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Mythmaking and the Atomic Destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki



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Myth: The war in the Far East only ended in the summer of 1945, when the US president and his advisors felt that, to force the fanatical Japanese to surrender unconditionally, they had no other option than to destroy not one but two cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with atom bombs. This decision saved the lives of countless Americans and Japanese who would have perished if the war had continued and required an invasion of Japan.

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Reality: Hiroshima and Nagasaki were destroyed to prevent the Soviets from making a contribution to the victory against Japan, which would have forced Washington to allow Moscow to participate in the postwar occupation and reconstruction of the country. It was also the intention to intimidate the Soviet leadership and thus to wrest concessions from it with respect to the postwar arrangements in Germany and Eastern Europe. Finally, it was not the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but the Soviet entry into the war against Japan, which caused Tokyo to surrender.

With the German capitulation in early May 1945, the war in Europe was over. The victors, the Big Three,^[1] now faced the complex and delicate problem of the postwar reorganization of Europe. The United States had entered the war rather late, namely in December 1941. And the Americans only started to make a major contribution to the victory against Germany with the landings in Normandy in June 1944, that is, less than one year before the end of the hostilities in Europe. When the war against Germany came to an end, however, Uncle Sam occupied a seat at the table of the victors, ready and eager to look after his interests, to achieve what one might call the American war aims. (It is a myth that the presumably deeply isolationist Americans just wanted to withdraw from Europe: the country's political, military, and economic leaders had urgent reasons for maintaining a presence on the old continent.) The other big victorious powers, Britain and the Soviet Union, also looked to pursue their interests. It was clear that it would be impossible for one of the three to "have it all", that compromises would have to be reached. From the American point of view, the British expectations did not present much of a problem, but Soviet aspirations were a concern. What, then, were the war aims of the Soviet Union?

As the country that had made the biggest contribution by far to the common victory over Nazi Germany and suffered enormous casualties in the process, the Soviet Union had two major objectives. First, hefty reparation payments from Germany as compensation for the huge destruction wrought by Nazi aggression, a demand similar to the French and Belgian demands for reparations payments from the Reich after World War I. Second, security against potential future threats emanating from Germany. These security concerns also involved Eastern Europe, especially Poland, a potential springboard for German aggression against the USSR. Moscow wanted to ensure that in Germany, Poland, and other Eastern European countries, no regimes hostile to the Soviet Union would ever come to power again. The Soviets also expected the Western allies to certify their recuperation of territories lost by revolutionary Russia during the Revolution and the Civil War, such as

“Eastern Poland”, and to recognize the metamorphosis of the three Baltic states from independent countries to autonomous republics within the Soviet Union. Finally, now that the nightmare of the war was over, the Soviets expected that they would be able to go back to work on the construction of a socialist society. It is well known that the Soviet supremo, Stalin, was a firm believer in the idea that it was possible and even necessary to create “socialism in one country”, hence the hostility between him and Trotsky, an apostle of worldwide revolution. Less well known is the fact that, as the war came to an end, Stalin did not plan to install communist regimes in Germany or in any of the Eastern European countries liberated by the Red Army, and that he also discouraged communist parties in France, Italy, and elsewhere in Western Europe, liberated by the Americans and their allies, from trying to come to power. He had already formally stopped promoting worldwide revolution in 1943, when he dissolved the Comintern, the communist international organization created for that purpose by Lenin in 1919. This policy was resented by many communists outside of the Soviet Union, but it pleased Moscow’s Western allies, especially the US and Britain. Stalin was eager to maintain good relations with them, because he needed their goodwill and cooperation to achieve the objectives, described above, aimed at providing the Soviet Union with reparations, security, and the opportunity to resume work on the construction of a socialist society. His American and British partners had never indicated to Stalin that they found these expectations unreasonable. To the contrary, the legitimacy of these Soviet war aims had been recognized repeatedly, either explicitly or implicitly, in Tehran, Yalta, and elsewhere.

