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The Lessons of History

HIROSHIMA, NAGASAKI: a poorly-known story and some lessons of burning relevance

- Homepage - Background papers -

Publication date: Thursday 3 August 2000

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The text below results from historical and philosophical research done in the 1980s and presented in a thesis in 1991. It was disseminated in August 2000 to mark the 55th anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Fifteen years later, this analysis retains its great topicality: the historical facts presented, far from being disputed, have been confirmed by more recent historical studies, notably the one about the Nagasaki bombing published in April 2015 by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists ; the worries it expresses and the questions it raises in its conclusion are unfortunately still extremely relevant.

To the question : "Will not the peoples of the world have to make their voices heard? " we have heard the start of a reply: in 2013 and 2014, with the intergovernmental conferences in Oslo, Nayarit (Mexico) and Vienna on the inhumane effects of nuclear weapons; in May 2015 in New York, with 113 non-nuclear states at the NPT Review Conference supporting the "Humanitarian Pledge" which condemns nuclear weapons; today and tomorrow, with the mobilisation of NGOs and public opinion in favour of a ban treaty and a convention to eliminate nuclear weapons. But this mobilisation will remain futile unless the people succeed in imposing political decisions on the nuclear-armed states that lead to the effective abolition of these weapons.

Knowing that France is one of the nuclear states posing the greatest obstacle to their elimination, while the great majority of the French people wish for this, we put again our question: "Why shouldn't the French people, after debate and information, make known its will? When will there be a referendum on this matter?"

On August 6, 1945, at 8.15 a.m., local time, the crew of the US bomber "Enola Gay" dropped over Hiroshima the first atom bomb used against a city. Nicknamed « Little Boy », this was a uranium bomb, a single prototype never previously tested. The US army's first estimate of casualties was 78150 dead; but to approach the real figure we must multiply by three: between 200 000 and 300 000 died immediately or subsequently, not counting the "hibakusha" - those who lived on bearing the impact in their flesh, their minds and their social relationships.

The above facts are well known. What is known less, and often concealed, is that the operation had been conducted like a scientific experiment.

For nearly a year, a special unit (special group 509 of the 20th Air Fleet) had been training exclusively for this new type of bombing. Since mid-January 1945 - by a decision taken even before the German counter-attack was defeated in the Ardennes - their training covered distances which implied not a German target but a Japanese one. The commission entrusted with the operation recommended that it be conducted "on populous cities" and "without any warning". On April 16, 1945, four of the biggest Japanese cities (not including Tokyo, which was already ravaged by conventional and incendiary bombing, notably on March 9) had been identified as potential targets and spared from all other bombing, so that all observable damage could be attributed to the atom bomb alone. These cities were, in order of « preference », Hiroshima, Niigata, Kokura and Nagasaki; the old cultural and religious centre Kyoto had been removed from the list because of "humanist" scruples. On August 6, three reconnaissance planes preceded the "Enola Gay", so as to inform it by agreed code of the weather conditions above three of the cities - the bombing was not to be done by radar but by sight, for the sake of maximum precision. The exceptionally fine weather over Hiroshima that morning (predicted since April by a Norwegian meteorologist specialising in the region) gave 10 miles visibility and so confirmed this city as the ideal target. Two observation planes followed the "Enola Gay" at a distance, one to release the measuring devices over the bombed city and one for photography and filming. That

HIROSHIMA, NAGASAKI: a poorly-known story and some lessons of burning relevance

made altogether six B-29s, flying practically out of reach of anti-aircraft fire. Further steps had been taken to deter the few capable Japanese fighter-planes and to counter any passive defense measures: in the preceding days the target cities had been regularly overflowed by isolated planes which did no bombing. The moment chosen for the bombing was not random one either: accustomed to false alerts, the inhabitants were already busy with their day's work.

The bombing was "a complete success", and President Truman, when he heard of it in mid-Atlantic aboard the ship returning him from the Potsdam Conference, exclaimed: "This is the greatest day in history!" Once home in the USA, he gave a broadcast to the American people, in which he thanked God for favouring the Americans.

On the morning of August 9 it was Nagasaki's turn. In the interim the weather had deteriorated, but it determined the fate of this other city too.

