Steffen Wöll

Winter Semester 2012/13

Society, History, and Politics II

Seminar b (Tobias Schlobach, M.A.)

"I Thought of Carthage":

Tactical and Moral Adjustments of the 1945 Atomic Bomb Drops on Hiroshima and Nagasaki

February 15, 2013

1.594 words (without quotes)

2.014 words (with quotes)

Outline

I. Introduction

II. Thesis

III. Tactical necessity and alternatives to the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings

1. Strategic situation of Japan
2. Rationale of the United States for using the atomic bombs
3. The invasion and casualties issues
4. Truman and "unconditional surrender"
5. Impressing the Russians

IV. Moral and ethical considerations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

1. "New American Barbarism"
2. Adjustments of historical approaches to ethical questions
3. The morals of 1945 contemporaries
4. Cleansing history: The *Enola Gay* controversy
5. The morals of modern America

V. Conclusion

I. When Japan on September 2, 1945 signed its Instrument of Surrender aboard the USS Missouri, the fighting in the Pacific Theatre and World War II, the bloodiest military conflict to ever befall humanity, came to an end. To achieve their victory, the United States – after years of feverish scientific research in New Mexico – had deployed two atomic bombs against the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Relating the civilian death toll to the duration of the attacks, they remain to this day the most brutal military actions in recorded history (cf. Craig 2008, 81). The mere existence of a device with virtually unlimited destructive potential persistently altered the postwar world and international politics, heralding the start of the Cold War. However, the decision to use atomic bombs has ever since been the subject of one of the most controversial and long-lasting debates among historians in the United States (cf. Walker 1997, 131).

II. Discussing the necessity of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings unavoidably confronts researchers with the dilemma of taking moral considerations as a basis for military decisions, whereas an isolated examination of both the tactical and moral domains yields a more distinguished result when confronting this complex issue.

III. First, given the tactical situation in August 1945, the use of nuclear weapons was not essential to achieve military success, but instead rooted in a complex set of various motives.

1. In strategic terms, the Japanese Empire was on the verge of collapse by the spring of 1945; its economy had been crippled by an Allied blockade, its fleet incapacitated and its population suffering from food shortage. Nevertheless, general morale and the willingness to make sacrifices for Emperor Hirohito had all but vanished. Aware of this situation, government officials hoped to improve their stance in a postwar order by maintaining the political frame of the Empire, or even keeping some of the conquered territories (cf. Wilson 2007, 164 f.). A strong faction of hardliners, deep-rooted in Japan's warrior culture, believed that one last-ditch battle would improve the terms of surrender, while a faction of moderate ministers worked on a diplomatic solution, hoping to persuade the neutral Soviets to mediate a settlement with the United States and their allies (cf. Wilson 2007, 164 f.). However small the chances of both plans were, Stalin's military intervention on August 9 put an end to them.

2. On the other side of the Pacific Ocean, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson provided in his article "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb" the most memorable explanation for the annihilation of 150.000 to 200.000 Japanese civilians (cf. Sherwin 1995, 1086) to the American public. Focusing solely on military aspects, Stimson justified the attacks as necessary "[i]n order to end the war in the shortest possible time and to avoid […] enormous losses of human life" (Stimson 1947, 106). The Truman administration, he argued, was confronted with the "choice of either using atomic bombs or invading Japan" (Sherwin 1995, 1085). The invasion of the Japanese mainland

("Operation Olympic") was scheduled to take place in November 1945, targeting southern Kyushu, and involving some 767,000 U.S. troops. Calculations of estimated casualties were conducted under the aegis of General Marshall.

3. Although no larger pre-Hiroshima casualty estimate than 63,000 could ever be found, Truman claimed that "1/4 million casualties would be the minimum cost" – this dubious figure was subsequently quadrupled ("might cost as much as a million") in a 1953 official White House letter (cf. Bernstein 1998, 551). These exorbitant figures remained unchallenged, until from 1965 onwards a revisionist school began scrutinizing the underlying motives of the Truman administration (cf. Wilson 2007, 162). Subsequent research unearthed a 1947 message from Stimson, explaining to Truman that his article "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb" was partly "intended to satisfy the doubts of that rather difficult class of the community which will have charge of the education of the next generation, namely educators and historians" (Sherwin 1995, 1085). In fact, several major strands of evidence underscore the availability of viable alternatives to the atomic bomb(s). The necessity of an invasion had long been doubted by government and military officials like Dwight D. Eisenhower, who after Hiroshima concluded that it was almost certain that the Japanese would have capitulated after the Russian intervention (cf. Alperovitz et. al. 1991, 205). Likewise, the United States Strategic Bombing Survey of mid-1946 – after extensive analysis of the political, military, and

economic circumstances in Japan – reached the same conclusion of a highly probable pre-invasion surrender (cf. Wilds 1946, 13).

