The Mystery of the Nagasaki Bomb

On Aug. 9, 1945, three days after obliterating Hiroshima with one nuclear bomb as Japan’s high command met on surrender plans the U.S. government dropped a second bomb on Nagasaki killing 74,000 people instantly, a decision that has never been adequately explained, writes John LaForge.

By John LaForge

“The rights and wrongs of Hiroshima are debatable,” Telford Taylor, the chief prosecutor at Nuremberg, once said, “but I have never heard a plausible justification of Nagasaki” — which he labeled a war crime.

In his 2011 book Atomic Cover-Up, Greg Mitchell says, “If Hiroshima suggests how cheap life had become in the atomic age, Nagasaki shows that it could be judged to have no value whatsoever.” Mitchell notes that the U.S. writer Dwight MacDonald cited in 1945 America’s “decline to barbarism” for dropping “half-understood poisons” on a civilian population.

The New York Herald Tribune editorialized there was “no satisfaction in the thought that an American air crew had produced what must without doubt be the greatest simultaneous slaughter in the whole history of mankind.”

Mitchell reports that the novelist Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. – who experienced the firebombing of Dresden first hand and described it in Slaughterhouse Five – said, “The most racist, nastiest act by this country, after human slavery, was the bombing of Nagasaki.”

On Aug. 17, 1945, David Lawrence, the conservative columnist and editor of US News, put it this way: “Last week we destroyed hundreds of thousands of civilians in Japanese cities with the new atomic bomb. we shall not soon purge ourselves of the feeling of guilt. wedid not hesitate to employ the most destructive weapon of all times indiscriminately against men, women and children. Surely we cannot be proud of what we have done. If we state our inner thoughts honestly, we are ashamed of it.”

If shame is the natural response to Hiroshima, how is one to respond to Nagasaki, especially in view of all the declassified government papers on the subject? According to Dr. Joseph Gerson’s With Hiroshima Eye, some 74,000 were killed instantly at Nagasaki, another 75,000 were injured and 120,000 were poisoned.

If Hiroshima was unnecessary, how to justify Nagasaki?
The saving of thousands of U.S. lives is held up as the official justification for the two atomic bombings. Leaving aside the ethical and legal question of slaughtering civilians to protect soldiers, what can be made of the Nagasaki bomb if Hiroshima’s incineration was not necessary?

The most amazingly under-reported statement in this context is that of Truman’s Secretary of State James Byrnes, quoted on the front page of the Aug. 29, 1945 New York Times with the headline, “Japan Beaten Before Atom Bomb, Byrnes Says, Citing Peace Bids.” Byrnes cited what he called “proof that the Japanese knew that they were beaten before the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima.”

On Sept. 20, 1945, Gen. Curtis LeMay, the famous bombing commander, told a press conference, “The war would have been over in two weeks without the Russians entering and without the atomic bomb. The atomic bomb had nothing to do with the end of the war at all.”

According to Robert Lifton’s and Greg Mitchel’s Hiroshima in America: 50 Years of Denial (1995), only weeks after Aug. 6 and 9, President Harry Truman himself publicly declared that the bomb “did not win the war.”

The U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, conducted by Paul Nitze less than a year after the atom bombings, concluded that “certainly prior to 31 December 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and ever if no invasion had been planned or contemplated.”

Likewise, the Intelligence Group of the U.S. War Department’s Military Intelligence Division conducted a study from January to April 1946 and declared that the bombs had not been needed to end the war, according to reports Gar Alperovitz in his massive The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb. The IG said it is “almost a certainty that the Japanese would have capitulated upon the entry of Russia into the war.”

Russia did so, Aug. 8, 1945, and as Ward Wilson reports in his Five Myths about Nuclear Weapons, six hours after news of Russia’s invasion of Sakhalin Island reached Tokyo – and before Nagasaki was bombed – the Supreme Council met to discuss unconditional surrender.

Experiments with Hell Fire?

Nagasaki was attacked with a bomb made of plutonium, named after Pluto, god of the underworld earlier known as Hades, in what some believe to have been a ghastly trial. The most toxic substance known to science, developed for mass destruction, plutonium is so lethal it contaminates everything nearby forever, every isotope a little bit of hell fire.
According to *Atomic Cover-Up*, Hitoshi Motoshima, mayor of Nagasaki from 1979 to 1995, said, “The reason for Nagasaki was to experiment with the plutonium bomb.” Mitchell notes that “hard evidence to support this ‘experiment’ as the major reason for the bombing remains sketchy.” But according to a wire service report in *Newsweek*, Aug. 20, 1945, by a journalist traveling with the president aboard the *USS Augusta*, Truman reportedly announced to his shipmates, “The experiment has been an overwhelming success.”

U.S. investigators visiting Hiroshima on Sept. 8, 1945 met with Japan’s leading radiation expert, Professor Masao Tsuzuki. One was given a 1926 paper on Tsuzuki’s famous radiation experiments on rabbits. “Ah, but the Americans, they are wonderful,” Tsuzuki told the group. “It has remained for them to conduct the human experiment!”

John LaForge is a Co-director of Nukewatch, a nuclear watchdog and environmental justice group in Wisconsin, edits its quarterly newsletter, and writes for *PeaceVoice*. 