The Americans and their British, Canadian, and other partners had liberated most of Western Europe by the end of 1944. And they had made sure that in Italy, France, and elsewhere, regimes were established that were congenial to them, if not always to the population at large. This usually meant that the local communists were sidelined entirely; if that proved impossible, for example in France, they were denied a share of power commensurate with the important role they had played in the resistance or the considerable popular support they enjoyed. And even though the inter-allied agreements had stipulated that the “big three” would collaborate closely in the administration and reconstruction of liberated countries, the Americans and British prevented their Soviet ally from providing any input into the affairs of Italy, for example, the first country to be liberated, already in 1943. In that country, the Americans and British sidelined the communists, who were very popular because of their role in the resistance, in favour of former fascists such as Badoglio, without allowing the Soviets any input. This *modus operandi* was to set a fateful

precedent. Stalin had no choice but to accept that arrangement, but, as US historian Gabriel Kolko has observed, “the Russians accepted the [Italian] ‘formula’ without much enthusiasm, but carefully noted the arrangement for future reference and as a precedent”.^[2] (The Soviets were unquestionably entitled to a voice in the affairs of Italy, since Italian troops had participated in Operation Barbarossa.)

In Western Europe, in 1943-1944, the American and British liberators had acted *ad libitum*, ignoring not only the wishes of a large part of the local population but also the interests of their Soviet ally, and Stalin had accepted that arrangement. In 1945, on the other hand, the shoe was on the other foot: the Soviets clearly enjoyed the advantage in an Eastern Europe liberated by the Red Army. Even so, the Western Allies could hope that they might be able to provide a measure of input into the reorganization of this part of Europe as well. Everything was still possible over there. The Soviets had obviously favoured the local communists but had not yet created any *faits accomplis*. And the Western Allies were well aware that Stalin craved their goodwill and cooperation and would therefore be willing to make concessions. The political and military leaders in Washington and London also expected that Stalin would be indulgent because, if not, he had reason to fear the consequences. The Soviet leader was keenly aware that it was already an enormous achievement for his country to have emerged victoriously from a life-and-death struggle with the Nazi behemoth. But he also knew that many US and British leaders, exemplified by Patton and Churchill, hated the Soviet Union and were even considering waging war against it as soon as the common German enemy was defeated, preferably in a march on Moscow side-by-side with the remainder of the Nazi host; that plan called Operation Unthinkable, had been hatched by Churchill. Stalin had reason to try to avoid such a scenario.

The aspirations of the Soviets with respect to reparations and security, described above, were not unreasonable, and the US and British leaders had recognized their legitimacy, explicitly or implicitly, during a meeting of the Big Three in Yalta in February 1945. But Washington and London were far from enchanted by the prospect of seeing the Soviet Union receiving its due after having made such outstanding efforts and sacrifices on behalf of the common anti-Nazi cause. The Americans, in particular, had their own ideas with respect to postwar Germany and Eastern as well as Western Europe, to be examined in the next chapter. Reparations, for example, would enable the Soviets to resume work, possibly successfully, on the project of a communist society, a counter system to the international capitalist system of which the USA had become the great champion.

Essentially, in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, Uncle Sam wanted governments, democratic or not, that would pursue a liberal economic policy, involving an “open door” for American products and investment capital. Roosevelt had displayed a measure of empathy vis-à-vis the Soviets, but after his death on April 12, 1945, his successor, Harry Truman, had little or no sympathy or understanding for the Soviet point of view. He and his advisors loathed the idea that the Soviet Union might receive major reparations from Germany, since this was likely to disqualify Germany as a potentially lucrative market for American products and investment capital. And they also found it abominable that the Soviets were certain to use that German capital to build a socialist system, an undesirable form of competition for capitalism.

The Soviet aspirations were reasonable, and the Soviet leaders, including Stalin, who is usually wrongly depicted as making all the decisions by himself, were certainly willing to make major concessions. It was possible to talk with them, but such a dialogue also required patience and understanding of the Soviet viewpoint and had to be carried out in the knowledge that the Soviet Union was not prepared to leave the conference table empty-handed. Truman, however, had no desire to engage in such a dialogue. (That Stalin was interested in dialogue and could be most reasonable was to be reflected in his approach to the postwar arrangements regarding Finland and Austria; the Red Army would in due course pull out of these countries without leaving behind any communist regimes.)

Truman and his advisors hoped that it would prove possible to force the Soviets to abstain from German reparations and withdraw not only from the eastern reaches of German territory but also from Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe, so that the Americans and their British partners could operate there as they had already done in Western Europe. Truman even hoped that it might be possible to cause the Soviets to put an end to their communist experiment, which remained a source of inspiration for “reds” and other radicals and revolutionaries everywhere on earth, even in the United States itself.