4. Furthermore, the United States had long since deciphered the enemy's communication codes, and thus had knowledge of Japan's inclination to surrender, albeit under the condition of retaining the imperial system – the Nuremberg trials were about to begin, implying the excruciating possibility of the godly Emperor being executed as a war criminal (cf. Alperovitz 1995, 19). Nevertheless, Truman was unwilling to retreat substantially from the dogmatic formula of "unconditional surrender" inherited from the Roosevelt administration (cf. Bernstein 1991, 164). Tellingly, when Hirohito himself intervened on July 12 in an effort to end the war, Truman referred to this attempt in his diary as the "telegram from Jap [sic] Emperor asking for peace" (Truman, 7/18/45 Diary Entry).

5. Additionally, existing indication suggests political and diplomatic motives that go beyond Truman's and Stimson's explanations "that the bomb was used solely to save lives that would have been lost in a bloody invasion" (Alperovitz et. al. 1991, 212). This holds true especially for the bomb on Nagasaki ("Fat Man"), when Japanese surrender was already imminent after the Soviet attack on Manchuria. Confronted with the unclear distribution of power and influence spheres in forthcoming peacetime, politicians began to anticipate the "Russian Problem" and viewing the A-bomb as a "diplomatic panacea for their postwar problems" (Sherwin 1973, 965). The designated Secretary of State James F. Byrnes regarded the bomb as a way to reinforce the

American diplomatic position "not only in the Far East but in negotiations over the fate of Europe in general, and Eastern Europe in particular" (Alperovitz et. al. 1991, 212). Stimson hoped to curb Stalin's ambitions by using the bomb as the "master card" of diplomacy with the USSR, "and let our actions speak for words. The Russians will understand them better than anything else" (Stimson, 5/15/45 and 5/14/45 Diary Entries).

IV. Secondly, studying the overarching moral facets of the atomic bombings reveals an elementary dichotomy between the actual conduct of war and its ethical rationalization in 1945 and modern America. Although the motivation to deploy nuclear weapons was driven by a multitude of intricate and impervious strategic and political reasons as illustrated above, Hiroshima and Nagasaki left behind fundamental moral issues to posterity.

1. Succeeding generations, among them scholars of various specialties, have asked the question how American leaders could have overcome their moral scruples, purposely committing the – clearly horrific – act of killing hundreds of thousands Japanese non-combatants. A growing distance in time made Hiroshima and Nagasaki "symbols of a new American barbarism" (Sherwin 1973, 968). Top-ranking military officials like Admiral William Leahy expressed strong moral condemnations of the atomic bombings: "In being the first to use it," Leahy explicated, "we had adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages" (Leahy 1950, 441). Truman, perhaps in an act of self-deception, devoted to his diary that "I have told the Sec[retary] of

War, Mr. Stimson to use it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children. […] The target will be a purely military one [...]" (Truman, 7/25/45 Diary Entry). After the war, Truman, obviously riddled by moral qualms and caught in processes of self-denial, continued to refer to the leveled cities incorrectly as almost exclusively military targets (cf. Bernstein 1998, 558).

2. Consequently, these circumstances strongly emphasize the existence of substantial ulterior motives – like impressing the Soviets – that were capable of subduing those scruples. Assuming that the Truman administration acted on such a maxim while simultaneously being prepared to sacrifice hundreds of thousands women, children and old men to achieve their goals, puts the atomic bombings in line with the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, and Imperial Japan. However, by restricting our conception and focus of research to hidden motives, suppressed scruples, and alternative paths suspiciously not taken, we run the risk of severely misunderstanding the circumstances, attitudes, and mindset of that time period, on which we have no right to impose the values of our own time. "Any schoolboy's afterthought", as Truman explained during a press conference "is worth more than all the generals' forethought" (Truman 1947). Therefore, questions of moral justification or disapproval can only be analyzed within a contemporary context, while "to understand that world of 1945 does not mean morally acceding […] to its values" (Alperovitz et. al. 1991, 221).

3. In fact, during the first twenty years after the bombings, the vast majority of U.S. citizens were almost completely impervious to the critical remarks and signs of regret expressed by Eisenhower, Leahy, Einstein and Oppenheimer. Immediate post-Hiroshima polls revealed that 85 percent approved the use of the bombs (cf. Bernstein 1998, 568). In the context of a virtually total war and propaganda-driven hatred towards the Japanese, most citizens had no reason to contest Truman's decision, and many even regretted that Japan surrendered before more bombs could be used (cf. Alperovitz et. al. 1991, 220). The use of every available weapon was ethically acceptable in the world of 1945, a fortiori as the enemy resorted to the devious device of Kamikaze, nurturing fears that "[Japanese] citizens would [even] have fought with pickup weapons and bamboo lances" (Correll 1994). Accordingly, Japan's brutal conduct of war, the atrocities committed in Manchuria, the rape of Nanking, the ghastly treatment of American POWs, as well as the desire to avenge the "sneak attack" on Pearl Harbor, for most Americans morally vindicated the atomic bombings.

