

EG:500-L1
Unit main title

JAPAN SURRENDERS

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EG:500-L2
Unit main text

"The destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki put an end to the Japanese war. It stopped the fire raids, and the strangling blockade; it ended the ghastly specter of the clash of great land armies."

Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson

The atomic attacks played the crucial role in the sudden surrender of Japan on August 14, 1945--only eight days after the bombing of Hiroshima and five days after Nagasaki. They were accompanied by 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. Immediately following their declaration of war, the Soviets launched a massive surprise attack, overrunning the Japanese army in Manchuria and Korea.

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EG:500-L2a-P2a

Allied prisoners of war cheer rescuers, as the U.S. Navy arrives at the Aomori POW camp near Yokohama, August 29, 1945. They are waving the flags of the United States, Great Britain, and the Netherlands.

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EG:500-L3

HIROSHIMA AND THE SOVIET DECLARATION OF WAR

Soon after the bombing of Hiroshima, the Japanese government received reports about the destruction of the city and the unique character of the weapon. President Truman's August 6 announcement of the nuclear attack, broadcast throughout the world, increased the shock of the bombing because it revealed to the world the United States' harnessing of atomic power--a stunning and revolutionary scientific achievement.

The Soviet offensive against Japan was not planned to take place until mid-August or later. Afraid that the war would be over before he could gain a share of the spoils, on the evening of August 7, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin ordered his forces to attack the Japanese army in north China 24 hours later. Shortly beforehand, the Japanese ambassador was handed a surprise declaration of war.

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EG:500-L3a-P3a
Headlines from U.S.
newspapers about
Hiroshima.

No caption needed.

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EG:500-L3b-P3b

Soviet tanks roll across the Manchurian steppe in north China, August 1945, while a liaison aircraft circles overhead.

Courtesy of Sovfoto

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EG:500-L3c-P3c
Campaign map

The Soviet campaign against the Japanese army
in northern China and Korea, August 1945.

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EG:500-L4

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 break the deadlock. The key issue was the preservation of the monarchy. Togo argued for accepting the Allies' Potsdam Declaration, as long as it "would not comprise any demand which would prejudice the prerogatives of His Majesty as a Sovereign Ruler."

The deadlock provoked an emergency conference with Emperor Hirohito in his air-raid bunker around midnight, August 9-10. At the end of this meeting, the Emperor stated his wish that Japan offer to surrender on terms proposed by Togo.

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EG:500-L4a-P4a

Emperor Hirohito meeting with key Japanese government officials in the Imperial Palace bunker, where he asked for an end to the war, August 1945.

Painting by Ichiro Sharakawa, courtesy of Time-Life

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EG:500-L5

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, however, felt that the Japanese condition would lead to "the crucifixion of the President" by an angry public demanding unconditional surrender. Truman eventually instructed Byrnes to send a note that said nothing about the ultimate fate of the Emperor.

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EG:500-L5a-P5a

American servicemen read news of the Japanese surrender offer, August 10, 1945.

Courtesy of

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EG:500-L6

NO THIRD ATOMIC BOMB

On August 10, while discussing the Japanese surrender offer, President Truman ordered that no more atomic bombs be dropped until further notice. According to the diary of Commerce Secretary Henry Wallace, Truman told the Cabinet that "the thought of wiping out another 100,000 people was too horrible. He didn't like killing, as he said, 'all those kids.'" Although he had written in his Potsdam diary in July that the target for the first bomb would be purely military, Truman clearly understood after Hiroshima that whatever the target, the atomic bomb could destroy whole cities.

Because of Truman's order, General Groves held up the shipment to the Pacific of the plutonium 239 core for another "Fat Man" bomb, which was to be available for a mission around August 20. Further plutonium cores could have been shipped to the Pacific about every three to four weeks thereafter. But no uranium 235 for a "Little Boy" bomb would have been available for some months.

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EG:500-L6a

"For myself I certainly regret the necessity of wiping out whole populations because of the 'pigheadedness' of the leaders of a nation, and, for your information, I am not going to do it unless it is absolutely necessary. It is my opinion that after the Russians enter into the war the Japanese will very shortly fold up. My object is to save as many American lives as possible but I also have a human feeling for the women and children of Japan."

President Harry S Truman to Senator Richard Russell, August 9, 1945

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EG:500-L6b-S6b
(if available)

On this August 10, 1945, memorandum from General Groves to General Marshall, Marshall has written that a third bomb is "not to be released on Japan without express authority from the President."