In the early spring of 1945, Churchill had flogged the idea of having US and British troops march to Moscow together with the remaining Nazi forces. But that plan, called Operation Unthinkable, had to be abandoned. mainly because of the same stiff kind of opposition displayed by soldiers and civilians that had led to the aborting of the armed intervention in the Russian Civil War. Like Patton, who had looked forward to playing a major role in “Barbarossa Bis”, Truman must have been disappointed. But on April 25, 1945, only days before the German capitulation, the president received electrifying news. He was briefed

about the top-secret Manhattan Project, or S-1, the code name for the construction of the atom bomb. That new and powerful weapon, on which the Americans had been working for years, was almost ready and, if tested successfully, would soon be available for use. Truman and his advisors thus fell under the spell of what the renowned American historian William Appleman Williams has called a “vision of omnipotence”. They convinced themselves that the new weapon would enable them to force their will on the Soviet Union. The atomic bomb was “a hammer”, as Truman himself put it, that he would wave over the heads of “those boys in the Kremlin”.^[3]

Thanks to the bomb, it would now be possible to force Moscow to withdraw the Red Army from Germany and to deny Stalin a say in its postwar affairs. It now also seemed a feasible proposition to install pro-Western and even anticommunist regimes in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, and to prevent Stalin from exerting any influence there. It even became thinkable that the Soviet Union itself might be opened up to American investment capital as well as American political and economic influence, and that this communist heretic might thus be returned to the bosom of the universal capitalist church. “There is evidence”, writes the German historian Jost Dülffer, that Truman believed that the monopoly of the nuclear bomb would be “a *passepartout* for the implementation of the United States’ ideas for a new world order”.^[4] Indeed, with the nuclear pistol on his hip, the American president did not feel that he had to treat “the boys in the Kremlin”, who did not have such a super-weapon, as his equals. “The American leaders waxed self-righteous and excoriated Russia”, writes Gabriel Kolko, “[and] they refused to negotiate in any serious way simply because as self-confident master of economic and military powers the United States felt it could ultimately define the world order”.^[5]

Possession of a mighty new weapon also opened up all sorts of possibilities with respect to the ongoing war in the Far East and the postwar arrangements to be made for that part of the world, of great importance to the leaders of the US, as we have seen when dealing with Pearl Harbor. Nevertheless, playing that powerful trump card would only be possible after the bomb had been successfully tested and was available to be used. Truman needed to bide his time. He therefore did not heed Churchill’s advice to discuss the fate of Germany and Eastern Europe with Stalin as soon as possible, “before the armies of democracy melted”, that is, before the American troops were to pull out of Europe. Eventually, Truman did agree to a summit meeting of the Big Three in Berlin, but not before the summer, when the bomb was supposed to be ready.

The meeting of the Big Three took place, not in bombed-out Berlin but in nearby Potsdam, from July 17 to August 2, 1945. It was there that Truman received the long-awaited message that the atomic bomb had been tested successfully on July 16 in New Mexico. The American president now felt strong enough to make his move. He no longer bothered to present proposals to Stalin but made all sorts of non-negotiable demands; at the same time, he rejected out of hand all proposals emanating from the Soviet side, for example proposals concerning German reparation payments. But Stalin did not capitulate, not even when Truman attempted to intimidate him by whispering into his ear that America had acquired an incredibly powerful new weapon. The Soviet leader, who had certainly been informed already about the Manhattan Project by his spies, listened in stony silence. Truman concluded that only an actual demonstration of the atomic bomb could persuade the Soviets to give way. Consequently, no general agreement on important issues could be achieved at Potsdam^[6]

In the meantime, the Japanese battled on in the Far East, even though their situation was totally hopeless. They were in fact prepared to surrender, but not unconditionally as the Americans demanded. To the Japanese mind, an unconditional capitulation conjured up the supreme humiliation, namely, that Emperor Hirohito might be forced to step down and possibly be accused of war crimes. American leaders were aware of this, and some of them, for example Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, believed, as historian Gar Alperovitz writes, “that a statement reassuring the Japanese that unconditional surrender did not mean dethronement of the Emperor would probably bring an end to the war”.^[7]

