

EG:240-L1
main title

THE SOVIET FACTOR

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EG:240-L2
main text

Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb was based on saving American lives and shortening the war. However, Joseph Stalin's Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was a factor in American calculations regarding the new weapon and the Japanese. The alliance of the United States, the British Commonwealth, and the Soviet Union, which was forged only after Germany attacked Russia in 1941, was one of convenience. Suspicion between West and East remained high, despite positive feelings evoked by their common struggle against the Nazis.

In the spring of 1945, tensions were rising over the Soviet imposition of puppet governments in Eastern Europe after the German defeat. There was also the prospect of similar Soviet gains in the Far East. While U.S. military leaders argued that Soviet entry into the Pacific war must precede the U.S. invasion of Japan, some of Truman's civilian advisers began to question its desirability.

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EG:240-L2a-P2a

Soviet tanks in a Berlin victory parade, August 1945.

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EG:240-L2b-P2b
bio. picture
208-PU189V-5

Joseph V. Stalin (1879-1953) became the undisputed leader of the Soviet Communist Party and dictator of the Soviet Union during the late 1920s. His bloody purges cost millions of lives. He acquired a new international importance as a result of his country's decisive contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II. Stalin authorized a Soviet atomic bomb project in 1942, but did not give it the highest priority until after the United States' atomic bombings of Japanese cities in August 1945.

Courtesy of the National Archives

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EG:240-L3

THE SOVIET UNION AND THE PACIFIC WAR

While the Soviet Union was battling Germany, and Japan was fighting to preserve its conquests in Asia and the Pacific, neither power had an interest in disturbing their mutual peace. But as the defeat of the Nazis approached, the United States wanted the Soviets to attack and pin down the huge Japanese army in China, which would prevent it from assisting the defense of the Japanese home islands. At the Yalta conference in February 1945, Stalin promised to enter the Pacific war two to three months after Germany's surrender.

During the spring of 1945, some American leaders began to doubt the wisdom of this policy. The U.S. Navy's blockade of Japan was nearly complete by April, making a troop transfer from China more difficult. Key advisers to President Truman also began to worry about the spread of Communism in post-war Asia. Indeed, Stalin was interested in joining the Pacific war so that he could bring China and Korea into the Soviet sphere and share in the occupation of Japan.

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The northwest Pacific theater, spring 1945.

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EG:240-L3a-P3a
 (Map needed of North
 China, Eastern USSR,
 Korea and Japan, as of
 spring 1945.)

EG:240-L3b-P3b

An exhausted President Roosevelt sits between
Prime Minister Churchill and Marshal Stalin
at the Yalta Conference in south Russia,
February 1945.

Courtesy of the National Archives

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EG:240-L4

THE SOVIET UNION AND THE ATOMIC SECRET

The Manhattan Project was a joint undertaking of the United States, Great Britain, and Canada, although dominated by American resources and personnel. President Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Churchill decided to conceal the project from Stalin, hoping to delay Soviet acquisition of nuclear weapons. However, Soviet spies sent atomic secrets back to Moscow.

As the time to test and use the bomb approached, the Western Allies had to decide whether to tell Stalin before dropping it on Japan and what post-war nuclear policy should be. Some scientists and advisers, concerned with America's postwar position after the use of the weapon, urged that atomic weapons be placed under "international control" so that a nuclear arms race might be avoided. Others saw advantages in an American or Anglo-American nuclear monopoly.

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EG:240-L4a-P4a

The 1944 Los Alamos identification photo of Dr. Klaus Fuchs, a German refugee scientist and British citizen who passed Manhattan Project secrets to the Soviet Union.
Courtesy of the Los Alamos National Laboratory

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EG:240-L5

"PERSUADING RUSSIA TO PLAY BALL"

As tensions grew in spring 1945 over the Soviet domination of Poland and other Eastern European countries, Secretary of War Stimson hoped that American possession of the atomic bomb might help make the Soviets "play ball" in Europe and elsewhere.

