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Nuclear Narratives Today

When the first only atomic bombs in the world that were used in war were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the consensus was that it was to save American lives and get Japan to surrender as quickly as possible. But soon after, the story changed from appreciation to condemnation of these deadly weapons. The estimated death toll of Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined is about 135,000[[1]](#footnote-1) people which led to an argument between traditionalists and revisionists[[2]](#footnote-2) that continues today. Traditionalists believe that bombings were worth the countless American lives and that it made Japan surrender, and Truman with limited information did what he could to the best of his abilities. On the other hand, revisionists believe the bombing was an atrocity that did nothing but take lives and that Japan was going to surrender anyway with the Russian invasion of Manchuria. Even years later this argument continues taking on different forms and citing different aspects such as the Potsdam conference. On the 75th anniversary of the bombings the arguments frame the bombings as an unnecessary exercise of power that took many lives. Also, stories from the survivors send a powerful message that these bombs should never be used again and that this should still be lesson to the world after 75 years. Also, accounts about different accounts of the Truman administration and their opinions that shaped Truman’s decision to drop the bomb have been pulled out to shine a new light on what the thought process was for dropping these atomic bombs.

Just a few weeks after the atomic bombs were dropped, there was already controversy on the decision to drop them. Even Truman reversed his opinion on using these bombs and enacted policy in his later years to prevent use of these bombs. Since then, the question has been were the nukes necessary to get Japan to surrender? The two opposing views on this have been the traditionalists and the revisionists. The traditionalists believe it was necessary and it saved many American lives. They use different accounts from the Potsdam conference and memos from the Truman administration to argue the estimates for people that would have died in an American invasion of Japan. The revisionists base their argument on the fact that Russia also started invading and “[r]evisionist scholars of the 1990s drew on several documentary foundations to show that Japan was ready to surrender.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Many of these documents show that the atomic bombs did not receive any importance when they were discussing surrender. Even now this discussion continues in some respects as to whether the bomb was necessary. “Generals Dwight Eisenhower, Douglas MacArthur and Henry “Hap” Arnold and Admirals William Leahy, Chester Nimitz, Ernest King, and William Halsey are on record stating that the atomic bombs were either militarily unnecessary, morally reprehensible, or both.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Many now agree that the bomb was probably not necessary on the 75th anniversary, however it is used as a reminder as to what nuclear weapons are capable of and that they should not be used.

Today, the current political situation of the world seems to heavily influence the story and the views on the atomic bombs. The event happened 75 years ago and there are a few stark reminders of the bombs. “The hibakusha, as the survivors of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are known in Japan, have achieved a powerful feat of alchemy, transforming their nightmarish memories of the blasts and their aftermath into a visceral force for promoting a world free of nuclear arms.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The story this year revolves around the survivors and peace protestors that are trying to eliminate all nuclear arms. They are urging governments to look at what happened to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and never let that happen again. “But after years of optimism fed by signs of progress, most survivors now say that a world free of nuclear weapons is a distant dream.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The activists and survivors are concerned that a nuclear treaty that would remove atomic bombs from the world and would prevent a nuclear holocaust is slipping away in the current political situation. Another problem with this is that the hibakusha median age is 83[[7]](#footnote-7) and this might be the last anniversary of the bombing that a human face can be put on this horrific event. The organizations that are lobbying for the nuclear treaties are slowly dying out as the survivors die out.

Currently, the story surrounding the 75th anniversary is depressing. The survivors are starting to lose power as their numbers dwindle. There is a consensus that the bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki were an atrocity that should never be repeated. However, current political situation is leaving the future uncertain with nuclear weapons. The arguments are not focusing on whether decision to drop the bomb was justified anymore. People accept that it happened and are looking towards the future and are trying to prevent it from ever happening again.

Bibliography

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Samuel Walker, J. “Recent Literature on Truman’s Atomic Bomb Decision: A Search for Middle Ground,” Diplomatic History 29, no. 2 (April 2005): 311-334.

1. Borger, Julian. “Hiroshima at 75: Bitter Row Persists over US Decision to Drop the Bomb.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, August 5, 2020. Last modified August 5, 2020. Accessed September 27, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/04/hiroshima-atomic-bomb-us-japan-history, The exact number is still unknown and still debated over today. There are the people that died directly in the bombing and the people months and years after from radiation poisoning and cancer. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Samuel Walker, J. “Recent Literature on Truman’s Atomic Bomb Decision: A Search for Middle Ground,” Diplomatic History 29, no. 2 (April 2005): 311-334. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Samuel Walker, J. “Recent Literature on Truman’s Atomic Bomb Decision: A Search for Middle Ground,” Diplomatic History 29, no. 2 (April 2005): 311-334, The Americans intercepted most communications between Japanese officials. As our professor pointed out, Truman was not well versed with foreign policy. He seemed to try to do his best in the current situation and he knew he was out of his depth when making the decision to drop the bombs. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Alperovitz, Gar. “Op-Ed: U.S. Leaders Knew We Didn't Have to Drop Atomic Bombs on Japan to Win the War. We Did It Anyway.” *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles Times, August 5, 2020. Last modified August 5, 2020. Accessed September 27, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-08-05/hiroshima-anniversary-japan-atomic-bombs>, The Potsdam Conference was a large part of both revisionist and traditionalist arguments. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dooley, Ben, and Hisako Ueno. “Hiroshima 75th Anniversary: Preserving Survivors' Message of Peace.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, August 5, 2020. Last modified August 5, 2020. Accessed September 27, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/05/world/asia/hiroshima-japan-75th-anniversary.html>, Due to the coronavirus pandemic, many did not attend the memorial service. Many conferences and events were held online. There is no real evidence if it hurt or helped moving these events online and broadcasting to a larger audience. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dooley, Ben, and Hisako Ueno. “Hiroshima 75th Anniversary: Preserving Survivors' Message of Peace.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, August 5, 2020. Last modified August 5, 2020. Accessed September 27, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/05/world/asia/hiroshima-japan-75th-anniversary.html>, 40 out 50 governments have signed a nuclear treaty that would when ratified, remove nuclear arms. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dooley, Ben, and Hisako Ueno. “Hiroshima 75th Anniversary: Preserving Survivors' Message of Peace.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, August 5, 2020. Last modified August 5, 2020. Accessed September 27, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/05/world/asia/hiroshima-japan-75th-anniversary.html>, This is probably the last major anniversary that many of the survivors will be alive. The shrinking population is already showing signs of slowing support for an international treaty for removal of nuclear arms. The article states that putting a face to the tragedy is one of the most important aspects for supporting this treaty and emphasizing for the lives lost. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)