The demand for an unconditional surrender was actually far from sacrosanct: in General Eisenhower’s HQ in Reims on May 7, a German condition had been accepted, namely their request for the cease-fire to be implemented only after a delay of no less than 45 hours, long enough to permit a large number of their troops to slip away from the eastern front in order to end up in not in Soviet but in American or British captivity; even at this late stage, many of these units would be kept ready – in uniform, armed, and under the command of their own officers – for possible use against the Red Army, as Churchill was to admit after the war.^[8] It was therefore quite possible to bring about a Japanese capitulation in spite of the demand for immunity for Hirohito. Furthermore, Tokyo’s condition was far from essential: after an unconditional surrender was finally wrested from the Japanese, the Americans never bothered to lay charges against Hirohito, and it was thanks to Washington that he was able to remain emperor for many more decades.

Why did the Japanese think that they could still afford the luxury of attaching a condition to their offer of surrender? The reason was that in China the main force of their army remained intact. They thought that they could use this army to defend Japan itself and thus exact a high price from the Americans for their admittedly inevitable final victory. This scheme would only work, however, if the Soviet Union did not get involved in the war in the Far East, thus pinning the Japanese forces down on the Chinese mainland. Soviet neutrality, in other words, allowed Tokyo a small measure of hope, not hope for a victory of course, but hope that Washington might accept the condition about their emperor. To a certain extent, the war with Japan dragged on because the USSR was not yet involved in it. But Stalin had already promised in 1943 to declare war on Japan within three months after the capitulation of Germany, and he had reiterated this commitment as recently as July 17, 1945, in Potsdam. Consequently, Washington counted on a Soviet attack on Japan in early August. The Americans thus knew only too well that the situation of the Japanese was hopeless. “Fini Japs when that comes about”, Truman wrote in his diary, referring to the expected Soviet intervention in the war in the Far East.^[9]

In addition, the American navy assured Washington that it was able to prevent the Japanese from transferring their army from China to defend the homeland against an American invasion. Finally, it was questionable whether an American invasion of Japan would be necessary at all, since the mighty US Navy could also simply blockade that island nation and thus confront it with a choice between capitulating or starving to death.

In order to finish the war against Japan without having to make more sacrifices, Truman thus had a range of attractive options. He could accept the trivial Japanese condition, immunity for their emperor; he could also wait until the Red Army attacked the Japanese in China, thus forcing Tokyo into accepting an unconditional surrender after all; and he could have instituted a naval blockade that would have forced Tokyo to sue for peace sooner or later. But Truman and his advisors chose none of these options. Instead, they decided to knock Japan out with the atomic bomb.

This fateful decision, which was to cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, mostly civilians, offered the Americans considerable advantages. First, the bomb might still force Tokyo to surrender before the Soviets got involved in the war in Asia. In this case it would not be necessary to allow Moscow a say in the coming decisions about postwar Japan, about the territories that had been occupied by Japan (such as Korea and Manchuria), and about the Far East and the Pacific region in general. The United States would then enjoy total hegemony over that part of the world, something that was

Washington's true, albeit unspoken, war aim in the conflict with Japan, as we have seen in the previous chapter. It is for this reason that the option of a blockade was also rejected: in this case, the Japanese would have capitulated only many months after the entry into the war of the Soviet Union.

A Soviet intervention in the war in the Far East threatened to achieve for the Soviets the same advantage that the Americans' own relatively late intervention in the war in Europe had produced for themselves, namely, a place at the round table of the victors who would force their will on the defeated enemy, decide on borders, determine postwar socio-economic and political structures, and thereby achieve enormous benefits and prestige. Washington absolutely did not want the Soviet Union to enjoy this kind of input. The Americans had eliminated their great imperialist competitor in that part of the world and did not relish the idea of being saddled with a new potential rival, a rival, moreover, whose detested communist ideology was already becoming dangerously influential in many Asiatic countries, including China. By making use of the atom bomb, US leaders hoped to finish off the Japanese quickly and start to rearrange the Far East without a potentially pesky Soviet partner.

The atom bomb seemed to offer the American leaders an additional important advantage. Truman's experience in Potsdam had persuaded him that only an actual demonstration of this new weapon would make Stalin pliable. Using the atom bomb to obliterate a Japanese city seemed to be the perfect stratagem to intimidate the Soviets and coerce them to make major concessions with respect to postwar arrangements in Germany, Poland, and elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe. Truman's secretary of state, James F. Byrnes, reportedly declared later that the atom bomb had been used because such a demonstration of power was likely to make the Soviets more accommodating in Europe.