But it was Truman's new Secretary of State, James "Jimmy" Byrnes, who, more than anyone else, recommended a hard line against Stalin's demands for concessions in Europe and Asia.

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EG:240-L5a-P5a

Secretary of State James Byrnes with President Truman on the day Byrnes was sworn into office, July 5, 1945.

Courtesy of the National Archives

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EG:240-L5b-S5b
(or facsimile)

This page from Secretary Stimson's diary for May 15, 1945, shows that he discussed the impact of "the S-1 secret"--the atomic bomb--on relations with the Soviets in a meeting with Acting Secretary of State Grew and Navy Secretary Forrestal.

Lent by Yale University

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EG:240-L5c-P5c
bio. picture

James F. Byrnes (1879-1972) was one of the most powerful figures in the Roosevelt and Truman administrations. As a U.S. senator from South Carolina, he proved instrumental in the passage of Roosevelt's "New Deal." He became a U.S. Supreme Court justice in 1941, but resigned a year later to lead the war mobilization effort. He was so influential in domestic policy that the press nicknamed him "Assistant President." Truman, cast into the presidency with almost no foreign policy experience, sought out Byrnes as an adviser and as Secretary of State.

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EG:240-L5d-S5d

Print of the White House inscribed: "For James F. Byrnes, his home sweet home, from the contractor, Franklin D. Roosevelt." This inscription probably refers to Roosevelt's interest in having Byrnes as his running mate in 1944. Truman was eventually chosen instead.

Lent by Clemson University

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EG:250-L1
main title

SELECTING THE TARGET

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EG:250-L2
main text

While plans for the invasion of Japan were going ahead, preparations were also being made for the military deployment of the atomic bomb.

Target recommendations were made by the Target Committee, controlled by General Groves and his Manhattan Project staff. Among its primary concerns was showing off the bomb's power to the maximum effect and making the greatest impression possible on the Japanese with the goal of shocking Japan into surrender. To ensure an accurate drop, the committee insisted that the bombings occur in daylight and clear weather. They also decided that the targets would be cities with military significance that were undamaged by conventional bombing and had geographical layouts that would maximize damage from the bomb's blast wave.

By the end of May 1945, the committee selected, in order of priority, Kyoto, Hiroshima, Kokura, and Niigata. The Army Air Forces were ordered not to firebomb these cities.

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EG:250-L2a-P2a

Major General Groves inspects a map of Japan in this picture released to the press after the first atomic bombing, on August 6, 1945.

Courtesy of the National Archives

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EG:250-L2b-P2b
(Map of Japan needed with Kyoto, Hiroshima, Kokura, Niigata and Nagasaki singled out.)

The targets chosen for the atomic bomb. Kyoto was later eliminated from the list and Nagasaki added.

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EG:250-L3

GROVES, STIMSON, AND THE SAVING OF KYOTO

Kyoto, the top choice of Major General Groves' Target Committee, was never bombed. On May 30, 1945, Groves met Secretary of War Stimson, who asked for the target list. Stimson vetoed Kyoto because it "was the ancient capital of Japan, a historical city, and one that was of great religious significance to the Japanese." He had visited the city several times and was "very much impressed by its ancient culture." Stimson was concerned that destroying Kyoto would permanently embitter the Japanese against the United States and increase Soviet influence in Japan.

Groves argued that Kyoto had a population of over a million, did much war work, and had a highly suitable geography for the bomb. He fought for two months to reinstate the city to the target list, but to no avail. In July the port city of Nagasaki was added instead.

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EG:250-L3a-S3a

[Grew's 1924 guide to Kyoto--label to be written.]

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EG:250-L4

"WE COULD NOT GIVE THE JAPANESE ANY WARNING"

The question of whether to drop the first atomic bomb on Japan without warning was left to another group, the Interim Committee on post-war atomic policy. On May 31, 1945, Secretary Stimson chaired a meeting of this group, which included Truman's personal representative, James Byrnes, and the committee's scientific advisers, headed by Dr. Robert Oppenheimer.

