world, and their first use at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, left powerful legacies beyond the long-term radiation effects on the survivors. For Japan, the United States and its Allies, a horrific war was brought to an abrupt end, although at a cost debated to this day; for the world, a nuclear arms race unfolded that still threatens unimaginable devastation. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki cannot be said to have simply caused either the end of the war or the nuclear arms race, but they have exercised a profound influence as military and political acts, as symbols of the arrival of the nuclear age, and as a glimpse of the realities of nuclear war.

Japan Surrenders

The sudden surrender of Japan on August 14, 1945—only eight days after the bombing of Hiroshima and five days after Nagasaki—have led many to believe that the atomic bomb alone forced the Japanese government to accept defeat. Actually, the bombings were one of two major shocks to Japan. The other was the Soviet Union's declaration of war on August 8/9, which destroyed the hopes of the Japanese elite for a compromise peace through Moscow. The Soviet declaration was immediately followed by a massive surprise attack on the Japanese Army in north China.

The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki nevertheless played a crucial role in ending the Pacific War quickly. Some have argued that no atomic bombs were needed to shock the Japanese leadership, because a peace agreement was already possible if Emperor Hirohito's position had been guaranteed. Others have argued that only one bomb was needed and that the destruction inflicted on Nagasaki was unnecessary. These matters remain hotly contested, but the surrender of Japan was doubtlessly a critical legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

HIROSHIMA AND THE SOVIET DECLARATION OF WAR

For days after the bombing of Hiroshima, the Japanese government had only sketchy information. The destruction was so massive that the city was effectively cut off from the rest of the world. The shock effect of Hiroshima was thus largely derived from President Truman's August 6 announcement of the nuclear attack, repeated on Allied radio stations. That announcement simultaneously revealed to the world the ultra-secret Manhattan Project.

The atomic bombing of Hiroshima also shocked the Soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin. He had promised to enter the Pacific war, but the offensive was not planned until mid-August or later. Afraid that the war would be over before the Soviet Union could gain a share of the spoils, on the evening of August 7, Moscow time, Stalin ordered Soviet forces to attack the Japanese Army in north China twenty-four hours later, at midnight August 8/9, Far Eastern Time. Shortly before that, the Japanese ambassador was handed a surprise declaration of war.

THE EMPEROR INTERVENES

"The time has come when we must bear the unbearable...I swallow my own tears and give my sanction to the proposal to accept the Allied proclamation..."

Emperor Hirohito, August 10, 1945

The Japanese government and military leadership was unable to meet until August 9, after the Soviet declaration of war. Throughout the day, the peace faction, led by Foreign Minister Togo, was stalemated by the military hard-liners, who would not accept surrender. Even the news of the Nagasaki bombing did not change the situation. The key stumbling block was the preservation of the monarchy. Togo argued for accepting the Allies' Potsdam Proclamation, as long as it "would not comprise any demand which would prejudice the prerogatives of His Majesty as a Sovereign Ruler."

The political deadlock provoked an emergency conference with Emperor Hirohito in his air-raid bunker, beginning around midnight, August 9/10. At the end, the Emperor clearly stated his wish that Japan offer surrender on Togo's terms.

TRUMAN AND THE EMPEROR QUESTION

"From the moment of surrender the authority of the Emperor and the Japanese government to rule the state shall be subject to the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers who will take such steps as he deems proper to effectuate the surrender terms."

U.S. note to Japan, August 10, 1945

The Japanese surrender offer of August 10, which sought to keep Emperor Hirohito on the throne, provoked disagreement among President Truman's advisers. The President's Chief of Staff, Admiral Leahy, argued for immediate acceptance. Secretary of State Byrnes felt, however, that the Japanese condition would lead to "the crucifixion of the President" by an angry public demanding "unconditional surrender." Truman eventually instructed Byrnes to dodge the issue by sending a note that said nothing about the ultimate fate of the Emperor.

NO THIRD ATOMIC BOMB

On August 10, during discussions of the Japanese surrender offer, President Truman ordered that no more atomic bombs be dropped without his consent. He told Commerce Secretary and former Vice President Henry Wallace that he did not like killing "all those kids." Although he had written in his Potsdam diary in July that the target for the first bomb would be "purely military," he clearly understood after Hiroshima that whole cities and their inhabitants were the target.

General Groves, the head of the Manhattan Project, held up the shipment to the Pacific of the plutonium 239 core for another "Fat Man" bomb. Otherwise it would have been available for a mission from Tinian around August 24. The original primary

target for the Nagasaki mission, Kokura, would probably have been chosen, although there was some talk of attacking Tokyo. Further plutonium cores could have been shipped to the Pacific approximately every three to four weeks thereafter. But no uranium 235 for a "Little Boy"-type bomb would have been available for some months.

