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Hiroshima

A warning from history: 'This is what is going to happen to you'

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Eighty years ago, the United States government exploded over the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki the only two nuclear bombs ever used in wartime against a civilian population. Never before in human history had a single weapon caused such widespread death and destruction.

A report by engineers and scientists of the Manhattan Project (the US project that developed the bombs), based on a 1946 investigation in both cities, estimated that more than two-thirds of Hiroshima's 90,000 buildings had been destroyed or badly damaged, including everything within one mile (1.6km) of ground zero, aside from a few structures made from reinforced concrete. In Nagasaki, buildings with reinforced concrete walls 25cm thick, more than 600 metres from ground zero, collapsed.

In Hiroshima, the bomb destroyed 26 of 33 firefighting stations, killing or badly injuring three-fourths of their personnel. It killed or badly wounded more than 1,800 of 2,400 nurses and medical orderlies, and left only 30 of 298 registered doctors able to treat survivors. Many of those not killed immediately burned to death in the subsequent firestorm, or drowned trying to escape it in rivers, or died within hours or days of radiation sickness.

The Manhattan Project report estimated that Hiroshima suffered 135,000 casualties—more than half its population—and Nagasaki 64,000 out of a population of 195,000. Both figures were underestimates because they did not include prisoners of war and other foreigners, such as thousands of Korean forced labourers present in both cities.

People who survived the immediate effects of the blasts were not necessarily safe. Two years after the bombings, there was a notable increase in the rate of leukaemia among initial survivors, which spiked four to six years later. The largest number of victims were children.

But while the power of the bombs was unprecedented, the mass slaughter of civilians was anything but new. All of the major powers involved in the war carried out or assisted deliberate massive attacks on civilians: Japan's 1937-38 Rape of Nanjing, which killed up to 300,000 Chinese civilians and disarmed soldiers; the German Blitz of Britain, which killed around 43,000; the US-British firebombing of Dresden, which destroyed 90 percent of the city's centre and killed at least 25,000 people, many of whom died of suffocation as all available oxygen was consumed by the conflagration; there are numerous other examples.

If the ruling classes of the warring countries had a similar amoral sense (the belief that any slaughter they engaged in was justified), the course of the war and a technological lead gave the US rulers the opportunity and confidence that they could get away with the greatest atrocities. In the last year of the war, US air raids systematically destroyed Tokyo, taking advantage of the large number of highly combustible houses to create firestorms. Early on 10 March 1945, some 279 US bombers firebombed most of eastern Tokyo, killing 90,000 to 100,000 people and leaving a million homeless; the destruction was even greater than that of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In part, the atomic bombs were more "efficient" than earlier air raids: in the 10 March raid on Tokyo, fourteen US aircraft were shot down. But strategic decisions directed against the Soviet Union were a more important consideration. This was summed up by South Africa's Nelson Mandela in 2003:

"Fifty-seven years ago, when Japan was retreating on all fronts, they [the US] decided to drop the atom bomb in

Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Killed a lot of innocent people, who are still suffering from the effects of those bombs. Those bombs were not aimed against the Japanese. They were aimed against the Soviet Union. To say, look, this is the power that we have. If you dare oppose what we do, this is what is going to happen to you."

Looking forward to the next war between the "allies" was also evident in a memo issued to British airmen on the night of the attack on Dresden:

"The intentions of the attack are to hit the enemy where he will feel it most, behind an already partially collapsed front, to prevent the use of the city in the way of further advance, and incidentally to show the Russians when they arrive what Bomber Command can do."

When the Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb in August 1949, considerably earlier than the US expected, the US quickly recognised a need to "outcompete" its rivals, beginning serious steps toward developing a thermonuclear (hydrogen) bomb. An investigation of the desirability and possibility of building the new bomb, chaired by Robert Oppenheimer, the physicist who had headed the Manhattan Project's Los Alamos laboratory, concluded: "The extreme danger to mankind inherent in the proposal wholly outweighs any military advantage".

The extreme danger to the human race was less important than the military needs of imperialism. US President Harry Truman approved the development of the hydrogen bomb in January 1950. The first thermonuclear bomb was tested on 1 November 1952. It was more than 450 times as powerful as the Nagasaki bomb, with an explosive force of 15 megatons of TNT.

The US thermonuclear monopoly lasted less than a year, the Soviet Union testing its first hydrogen bomb in the following August. And although 15 megatons was an already unimaginable force, the Soviet government in 1961 tested a bomb with a force of 50 megatons. Within the test zone, brick buildings 55km from ground zero were destroyed. The heat from the blast was capable of causing third-degree burns 100km away.

That test was, in part, an experiment designed to discover whether there was any inherent limit to the potential explosive power of a nuclear bomb. There wasn't; in a report for the US Atomic Energy Commission, physicists Enrico Fermi and Isidor Isaac Rabi concluded that hydrogen bombs potentially have "unlimited destructive power".

At the time, the 50-megaton thermonuclear bomb was too heavy to be carried by any existing missile or aeroplane. But technological "progress" has since created hydrogen bombs light enough for ten or more to be carried by a single missile.

And yet, today, all of the nine nuclear-armed states—United States, Russia, France, United Kingdom, China, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea—are attempting to "modernise" their arsenals, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "upgrading existing weapons and adding newer versions".

SIPRI calculates the world nuclear arsenal at 12,241 warheads. "An estimated 3,912 of those warheads were deployed with missiles and aircraft ... Around 2,100 of the deployed warheads were kept in a state of high operational alert on ballistic missiles. Nearly all of these warheads belonged to Russia or the USA, but China may now keep some warheads on missiles during peacetime."

In 2010, the USA and Russia agreed to a treaty (New Start) to limit their nuclear stockpiles and the number of warheads deployed on strategic missiles. But that treaty expires next February, and neither side has shown any real interest in renewing it, so the number of warheads able to be fired in minutes if not seconds is expected to increase.

Despite most nuclear arsenals being labelled “deterrents” by those who wield them, no government keeps nuclear bombs for peaceful purposes; they are intended for use when military and political conditions make that seem advisable. While the US and Russia have the biggest stockpiles, does anyone imagine that moral or humanitarian considerations would have more of a restraining influence on Benjamin Netanyahu than they have on Donald Trump or Vladimir Putin? At least one minister within the Israeli government has publicly advocated using an atomic bomb against Gaza—on which Israel has already inflicted destruction comparable to what was done to Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In short, the danger of capitalist governments letting loose nuclear weapons has not significantly decreased since 1945; in many respects, it is greater.

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