Lent by the National Archives and Records Administration

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EG:500-L7

A "LIVING GOD" SPEAKS

The American note of August 10 did not clearly guarantee the Emperor's position. This provoked another deadlock in the Japanese ruling elite. Even after the atomic bombings, 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, the Emperor called another emergency conference in the Imperial Palace bunker on August 14 and once again asked that the government accept the American terms.

During the night of August 14-15, 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.

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EG:500-L8

"The enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bomb, the power of which to do damage is indeed incalculable, taking the toll of many innocent lives. Should We continue to fight, it would not only result in an ultimate collapse and obliterating of the Japanese nation, but it would lead to the total extinction of human civilization. Such being the case, how are We to save the millions of Our subjects; or to atone Ourselves before the hallowed spirits of Our Imperial Ancestors? This is the reason why We have ordered the acceptance of the provisions of the Joint Declaration of the Powers.... It is according to the dictates of time and fate that We have resolved to pave the way for a grand peace for all the generations to come by enduring the unendurable and suffering what is insufferable."

Emperor Hirohito, August 14, 1945

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EG:500-L8a

"The peace party did not prevail until the bombing of Hiroshima created a situation which could be dramatized."

Emperor Hirohito to Gen. Douglas MacArthur,
September 27, 1945

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EG:500-L9

SHOCK AND SURRENDER

Prime Minister Suzuki told his American interrogators after the war that the atomic bomb had enabled his military colleagues to surrender honorably. To surrender when one's powers of resistance remained was dishonorable; to surrender to a force of overwhelming power was acceptable without loss of face. No brigades of children with bamboo spears, no kamikaze attacks, no spiritual strengths could overcome such might.

Japan had reversed itself previously in the face of superior power. The bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the prospect of more to come, compelled Japan to surrender, lest it be destroyed forever. This was the argument that Hirohito made in council to his government, and it ended the war.

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EG:500-L9a-P9a

President Truman announces the Japanese surrender to the press, 7:00 p.m., Washington time, August 14, 1945.

Courtesy of the National Archives

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EG:500-L9b-P9b

Japanese citizens listen to Emperor Hirohito's surrender announcement, August 15, 1945.

Courtesy of Kodansha International-Birnback

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EG:500-L9c-P9c

American sailors at Pearl Harbor hear the news of the surrender.

Courtesy of

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EG:500-L9d-P9d

American servicemen and women in Paris celebrate V-J Day, August 15, 1945.

Courtesy of

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EG:500-L9e-P9e

V-J Day in Times Square, New York City.

Courtesy of the National Archives

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EG:500-L9f

"When the atom bombs were dropped and the news began to circulate that...we would not be obliged in a few months to rush up the beaches near Tokyo assault-firing while being machine-gunned, mortared and shelled...we broke down and cried with relief and joy. We were going to live. We were going to grow to adulthood after all."

Paul Fussell, U.S. Army infantryman in Europe, from "Thank God for the Atom Bomb"

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EG:500-L9g-P9g

The Japanese government officially surrendered on September 2, 1945, in a ceremony held in Tokyo Bay on the deck of the battleship Missouri. Standing at left is Gen. Douglas MacArthur, the newly designated Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers.
Courtesy of the National Archives

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EG:500-L9h-P9h

Another view of the surrender ceremony.
Courtesy of the National Archives

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EG:500-L9i-S9i

A facsimile of the original surrender document signed on the Missouri, September 2, 1945.

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EG:500-L9j-S9j
(Stacked pile of Japanese swords, if available.)

No label needed.

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EG:500-L10

THE OCCUPATION OF JAPAN

The American occupation of Japan laid the foundation for postwar peace and prosperity. Japan was occupied from August 1945 until the peace treaty went into effect in April 1952. While representatives of other Allied powers served on various advisory councils, General of the Army Douglas MacArthur was the dominant figure. He held the post of Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers until April 1951, when he was replaced by Gen. Matthew Ridgway.

American occupation policy sought to achieve two goals: to demilitarize Japan and to encourage the growth of democracy. The former goal was achieved with relative ease. In addition, Japanese war criminals were tried and convicted. Democracy was instituted through a new constitution, which went into effect on May 1, 1947. Occupation officials also initiated land reform, encouraged the establishment of political parties, instituted radical changes in the educational system, and took a variety of other measures to transform Japanese society. Generous American economic aid also contributed to Japan's remarkable economic boom, which began in the 1950s.

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EG:500-L10a-P10a

Gen. Douglas MacArthur and Emperor Hirohito
in September 1945.

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EG:500-L10b-P10b

[Tokyo war crimes trial photo to be added
here.]