A "LIVING GOD" SPEAKS

The failure of the American note of August 10 to clearly guarantee the Emperor's position provoked another dangerous deadlock in the Japanese ruling elite. The militarist hard-liners felt that there was no choice but to fight the war to the bitter end. After some careful maneuvering by the leaders of the peace faction, Marquis Kido and Foreign Minister Togo, the Emperor called another emergency conference in the Imperial Palace air-raid bunker on August 14. Hirohito once again broke the deadlock by asking that the government accept the American terms.

During the night of August 14/15, ultra-right-wing military officers tried to overthrow the government to prevent the surrender, but the attempt failed because of lack of support in the Army. At noon, Tokyo time, August 15, 1945, the Japanese people for the first time heard the voice of the Emperor on the radio. His recorded message was hard to understand, because it was in archaic, court Japanese, but it conveyed stunning news: Japan had lost the war.

In all Allied countries, that same day was one of riotous celebration: V-J Day. World War II was over.

The Cold War and the Nuclear Arms Race

"A single demand of you, comrades, provide us with atomic weapons in the shortest possible time. You know that Hiroshima has shaken the whole world. The equilibrium has been destroyed. Provide the bomb—it will remove a great danger from us."

Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, mid-August 1945, to Munitions Minister Vannikov and chief nuclear scientist Kurchatov

Hiroshima and Nagasaki cannot be said to have caused either the Cold War or the nuclear race between East and West, but the first use of these weapons nevertheless had profound effects. The Soviet Union had had a small nuclear project since 1942, but the news of the bombings spurred it into a crash program. Stalin would have wanted to acquire the atomic bomb in any case, but Hiroshima and Nagasaki were frightening demonstrations of the power of these weapons.

Following the Soviet Union's lead, Great Britain, France and China all started their own bomb projects. By the 1960's, two bombs had become tens of thousands of bombs.

THE FAILURE OF INTERNATIONAL CONTROL

Immediately after World War II, American scientists pushed the idea of "international control": all atomic weapons would be put in the hands of the United Nations to prevent a worldwide arms race. The United States government proposed a version of that idea called the "Baruch plan," after the chief American delegate to the U.N. Atomic Energy Commission, Bernard Baruch.

To many in the United States, the Baruch plan looked like an unprecedented offer to give away America's greatest military secret, but to the Soviet Union, the plan appeared to guarantee the continuation of the American nuclear monopoly, at least in the short run. Fear and mutual distrust between the two sides prevented the plan from being enacted. As conflicts over the fate of Eastern Europe and other regions heated up in the late 1940s, the Cold War ended any possibility of even limiting a nuclear arms race to a smaller number of weapons.

MORE BOMBS AND BIGGER BOMBS

On August 23(?), 1949, the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb. The Truman administration responded with a crash program to build a "hydrogen bomb" that would harness the fusion power fueling the Sun and the stars. When the United States exploded the world's first thermonuclear device on November 1, 1952, it was nearly *one thousand times* more pow-

erful than the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs. An entire Pacific atoll was vaporized and the fireball was so huge it could have enveloped much of the island of Manhattan. The Russians responded with their first primitive thermonuclear device in 1953 and their first full-scale hydrogen bomb in 1955.

The United States and the Soviet Union also began to build large numbers of smaller "tactical" nuclear weapons for use on the battlefield and in short-range attacks. Great Britain staged its first atomic test in 1953 and exploded a hydrogen bomb in 1958. As a result, the number of nuclear weapons in the world skyrocketed into the thousands in the 1950s.

THE VOYAGE OF THE *LUCKY DRAGON*

After Hiroshima and Nagasaki, fear of the radiation effects of nuclear weapons grew, but it was the hydrogen bomb tests of the mid-1950s that made nuclear "fall-out" into a world-wide issue. Particularly important was the United States' "BRAVO" test of March 1, 1954. The bomb was twice as powerful as planned and radioactive dust fell on the natives of Rongelap Atoll and on the Japanese fishing vessel, the *Lucky Dragon No. 5*. When the boat returned to Japan two weeks later, the crew was suffering from the classic effects of radiation sickness. One crew member died.

The *Lucky Dragon* incident profoundly shocked Japan. A panic broke out about the possible radioactive pollution of tuna fish. In America, many were angered by government denials that radiation had anything to do with the fishermen's illness.

THE RISE OF THE ANTI-NUCLEAR MOVEMENT

The hydrogen bomb tests of the mid-1950s and the *Lucky Dragon* incident energized the anti-nuclear movement around the world. Although there had been movements ever since 1945 to "Ban the Bomb" and advocate "One World or None," nuclear fall-out and the frightening power of the new "H-bombs" made the arms race much more personally threatening to many around the world.

The cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki became especially

important as international symbols of the dangers of nuclear war. Commemorations had been held every year in the two cities on the anniversaries of the bombings, but it was the tenth anniversary ceremonies in 1955 that first gathered wide international attention.

DIDN'T THEY ALL GO CRAZY?