To make the desired terrifying impression on the Soviets – and the rest of the world –, the bomb obviously had to be dropped on a big city. It is probably for this reason that Truman turned down a proposal, made by some of the scientists involved in the Manhattan Project, to demonstrate the power of the bomb by dropping it on some uninhabited Pacific island: there would not have been sufficient death and destruction. It would also have been extremely embarrassing if the weapon had failed to work its deadly magic; but if the unannounced atomic bombing of a Japanese city backfired, no one would have known and no one would have been embarrassed. A big Japanese city had to be selected, but the capital, Tokyo, did not qualify, since it was already flattened by previous conventional bombing raids, so that additional damage was unlikely to loom sufficiently impressive. In

fact, very few cities qualified as the required “virgin” target. Why? In early August 1945, only ten cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants remained relatively unscathed by bombing raids, and quite a few of those were beyond the range of the bombers which. (On account of inexistant Japanese air defences, the latter had already started to obliterate towns with a population of less than 30,000.) But Hiroshima and Nagasaki were unlucky enough to qualify.^[10]

The atom bomb was ready just in time to be put to use before the USSR had a chance to become involved in the Far East. Hiroshima was obliterated on August 6, 1945, but the Japanese leaders did not react immediately with an unconditional capitulation. The reason was that the damage was great, but not greater than that caused by earlier bombing raids on Tokyo, where an attack by thousands of bombers on March 9 and 10, 1945, had caused more destruction and killed more people than at the “virgin” target of Hiroshima. This ruined Truman’s delicate scenario, at least partly. Tokyo had not yet surrendered when on August 8, 1945 — exactly three months after the German capitulation in Berlin — the USSR declared war on Japan, and the next day the Red Army attacked the Japanese troops stationed in northern China. Truman and his advisors now wanted to end the war as quickly as possible in order to limit the “damage” (from their perspective) done by the Soviet intervention.

Already on August 10, 1945, just one day after the Soviet Union’s entry into the war in the Far East, a second bomb was dropped, this time on the city of Nagasaki. About this bombardment, in which many Japanese Catholics perished, a former American army chaplain later stated: “That’s one of the reasons I think they dropped the second bomb. To hurry it up. To make them surrender before Russians came”.^[11] (The chaplain may or may not have been aware that among the 75,000 human beings who were “instantaneously incinerated, carbonized and evaporated” in Nagasaki were many Japanese Catholics as well an unknown number of inmates of a camp for allied POWs, whose presence had been reported to the air command, to no avail.)^[12]

Japan capitulated not because of the atom bombs but because of the Soviet entry into the conflict. After the obliteration of most of the country’s big cities, the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, no matter how horrible, made little or no difference from a strategic viewpoint. The Soviet declaration of war, on the other hand, was a fatal blow, because it eliminated Tokyo’s very last hope for attaching some minor conditions to the inevitable capitulation. Moreover, even after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese leaders knew that it would take many months before American troops might

land in Japan, but the Red Army was making such rapid progress that it was estimated to cross into Japan's own territory within ten days. Because of the Russian involvement, in other words, Tokyo ran out of time and of options other than unconditional surrender. Japan capitulated because of the Soviet declaration of war, not because of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Even without the atomic bombs, the Soviet entry into the war would have triggered a surrender.^[13] But the Japanese leaders took their time. Their formal capitulation occurred on August 14, 1945.

To the great chagrin of Truman and his advisors, the Red Army was able to make considerable progress during those final days of the war. The Soviet even began to drive the Japanese out of their Korean colony, and did so in collaboration with a Korean liberation movement led by Kim Il-sung, which proved to be immensely popular and therefore poised to come to power after the liberation of the entire country from Japan's nasty colonial yoke. But the prospect of an independent, socialist Korea did not fit into American plans for the postwar Far East. Washington therefore quickly send troops to occupy the south of the peninsula, and the Soviets agreed to a division of the country that was supposed to be only temporary but has lasted until the present.^[14]