The committee members briefly discussed warning the Japanese to evacuate the target, or arranging a demonstration of the bomb for delegates from Japan. However, they rejected those ideas because they reasoned that the Japanese, if warned, might try to shoot down the bomber or move prisoners of war into the target area, and because the demonstration bomb might fail to explode.

Others who knew about the atomic bomb were also thinking of ways to demonstrate it. For example, Manhattan Project physicist Edward Teller proposed exploding the first bomb high over Tokyo Bay at night, without any warning, to shock the Japanese leaders. But prior to the first test, the scientists had generally underestimated the power of the bomb, and it was not clear that any non-lethal demonstration would sufficiently

impress the Japanese.

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EG:250-L4a-S4a
quote underlined in the
original document

A page from the official minutes of the Interim Committee meeting of May 31, 1945. The underlined passage gives the committee's recommendation regarding the use of the bomb: "Secretary [Stimson] expressed the conclusion, on which there was general argeement, that we could not give the Japanese any warning, that we could not concentrate on a civilian area; but that we should seek to make a profound psychological impression on as many inhabitants as possible. At the suggestion of Dr. Conant the Secretary agreed that the most desirable target would be a vital war plant employing a large number of workers and closely surrounded by workers' houses."

Lent by the National Archives

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EG:250-L5

NUCLEAR VERSUS CONVENTIONAL BOMBING

Many of the decision-makers knowledgeable about the bomb did not consider it drastically different from conventional strategic bombing, which had already killed hundreds of thousands of civilians throughout the world. Nor was there any guarantee that the bomb would automatically end the war.

When Oppenheimer suggested on May 31 that several atomic attacks be carried out on the same day to shock the Japanese, Groves opposed the idea on the grounds that "the effect would not be sufficiently distinct from our regular air force [bombing] program." At that time, the firebombing of Japan had already devastated many cities. The explosive power of the first atomic bombs was also estimated at only 1/10 to 1/2 of what it turned out to be, and no one had a clear impression of the heat and radiation effects.

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EG:250-L5a-P5a

At the end of the war little remained standing in the firebombed sections of Tokyo.

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EG:250-L6

SCIENTISTS PETITION THE PRESIDENT

Leo Szilard and other Manhattan Project scientists felt that the bomb project had been a response to a threat from Germany. Attacking Japan without first providing a warning and an opportunity to surrender, they felt, would weaken "our moral position...in the eyes of the world." They were equally concerned that using the bomb without telling the Soviets first would increase the chances of an uncontrolled nuclear arms race after the war.

The Chicago group wrote a report, sent petitions to President Truman, and approached Truman's adviser and choice for Secretary of State, James Byrnes. But the President did not receive the petitions before the bomb was used, because all the scientists' initiatives were obstructed by Byrnes, Groves, Oppenheimer, and others.

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EG:250-L6a-P6a

Scientists of the University of Chicago Laboratory in 1946. At left in the front row is Nobel Prize-winning physicist Dr. Enrico Fermi; third from right is Dr. Leo Szilard. Fermi, who had moved to Los Alamos in 1944, did not agree with Szilard's efforts to question the policy of use without warning. Courtesy of the National Archives

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EG:250-L6b-S6b

One of the original petitions to President Truman by Manhattan Project scientists, with the signature of Leo Szilard at lower left.

Lent by the National Archives

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EG:260-L1
main title

THE INVASION OF JAPAN: A GIANT OKINAWA?

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EG:260-L2
main text

American planning for an invasion of Japan continued in spring 1945 as if the atomic bomb did not exist. The Manhattan Project was so secret that most military planners were unaware of it, and the effect of the new weapon on the Japanese was uncertain. Under the leadership of Army Chief of Staff Gen. George C. Marshall, the War Department continued to assume that an invasion would be needed to force Japan to surrender.