One of the strangest myths that emerged out of the growing fear of nuclear weapons was the belief that the aircrews on the Hiroshima missions all had gone insane and killed themselves. These stories had their root in the troubles of a former 509th Composite Group pilot, Claude Eatherly. On the Hiroshima mission, Eatherly had commanded one of the B-29s used as weather planes, but had not directly witnessed the bombing. An unstable personality, Eatherly committed burglaries in the mid-1950s and began to claim that guilt had driven him over the brink. Rumors soon spread that he was the commander of the "Enola Gay" and that all the crew members had similar troubles.

Eatherly was also exploited by Soviet-bloc propaganda, which often used peace and anti-nuclear slogans in a hypocritical way to attack the United States. In fact, no other 509th crew members had mental problems or claimed to have felt guilty for having done their duty as servicemen in wartime.

A WORLD GONE "M.A.D."

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the United States and the Soviet Union both developed intercontinental nuclear missiles that threatened nuclear annihilation of both sides within minutes instead of hours. "M.A.D."—Mutual Assured Destruction—was one acronym coined to describe this terrifying new reality. On the one hand, nuclear "deterrence" seemed to insure for the first time that wars between the great powers were no longer possible. On the other, human civilization itself could be destroyed if deterrence failed. During the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, that possibility came frighteningly close to reality.

NUCLEAR WASTE AND HUMAN EXPERIMENTS

Fear and the urgent need to build nuclear weapons produced other problems: widespread nuclear pollution, accidents and experiments on humans to determine the dangers of radioactivity. On all sides, the production of bomb fuel left huge quantities of nuclear waste. These wastes created massive clean-up problems and sometimes have engendered dangerous accidents. In 1959, a chemical explosion at a Soviet nuclear-weapons plant contaminated a huge area in the Ural Mountains with radioactive materials, killing hundreds.

The need to know about the radioactive effects of nuclear war and nuclear-weapons production also led on both sides to human experiments and the exposure of soldiers to above-ground bomb tests. Particularly shocking has [sic] been revelations of the injection of patients in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s with radioactive materials. But the other power undoubtedly also staged such experiments.

ARMS CONTROL?

The Limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963 ended most bomb-testing in the atmosphere, although not by the new nuclear powers, France and China. Arms control agreements were also concluded by the superpowers in the 1970s. Yet none of these stopped a relentless build-up of nuclear weapons. At its apogee in the mid-1980s, there were nearly 70,000 warheads in world stockpiles, 98% of which were held by the United States and the Soviet Union.

On average, each of these warheads were tens of times as powerful as the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs. If that explosive power were evenly distributed, every man, woman and child on Earth would be hit by the equivalent of several tons of TNT.

THE COLD WAR ENDS—REAL NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT BEGINS

In 1987, U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet President

Mikhail Gorbachev signed the first arms control agreement that actually resulted in the demolition of deployed nuclear weapons. The Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty eliminated a whole class of weapons—short and medium-range missiles.

It was a harbinger of much more fundamental agreements signed by the two sides after the stunning collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire between 1989 and 1991. At long last, strategic missiles and bombers were actually taken off alert and scrapped, beginning 1992. But the danger of nuclear war has not disappeared. Even today, the United States, Russia, other former Soviet republics, Britain, France and China have many thousands of nuclear weapons aimed at each other. The threat of global nuclear war has apparently vanished, but the possibility of nuclear weapons being used may have actually increased.

A Soviet SS-20 and an American Pershing missile, like those destroyed under the INF Treaty, can be seen in *Milestone of Flight* (Gallery 100).

NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION AND NUCLEAR TERRORISM

Although the Cold War is over, an increasing danger is the acquisition of nuclear weapons by more nations and even by terrorist groups. Already during the 1960s and 1970s, Israel appears to have built a number of nuclear warheads and India actually tested a nuclear device. South Africa built a few warheads similar to the Hiroshima gun-type bomb, although it has apparently become the first nation to dismantle all its nuclear weapons. Other nations who attempted, or who are still attempting to build atomic warheads include Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and North Korea. As the danger of global nuclear war has gone down, the possibility of a local use of nuclear weapons has increased.

It is also possible that terrorist groups could acquire enough plutonium, either through from existing nuclear electric production or from the former Soviet republics, to build a crude device.

FIFTY YEARS OF THE NUCLEAR DILEMMA

A half century after the arrival of nuclear weapons in the world and their employment on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the nuclear dilemma has not gone away. Some feel that the only solution is to ban all nuclear weapons. Others think that this idea is unrealistic and that nuclear deterrence—at a much lower level—is the only way that major wars can be prevented. One thing is clear, the nuclear “genie” is out of the bottle and, for the foreseeable future, the human race will not be able to eliminate the knowledge of how to build nuclear weapons. The dilemma is not about to disappear.

THE STRUGGLE OVER HISTORY

DEFINING THE
HIROSHIMA NARRATIVE

BY BARTON J. BERNSTEIN