

ATOMIC BOMBS

(Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-134192.)

The US decision to drop atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki altered the course of the Asia-Pacific war and human history. It also sparked sharp controversy that continues to this day.

The controversy largely centers around three questions: Why did the United States employ these weapons? What were the available alternatives to end the war and their consequences? And were atomic bombs necessary to bring about Japan's surrender? The disputes over these questions provide students like you with an opportunity to engage in the process of historical inquiry at the deepest level.

BUILDING THE BOMB

Before exploring the questions above, it is important to understand the origins of the atomic bomb. In 1938, a German physicist discovered that splitting an atom through the process of fission could release tremendous amounts of energy. News of this discovery prompted work around the world on harnessing fission for weaponry purposes. In 1939, Albert Einstein warned President Franklin Delano Roosevelt that Nazi Germany was potentially working on an atomic bomb. Roosevelt commissioned an American effort that became the Manhattan Project. This top-secret, \$2 billion program involved more than 100,000 workers, 37 sites, and more than a dozen university laboratories. Most of the workers were never informed they were working on an atomic weapon.

USING THE BOMB

On July 16, 1945, Manhattan Project officials successfully detonated the world's first nuclear device at a test site in New Mexico code-named **Trinity**. Despite this success, officials maintained doubts about whether all the weapons would actually work in combat. The test occurred at a critical juncture in the war. Though





Germany had surrendered in May, Pacific fighting had soared to new levels of ferocity. The recently concluded battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa had resulted in roughly 122,000 Japanese casualties (about 110,000 deaths) and 70,000 American casualties (about 20,000 deaths). As many as 150,000 Okinawan civilians also perished.

The United States was also preparing for an invasion of the Japanese home islands of Kyushu on November 1, 1945, and then the Tokyo plain on Honshu about March 1, 1946. A US firebombing campaign had destroyed more than 60 Japanese cities, and a US naval blockade aimed to bring on a deadly mass famine. In addition to the six million men formally in Japan's armed forces, Japanese leaders also had declared most adult males and females (roughly 18 million people) to be combatants.

The Trinity test also coincided with the **Potsdam Conference** in Germany, where Allied leaders met to end the war with Japan and establish an enduring peace. Additionally, Roosevelt's death in April 1945 had shifted all future decisions to his untested—and uninformed—successor, Harry S. Truman. Truman pledged to carry

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-  [Lawrence Johnston Oral History](#)
-  [The Bomb Video](#)
-  [Operation Downfall Map](#)
-  [Harry S. Truman's Atomic Bomb Address, August 9, 1945](#)

out Roosevelt's policies, but the late president had failed to brief Truman on a host of issues, including the Manhattan Project.

News of the successful Trinity test bolstered the new president's resolve. He was further encouraged when Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin confirmed his earlier promise to enter the war against Japan. On July 26, the United States, Great Britain, and China issued the **Potsdam Declaration**, which threatened Japan with "prompt and utter destruction" if it did not surrender unconditionally. The top leaders within the Japanese government could not agree on whether or how to end the war—or even if Japan was defeated. Japan's official response to the Potsdam Declaration was *mokusatsu*, a Japanese term variously translated as "unworthy of public notice" or "withholding comment." Since the Potsdam Declaration explicitly demanded a prompt answer, American officials deemed Japan to have rejected the declaration.

On August 6, the American B-29 *Enola Gay* dropped an atomic bomb over the Japanese city of **Hiroshima**, ultimately killing as many as 140,000 people. Two days later, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan. Then, on August 9, the United States dropped a second atomic bomb over Nagasaki, eventually killing approximately 70,000. Five days later, Japan announced its acceptance of the Potsdam surrender terms, effectively ending the Pacific war.

COMPETING INTERPRETATIONS

While historians mostly agree on these facts, they interpret them differently when explaining why the United States dropped the bombs, the alternatives that might have existed at the time and their consequences, and whether the bombs were necessary and justified. Some historians support Truman's argument that the bombs were necessary to end the war quickly and to save American and Japanese lives. Citing decoded Japanese diplomatic messages, these historians generally contend that the Japanese government remained determined to fight to the death and pursued no serious effort