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EG:510-L1

THE LEGACY OF THE ATOMIC BOMB

The introduction of atomic bombs, and their first use at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, left a powerful legacy. For the Allies and Japan, a horrendous war was brought to an abrupt end. For the world, the new weapon was a double-edged sword. It offered both the hope of preventing another global war and the danger that a failure of deterrence could destroy civilization.

During the postwar arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union, about 70,000 nuclear weapons were added to the world's arsenals--some of them a thousand times more powerful than the bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the wake of the Cold War, these massive arsenals are being drastically reduced. But other nations still possess nuclear weapons, and some non-nuclear states as well as terrorist groups will be tempted to acquire them.

The atomic bomb cannot be uninvented. But the atomic bombings that ended World War II provide grim evidence of the devastating potential of these weapons--and perhaps the most compelling reason why they have not been used since.

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EG:510-L1a-P1a
Graphic of the buildup of
the number of nuclear
weapons

From what had been two bombs at
Hiroshima and Nagasaki sprang 70,000 at the
height of the nuclear arms race--some a
thousand times as powerful as the original
two.

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EG:520-L1

By the visitor comment
area near the exit of the
exhibition.

Even during the planning stages, this
exhibition generated widespread debate. We
invite you to add your comments to those we
have already received.

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EG:520-L2

A sampling of letters to the National
Air and Space Museum regarding The Last Act:
The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II.

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EG:520-L2a

"The Enola Gay dropped a bomb which ended
World War II prior to my death. I could have
been killed on a bombing mission on the 17th
of August 1945, but I didn't have to fly that
mission because the Japanese quit. They
might have held out until our November 1st
invasions, in which case I truly believe we
would have lost a million people--and so
would have Japan. I consider the dropping of
the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima to be a net gain
in human lives--both on the Japanese side and
on ours."

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EG:520-L2b

"I am a former member of the 315th Bombardment Wing (VH), and a former pilot of the B-29 aircraft. I was bombing the coal liquefaction plant at Ube, on Honshu, the same date that the "Enola Gay" hit Hiroshima. I honestly feel that millions of lives, both American and Japanese, were saved by that one crew on that one airplane!"

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EG:520-L2c

"To the extent that the exhibit furthers our eternal quest for truth, it will help to break the self-perpetuating cycle of war--at an unprecedented time in world history when widespread peace can be realistically entertained. I think the lesson to be taken from the vocal outbreak of opposition to your efforts is, again, that war wreaks atrocious devastation on humans, psyches, cities, countries, economies, politics,...everything, for years to come."

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EG:520-L2d

"I was a crew member on a B-29 bombing Japan. We were shot down on our seventeenth mission bombing Yokohama on May 29th, 1945. All crew members managed to bail out successfully and were taken prisoners at various locations over the island of Honshu. We were interrogated frequently, beaten, put on a starvation diet and most of us lived crowded on the floor in cells built from an old horse stable, rife with lice and fleas and without sanitation facilities or medical help. Most of us lost at least fifty pounds during this ninety day period.... Americans, in my estimation, should make no apologies for strategic fire-bombing or dropping the atomic bomb. It took that to win the war!"

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EG:520-L2e

"Most people are not aware of the poor communication between the U.S. and Japan at that time. Or that there was the possibility (we'll never know for sure) that if we had offered to let the Emperor remain in some capacity (as some of Truman's advisors suggested to him, such as former president Hoover), that the Japanese might have surrendered sooner, with a saving of lives on both sides and without the dropping of the atomic bomb. Perhaps a clear warning and/or demonstration of the atomic bomb to Japan might have encouraged surrender--little thought was given to that. And people have little awareness of those possibilities now."

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EG:520-L2f

"My ship was allocated to the diversionary assault on the island of Shikoku the day before the main assault on Kyushu. I and the other 48 members of my amphibious ship felt we were assigned to a suicide mission. Harry Truman's decision to drop the bomb was most welcome by us."

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EG:530-L1

Further information about aviation and rocketry in World War II can be found in the following exhibition galleries.

World War II Aviation (Gallery 205)

Sea-Air Operations (Gallery 203)

Jet Aviation (Gallery 106)

Space Hall (Gallery 114)

Other exhibitions on World War II can be found at the National Museum of American History.

A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and the U.S. Constitution examines the internment of Japanese Americans during the war.

Science in American Life has a section on the role of science during the war, including the development of the atomic bomb.

World War II GI: The American Soldier's Experience covers the life of the soldier from induction through homecoming.

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EG:530-L2

[A film on the 509th Composite Group will conclude the exhibition.]

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