4. To understand how these standpoints have either transformed or carried over into modern U.S. society, the exhibit accompanying the display of the *Enola Gay* at the Smithsonian Museum in 1995 provides an interesting example. Historians had assembled documents, among them passages from Eisenhower's and Leahy's memoirs, which were able to evoke doubts about the necessity of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, it was only after five revisions, that a broad spectrum of conservative critics led by the American Legion gave

their consent to the exhibit. Interviews documenting the Japanese perspective were interpreted as anti-American bias, and had to be removed. Likewise, several congressmen uttered threats of retribution against the museum, demanding to emphasize instead the history of Japanese aggression and war crimes, and censor any critical statements regarding the use of the atomic bombs (cf. Sherwin 1995, 1090).

5. Therefore, even as the unbiased approval during the postwar era has softened over the intervening years and found its counterpart in a more detached academic perception, the inclination of Middle America to "cleanse" history of ambiguous elements still perseveres. The controversy evolving around the *Enola Gay* exhibit may well be regarded as an illustration of the clash between history and America's collective memory of World War II. This "Good War", unlike any other war this country has fought, endures to represent for many the archetypical materialization of American righteousness and moral superiority. As a result, vital parts of the national identity are inextricably linked to the purity and heroism of this struggle. Hence, any public debate capable of casting shadows on that beacon of honor is routinely "driven toward oversimplification and clarity", whereas "[a]mbiguity and complexity are unwelcome in [this] political culture" (Sherwin 1995, 1092). Therefore, to raise moral question about Hiroshima to some means the same as to raise doubts about the moral integrity of the entire country and its political leaders.

V. In Conclusion, discussing the necessity of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings unavoidably confronts researchers with the dilemma of taking moral considerations as a basis for military decisions, whereas an isolated examination of both the tactical and moral domains yields a more distinguished result when confronting this complex issue.

Bibliography

"I thought of Carthage" quote from: Truman, Harry S. "Primary Sources: Entries from President Truman's Diary." *Public Broadcasting Service*. Accessed February 9, 2013. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/truman-diary/.

Alperovitz, Gar, Robert L. Messer, and Barton J. Bernstein. 1991. "Marshall, Truman, and the Decision to Drop the Bomb." *International Security* 16 (3): 204-21. Accessed February 12, 2013. http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ins/summary/v016/16.3.alperovitz.html.

Alperovitz, Gar. 1995. "Hiroshima: Historians Reassess." *Foreign Policy* 99: 15-34. Accessed February 12, 2013. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1149003.

Bernstein, Barton J. 1991. "Eclipsed by Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Early Thinking about Tactical Nuclear Weapons." *International Security* 15 (4): 149-73. Accessed February 10, 2013. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2539014.

_____. 1998. "Truman and the A-Bomb: Targeting Noncombatants, Using the Bomb, and His Defending the 'Decision'." *The Journal of Military History* 62 (3): 547-70. Accessed February 11, 2013. http://www.jstor.org/stable/120437.

Correll, John T. 1994. "The Smithsonian and the Enola Gay." *Air Force Association*. Accessed February 12, 2013. http://www.afa.org/media/enolagay/03-001.asp.

Craig, Campbell, and Sergey Radchenko. 2008. *The Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Leahy, William D. 1950. *I Was There: The Personal Story of the Chief of Staff to Presidents Roosevelt and Truman Based on his Notes and Diaries Made at the Time*. New York: Whittlesey.

Sherwin, Martin J. 1973. "The Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War: U.S. Atomic-Energy Policy and Diplomacy, 1941-45." *The American Historical Review* 78 (4): 945-68. Accessed February 11, 2013. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1858347.

_____. 1995. "Hiroshima as Politics and History." *The Journal of American History* 82 (3): 1085-93. Accessed February 11, 2013. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2945113.

Stimson, Henry J. 1945. "Secretary of War Henry Stimson's Diary". *Nuclear Files: Project of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation*. Accessed February 13, 2013. http://www.nuclearfiles.org/menu/library/correspondence/stimson-henry/corr_diary_stimson.htm.

Stimson, Henry J. 1947. "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb." *Harper's Magazine* 194 (1161): 97-107. Accessed February 12, 2013.

http://inf2149decisionmaking.wikispaces.com/file/view/Stimson+-+Harper+Feb+1947+-+Decision+to+Use+the+Atomic+Bomb.pdf.

Truman, Harry S. 1945. "President Harry Truman's Diary: April 12, 1945 to August 11, 1945." *Nuclear Files: Project of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation*. Accessed February 11, 2013. http://www.nuclearfiles.org/menu/library/correspondence/truman-harry/corr_diary_truman.htm.

_____. 1947. "The President's One Hundred and Sixteenth News Conference." Conference held at in Washington DC, August 14. Accessed February 14, 2013. https://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=1910.

Walker, Samuel J. 1997. *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs Against Japan*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Wilds, Walter (ed.). 1946. "Japan's Struggle to End the War." *United States Strategic Bombing Survey*: 1-36. Accessed February 13, 2013. http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/AAF/USSBS/JapansStruggle/.

Wilson, Ward. 2007. "The Winning Weapon?: Rethinking Nuclear Weapons in Light of Hiroshima." *International Security* 31 (4): 162-79. Accessed February 9, 2013. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4137569.