Not everyone in the U.S. military agreed. Some Navy officers believed that the blockade could force Japan to quit the war, while many in the Army Air Forces thought firebombing could force surrender by itself or in conjunction with the blockade. Both groups pointed to the terrible casualties of the Okinawa campaign in arguing against an invasion. General Marshall and his staff also feared heavy losses but argued that, as with Germany, only the occupation of the enemy's territory and capital would end the war.

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EG:260-L2a-P2a

The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff in World War II: clockwise from left, Adm. Ernest J. King, Chief of Naval Operations; Gen. George C. Marshall, Army Chief of Staff; Adm. William D. Leahy, Chief of Staff to the President; and Gen. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, Commanding General of the Army Air Forces.

Courtesy of the National Archives

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EG:260-L3

"OPERATION DOWNFALL": THE INVASION PLAN

On June 18, 1945, President Truman gave preliminary approval to the invasion plans presented by General Marshall. "Operation Downfall" would have two parts. On or about November 1, 1945, 767,000 Marines and Army troops would begin landing on the beaches of the southern island of Kyushu in "Operation Olympic." The invasion fleet would be larger than that of the landings in Normandy in June 1944. The objective of this operation would be to occupy the southern half of Kyushu and use it as an air base and staging area for a second invasion.

If the Japanese did not surrender, "Operation Coronet"--the landings on the main island of Honshu--would begin on or about March 1, 1946. A huge force of 28 divisions, twice the size of "Olympic," would eventually come ashore on beaches near Tokyo. Strategists assumed that it could take until about the end of 1946 to occupy the capital and enough of Honshu to force Japan to surrender.

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EG:260-L3a,b-P3a,b

(Photos of maps of the invasion beaches from National Archives, tbd)

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EG:260-L3c-P3c
bio. picture

Gen. **George C. Marshall (1880-1959)** played a critical role in expanding the small, poorly armed U.S. Army of 1939 into the massive, effective force of 1942-1945. During the war he was Chief of Staff of the Army, a key strategist in Allied plans on all fronts, and an important adviser to Roosevelt and Truman on the Manhattan Project. After his retirement from the Army, he became Secretary of State in 1947. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953 for the Marshall Plan, which helped revive the economies of Western Europe.

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EG:260-L4

INVASION OF JAPAN--AT WHAT COST?

Estimates of the number of American casualties--dead, wounded, and missing--that the planned invasion of Japan would have cost varied greatly. At a June 18, 1945, meeting, General Marshall told President Truman that the first 30 days of the invasion of Kyushu could result in 31,000 casualties. Admiral Leahy pointed out that the huge invasion force could sustain losses proportional to those on Okinawa--about 35 percent--which would imply a quarter of a million casualties, or at least 50,000 dead.

Had the Kyushu invasion failed to force Japan to surrender, an invasion of Honshu, with the goal of capturing Tokyo, would have followed, and losses would have escalated. If even that failed, and Japan continued fighting in the home islands and in the captured territories in Asia, casualties conceivably could have risen to as many as a million (including up to a quarter of a million deaths). Added to the American losses would have been perhaps five times as many Japanese casualties--military and civilian. The Allies and Asian countries occupied by Japan would also have lost many lives.

For Truman, even the lowest of the

estimates was abhorrent. To prevent an invasion he feared would become "an Okinawa from one end of Japan to the other," and to try and save as many American lives as possible, Truman chose to use the atomic bomb.

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EG:260-L4a-P4a (old)

NOTE: Photo of U.S. Marine dead on Tarawa moved to section EG:000.]

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EG:260-L4a-P4a

Wounded Marines being treated on Iwo Jima, February 1945.

Courtesy of the National Archives

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EG:260-L4b-P4b

Japanese students help to fortify the home islands of Japan against invasion, May 1945.

Courtesy of "Asahi Shimbun"

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EG:260-L4c-S4c

These pages from the original minutes of the June 18, 1945, meeting between President Truman and the Joint Chiefs of Staff discuss the American losses expected in "Operation Olympic." On the second page, General Marshall endorses a figure of about 31,000 casualties for the first 30 days of the Kyushu invasion--the same as for the invasion of the main Philippine island of Luzon. On the third page, Admiral Leahy asks whether this figure is too low, based on the bloody battle for Okinawa.