It looked as if the Americans would be stuck with a Soviet partner in the Far East after all, but Truman made sure that this was not the case. He acted as if the earlier cooperation of the three great powers in Europe had not set a precedent by rejecting Stalin's request for a Soviet occupation zone in the defeated Land of the Rising Sun on August 15, 1945. And when on September 2, 1945, General MacArthur officially accepted the Japanese surrender on the American battleship Missouri in the Bay of Tokyo, representatives of the Soviet Union, and of other allies in the Far East, including Great Britain and the Netherlands, were allowed to be present only as insignificant extras. Japan was not carved up into occupation zones, like Germany. America's defeated rival was to be occupied in its entirety by the Americans only, and as American viceroy in Tokyo, General MacArthur would ensure that, regardless of contributions made to the common victory, no other power would have a say in the affairs of postwar Japan.

The American conquerors recreated the Land of the Rising Sun according to their ideas and to their advantage. In September 1951, a satisfied America would sign a peace treaty with Japan. The USSR, however, whose interests had never been taken into account, did not co-sign this treaty. The Soviets did pull out of the parts of China and Korea they had liberated, but they refused to evacuate Japanese territories such as Sakhalin and the Kurils, which had been occupied by the Red Army during the last days of the war. They would be

mercilessly criticized for this in the United States afterwards, as if the attitude of the American government itself had nothing to do with this issue.

American leaders believed that after the Japanese rape of China and its humiliation of traditional colonial powers such as Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands, and after their own victory over Japan, only the elimination of the USSR from the Far East — seemingly a mere formality — was required in order to realize their dream of absolute hegemony in that part of the world. Their disappointment and chagrin were all the greater when, after the war, China was “lost” to Mao’s Communists. To make things worse, the northern half of Korea, a former Japanese colony the US had hoped to reduce to vassalage together with Japan itself, opted for an idiosyncratic path to socialism, and in Vietnam a popular independence movement under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh likewise turned out to have plans that proved to be incompatible with the grand Asian ambitions of the United States. No wonder, then, that it would come to war in Korea and Vietnam, and almost to an armed conflict with “Red China”.

To force Japan to its knees, it was not necessary to use the atom bomb. As a thorough American study of the war in the air, the US Strategic Bombing Survey, was to acknowledge categorically, “Japan would certainly have surrendered prior to 31 December 1945, even if the atom bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated”.^[15] Several American military leaders have publicly acknowledged this, including Henry “Hap” Arnold, Chester Nimitz, William “Bull” Halsey, Curtis LeMay, and a future president, Dwight Eisenhower. Truman, however, wanted to use the bomb for a number of reasons, and not just to get the Japanese to surrender. He expected that dropping the atom bomb would keep the Soviets out of the Far East and terrorize that country’s leaders, so that Washington could impose its will on the Kremlin with respect to European affairs. And so, Hiroshima and Nagasaki were pulverized. Many American historians realize this only too well. Sean Dennis Cashman writes:

With the passing of time, many historians have concluded that the bomb was used as much for political reasons . . . Vannevar Bush [the head of the US Office of Scientific Research and Development] stated that the bomb “was also delivered on time, so that there was no necessity for any concessions to Russia at the end of the war”. Secretary of State James F. Byrnes [Truman’s secretary of state] never denied a statement attributed to him that the bomb had been used to demonstrate American power to the Soviet Union in order to make [the Soviets] more manageable in Europe.^[16]

Truman himself, however, hypocritically declared at the time that the purpose of the two nuclear bombardments had been “to bring the boys home”, that is, to quickly finish the war without any further major loss of life on the American side. This explanation was uncritically broadcast in the American media and thus was born a myth eagerly propagated by them and by mainstream historians in the US and in the Western World in general, and of course by Hollywood.

The myth that two Japanese cities were nuked to force Tokyo to surrender, thus shortening the war and saving lives, was “made in USA”, but it was to be eagerly espoused in Japan, whose post-war leaders, vassals of the US, found it extremely useful for a number of reasons, as War Wilson has pointed out in his excellent article on the Bomb. First, the emperor and his ministers, who were in many ways responsible for a war that had caused so much misery for the Japanese people, found it extremely convenient to blame their defeat, as Wilson puts it, on “an amazing scientific breakthrough that no one could have predicted”. The blinding light of the atomic blasts made it impossible, so to speak, to see their “mistakes and misjudgments”. The Japanese people had been lied to about how bad the situation really was, and how the misery had dragged on so long just to save the emperor, but the Bomb provided

the perfect excuse for having lost the war. No need to apportion blame; no court of enquiry need be held. Japan’s leaders were able to claim they had done their best. So, at the most general level the Bomb served to deflect blame from Japan’s leaders.