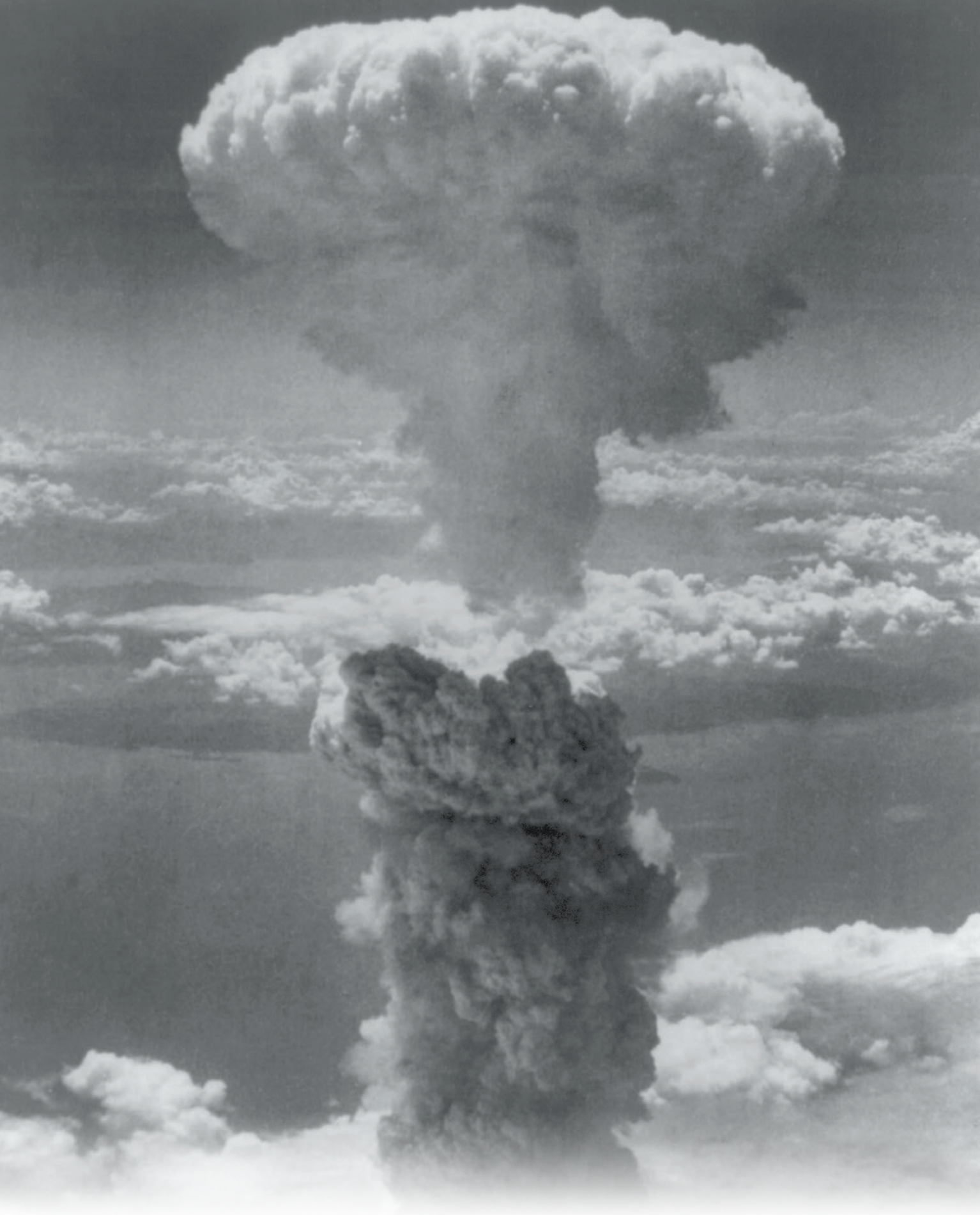
to end the war. They also emphasize that US code breaking had revealed the massive Japanese troop buildup on Kyushu, which all but guaranteed staggering American casualties in the planned November invasion. Additionally, these scholars maintain that alternatives to the atomic bombs, including invasion and a campaign of bombardment and blockade, would have produced as much or more destruction and loss of life. Other historians point to other alternatives to argue that the atomic bombs were not necessary. According to these scholars, these alternatives included demonstrating the bomb's destructive potential before using it against civilians, altering the surrender terms to allow Emperor Hirohito to remain on the throne (as the Allies eventually permitted), or allowing the Soviet Union to play a larger role in ending the war in the Pacific.

Historians often look beyond military considerations when explaining why the United States used the bomb. Some emphasize the mounting death toll in the Pacific, declining morale on the US Home Front, concerns about potential manpower shortages, and/or domestic political considerations, such as potential voter outrage over failing to use a weapon that could have saved American lives. Others stress diplomatic factors, such as assuring the complete defeat of Japan to permit postwar reforms or notably the US desire to end the war before the Soviet Union became deeply involved in Asia. Still others highlight the bureaucratic momentum that propelled officials to never seriously question using the bomb against Japan. In this formulation, there was not one decision to use the bomb but rather a series of moments when potential alternatives existed but went unexplored. Another school of thought maintains that Japan's leadership would not have capitulated under any of these alternatives and that some alternatives may actually have fortified Japanese resolve to continue the war. Finally, beyond American and Japanese lives, some historians highlight the huge numbers of additional, overwhelmingly Asian, noncombatants whose lives hinged on how soon and how the war ended.

Like any historical dilemma, delving into this debate involves examining tantalizing yet challenging questions about what might have happened had individuals chosen alternative courses of action. It also involves weighing the ethical implications of those alternatives as well as the likelihood that they would have been pursued. Historians' passionate—and divergent—stances on the atomic bombs suggest that the debate is unlikely to end any time soon. But the debate itself offers rewards by providing a deeper look at the forces that shaped the past—and the present.

"There are all sorts of different, alternative, and legitimate ways of framing the story of Hiroshima."

Peter Novick, Historian



A mushroom cloud rises over Nagasaki, Japan, after the United States detonated an atomic bomb, August 9, 1945.
(Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ds-05458.)