Lent by the National Archives

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EG:260-L5

HINDSIGHT: WAS AN INVASION INEVITABLE WITHOUT THE BOMB?

President Truman believed that an invasion of Japan would be necessary if the atomic bomb did not work. In hindsight, however, some have questioned whether an invasion was inevitable.

Based on information available after the war, the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey concluded in 1946 that, "Certainly prior to 31 December 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated." The U.S. naval blockade was strangling Japan, which depended totally on imported fuel, while conventional bombing was destroying its infrastructure.

However, other postwar observers, including Secretary Stimson, doubted that Japan's rulers would have accepted defeat if the home islands had not been invaded or if the atomic bomb had not been dropped. In any case, thousands of American lives would have been lost by November 1, 1945, and after that date, the invasion of Kyushu would have been in full swing.

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EG:270-L1
unit main title

"I AM BECOME DEATH, DESTROYER OF WORLDS"

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EG:270-L2
unit main text

At 5:29:45 a.m., July 16, 1945, a blinding flash and unbelievable heat seared the New Mexico desert--the world's first nuclear explosion. Codenamed "Trinity," the Manhattan Project's test of the plutonium implosion bomb was a stunning success. The explosion equaled about 20,000 tons of TNT, many times what some had expected. General Groves and his project leaders were jubilant and relieved. But for some, the spectacle also cast an ominous shadow. Los Alamos scientific director Dr. Robert Oppenheimer later said he thought of the lines from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita: "I am become Death, Destroyer of Worlds."

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EG:270-L2a-P2a

Manhattan Project scientists prepare to raise the bomb to the top of the test tower at Alamogordo, New Mexico, July 1945.

Courtesy of the National Archives

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EG:270-L2b-P2b

The fireball of the Trinity test at 0.053 seconds after ignition.

Courtesy of the National Archives

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EG:270-L2c-P2c
color photo from Segrè

The rising mushroom cloud.

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EG:270-L2d,e-S2d,e

Jumpsuit and goggles worn by Manhattan Project physicist Dr. Emilio Segrè at the Trinity test.

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EG:270-L2f

"I was flabbergasted by the new spectacle. We saw the whole sky flash with unbelievable brightness in spite of the very dark glasses we wore.... For a moment I thought the explosion might set fire to the atmosphere and thus finish the earth, even though I knew that this was not possible."

Dr. Emilio Segrè, Manhattan Project physicist and Nobel Prize winner

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EG:270-L2g-P2g

Dr. Segrè wearing the jumpsuit and goggles at the Trinity site.

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EG:270-L2h-S2h

Welder's glass used by Dr. Segrè to watch the explosion.

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EG:270-L2i-S2i

Identification card of Dr. Segrè issued specifically for the highly secret Trinity test site.

All objects from Dr. Segrè lent by the National Museum of American History

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EG:280-L1
unit main title

THE POTSDAM CONFERENCE AND THE BOMB

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EG:280-L2
unit main text

In mid-July 1945, as Manhattan Project scientists prepared for the world's first nuclear explosion, Allied leaders were assembling outside Berlin for the Potsdam Conference. The conference was called to discuss the peace settlement in Europe and to issue a surrender ultimatum to Japan.

President Truman had delayed the conference so it would take place at the time the bomb was to be tested. At Potsdam he gave final verbal approval for dropping the atomic bomb if Japan rejected the ultimatum.

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EG:280-L2a-P2a

Secretary of State Byrnes and President Truman cross the Atlantic on the cruiser USS Augusta, July 1945.

Courtesy of the National Archives

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EG:280-L3

TRUMAN TELLS STALIN ABOUT THE BOMB

Coded telegrams about the success of the atomic test reached Secretary of War Stimson at Potsdam within hours. But it was only after Truman, Stimson, and Byrnes saw General Groves' detailed report about Trinity on July 21, that they really understood how powerful the new weapon was.