Second, the Bomb earned Japan international sympathy. Like Germany, Japan had waged a war of aggression and committed all sorts of war crimes. Both countries looked for ways to improve their image, seeking to exchange the mantle of perpetrator for that of victim. In that context, post-war (West-)Germany invented the myth of the Red Army, depicted as a latter-day horde of racially inferior Mongols, storming towards Berlin, raping blond Frauleins and pillaging peaceful gingerbread towns en route to Berlin. Hiroshima and Nagasaki similarly permitted Japan to pose as “a victimized nation, one that had been unfairly bombed with a cruel and horrifying instrument of war”.

Third, echoing the American notion that the Bomb had ended the war was certain to please Japan’s post-war American overlords. The latter would protect Japan’s upper class against the demands for radical societal change emanating from radical elements, including communists, whose gospel “resonated among Japan’s poor, threatening plutocratic rule”.^[17] But for quite some time, the elite worried that the Americans might abolish the institution of the emperor and put many top government officials, bankers, and

industrialists on trial for war crimes. It was therefore deemed useful to please the Americans and, as a Japanese historian has put, “if they wanted to believe that the Bomb won the war, why disappoint them?” Japanese acceptance of their Hiroshima myth gratified the Americans because it served to spread the word in Japan, elsewhere in Asia, and around the world, that the US was militarily all-powerful yet peace-loving, and willing to use its monopoly of the atom bomb only when absolutely necessary. Ward Wilson continues and concludes as follows:

If, on the other hand, the Soviet entry into the war was what caused Japan to surrender, then the Soviets could claim that they were able to do in four days what the United States was unable to do in four years, and the perception of Soviet military power and Soviet diplomatic influence would be enhanced. And once the Cold War was underway, asserting that the Soviet entry had been the decisive factor would have been tantamount to giving aid and comfort to the enemy.^[18]

Over the years, the myth that the “nuking” of two Japanese cities was justified, has lost much of its appeal on both sides of the Pacific. In 1945, an overwhelming 85% of Americans saw it that way, but that share declined to 63% in 1991 and 29% 2015; of the Japanese population, only 29% approved in 2015, and in 2015 merely 14%.^[19] The myth obviously needed a boost, and it was duly provided by one of Truman’s successors, President Barack Obama.

Obama visited Hiroshima in May 2016. In a public address he coolly described the pulverization of the city by means of the atom bomb in 1945 as “death falling from the sky”, as if it had been a hailstorm or some other natural phenomenon his country had nothing to do with, and he neglected to utter a single word of regret, let alone an apology, on behalf of Uncle Sam. In an enthusiastic report about this presidential performance, the New York Times, one of America’s leading newspapers, wrote that “many historians believe the bombings on Hiroshima and then Nagasaki, which together took the lives of more than 200,000 people, saved lives on balance, since an invasion of the islands would have led to far greater bloodshed”.^[20] That numerous facts contradict this “belief”, and that numerous historians believe the exact opposite was not mentioned at all. This is how myths, even ailing myths, are kept alive.

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Notes.

[1] France was to join this trio later, thus making it the Big Four.

[2] Kolko (1968), pp. 50-51.

[3] Williams, p. 250.

[4] Dülffer, p. 155.

[5] Kolko (1976), p. 355.

[6] Alperovitz, p. 223.

[7] Alperovitz, p.156.

[8] Pauwels, pp. 178-79.

[9] Quoted in Alperovitz, p. 24.

[10] Wilson.

[11] Quoted in Terkel, p. 535.

[12] Kohls.

[13] Hasegawa, pp. 185-86, 295-97; Wilson.

[14] For a myth-free history of the tragedy of the division of Korea, see the books by Cummings and by Gowans.

[15] Quotation in Horowitz, p. 53.

[16] Cashman, p. 369.

[17] American historian Sarah C. Paine as quoted in Gowans, p. 106.

[18] Wilson

[19] Stokes.

[20] Harris.

*This essay is adapted from Jacques Pauwels forthcoming book on *The Great Myths of Modern History*,*

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