On July 24, Truman mentioned to Stalin as casually as possible that the United States now had "a new weapon of unusual destructive force." According to Truman, Stalin did not react, but merely stated that he hoped the Americans would make "good use of it against the Japanese." Truman and his entourage were not sure the Soviet dictator had even understood, but, thanks to his Manhattan Project spies, Stalin knew that Truman was referring to the atomic bomb.

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EG:280-L3a-P3a

Marshal Stalin, President Truman, and Prime Minister Churchill at the Potsdam Conference July 1945.

Courtesy of the National Archives

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EG:280-L3b-S3b

President Truman's Potsdam diary for July 25, 1945, alludes to General Groves' report on the Trinity test. Key passages show that Truman was troubled by the power of the new bomb:

"We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world. It may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Era, after Noah and his fabulous Ark.

"...I have told Sec. of War Stimson to use it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children. Even if the Japanese are savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic, we as the leader of the world for the common welfare cannot drop this bomb on the old Capitol [Kyoto] or the new [Tokyo].

"He and I are in accord. The target will be a purely military one and we will issue a warning statement asking the Japs to surrender and save lives."

Lent by the Harry S. Truman Library

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EG:280-L4

"FINI JAPS WHEN THAT COMES ABOUT"

During the Potsdam Conference, Stalin promised to declare war on Japan by August 15. Truman wrote in his diary on July 17, "Fini Japs when that comes about." But a day later he wrote, "Believe Japs will fold up before Russia comes in. I am sure they will when Manhattan appears over their homeland."

Stalin and Truman also discussed Tokyo's new diplomatic approaches to Moscow in July, which indicated Emperor Hirohito's search for a compromise peace that would allow Japan to retain some of its conquered territories. But since Stalin wanted to enter the Pacific war, he did not play up the new messages. Truman and Secretary of State Byrnes already knew about these Japanese initiatives from American intelligence reports, but found nothing new and so dismissed them.

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EG:280-L4a-P4a

Courtesy of the Bettmann Archive

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EG:280-L5

AN ULTIMATUM TO JAPAN

On July 26, 1945, the three largest Allied powers at war in the Pacific, the United States, Britain, and China, issued the Potsdam Declaration, which demanded that the Japanese Empire surrender immediately or face "prompt and utter destruction." Because of longstanding Allied and domestic opposition to anything less than "unconditional surrender," the declaration contained no reference to retaining Emperor Hirohito on the throne. Nor, for reasons of military secrecy, did it contain any direct reference to the atomic bomb or Soviet entry into the war.

The declaration did not change the position of the Japanese government. The military's reaction was especially unfavorable. On July 28, Prime Minister Suzuki announced that his government would ignore ("mokusatsu") the declaration. As a result, the United States used the atomic bomb.

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EG:280-L6

THE OFFICIAL ORDER TO DROP THE BOMB

During the spring and summer of 1945, Truman had verbally confirmed proposals presented to him by Stimson and Byrnes to use the bomb. According to General Groves, Truman's decision "was one of noninterference--basically a decision not to upset existing plans."

Lt. Gen. Carl Spaatz, the commander of the newly created U.S. Army Strategic Air Forces in the Pacific, requested a written order authorizing the use of the bomb. After long-distance communications with Stimson, who was with Truman in Potsdam, Gen. Thomas Handy, the Acting Army Chief of Staff in Washington, issued the order to Spaatz on July 25. President Truman could have reversed the order had Japan accepted the Potsdam Declaration.

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EG:280-L6a-P6a

Lt. Gen. Carl Spaatz (lighting cigarette) arrives on Guam, July 29, 1945, to take command of strategic air forces in the Pacific. With him are (left to right) Lt. Gen. Nathan Twining, Maj. Gen. Curtis LeMay, and Lt. Gen. Barney Giles.

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EG:280-L6b-S6b

A copy of the official order to drop the
bomb.

Lent by the Library of Congress

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