The announcement of a large depression approaching Japan prompted the special staff of General LeMay, located on Guam beside the HQ of General Spaatz, to set the second bombing date for August 9, two days earlier than scheduled and without seeking new instructions from President Truman : it was very likely that the "weather window" would close definitively. General Leslie Groves, the engineer who had directed the "Manhattan District" after building the Pentagon, and also his colleagues on Guam and the score of scientists hurriedly preparing the third and final bomb available, considered it essential that they seize the chance of using it before Japan surrendered. Nicknamed "Fat Man", it was even more promising than "Little Boy", because it was the same type as the plutonium bomb tested triumphantly on July 16 at Alamogordo in the New Mexico desert.

Since one of the targets had been deleted from the plan, only five B-29s flew in this new mission. The bad weather and the storms on the path led to a series of problems: drifting off course, excessive use of fuel, one missed rendez-vous, one radio failure. On arrival over the island of Kyushu the "Bock's Car" - the plane with the bomb - headed first for Kokura, its main target, but circled over it in vain because it was covered by cloud. At the controls, young Major Sweeney had to turn back towards base, via Nagasaki. By the time his radar identified the city. The plane no longer had enough fuel to return to its starting-point, Tinian Is, or even to Iwo Jima. The only way to avoid ditching at sea with an atom bomb on board was to head for Okinawa - and that is what he did, on his last drops of fuel, but not carrying the primed bomb which weighed 5 tons. In a tricky situation, Sweeney quickly consulted three members of his crew, and the four decided to drop it by radar, despite orders to the contrary. It was passed 11.01 a.m., local time, 11.02 a.m. when it exploded. This inaccurate bombing, plus the irregular topography of Nagasaki, explains why "Fat Man" was a disappointment: it ended up causing fewer casualties than "Little Boy". But the reason for the misery of this city was another small technical hitch: if the fuel had flowed properly from a reserve tank, Major Sweeney could have made a different decision... Thus the dead of Nagasaki owe their fate to a silly little blocked pipe.

As for the "compelling reasons" for these two great massacres, two have been mentioned most frequently, and both are highly debatable.

The first reason given is the need to shorten the war with Japan and thus spare the lives of US servicemen (other people counting less). This was the reason stated by President Truman in his speech of August 9, and also by a chaplain of the US crews giving a religious version intended to save them any moral scruples ("to restore peace as soon as possible"). In any case, they were kept in almost total ignorance about the first device they were carrying, including its atomic nature.

In military terms, however, the atom-bombing was unnecessary. General Curtis LeMay, the grand organiser of the bombing of Japan, opposed this operation (which was imposed on him, and which he carried out efficiently), and estimated that a few more conventional bombings would have sufficed to "bring Japan to her knees" - operations like that of March 9 which had used 279 flying fortresses to drop 1667 tons of bombs. He still believed this forty years

later. Other high-ranking officers too, including General Eisenhower, objected the use of the bomb. So did a group of scientists, including Albert Einstein and Leo Szilard (though they had been at the start of the US nuclear effort), who in March 1945 sent Roosevelt a memorandum advocating non-use. In the diplomatic sphere, even before July 17 (the start of the Potsdam Conference), Japan was wishing to surrender. The Americans knew this from July 13 onwards: knowing the Japanese code, their information services had intercepted and deciphered an exchange of messages between the Japanese government and its ambassador in Moscow which gave formal proof of this. The only condition for surrender was that this should be honourable surrender, with the Emperor Hirohito, as a sacred figure, retaining his throne - which is what eventually occurred. The ultimatum delivered to Japan on July 26 from Potsdam by the US, UK and Chinese nationalist allies, by speaking of "unconditional surrender", could only block this path. By this time President Truman had already ordered the use of the available bombs "as soon as possible after August 2" (order of July 17). Thus the two bombs, transported and prepared in feverish haste, did not hasten the Japanese surrender but on the contrary helped to delay it - and this delay was created knowingly.

The other "compelling reason" given later by some historians is the claim that President Truman wanted to use this bombing to prevent Soviet expansion in the Far East, and to display US power in anticipation of the future Cold War of which he allegedly had presentiments. This is an illusion of hindsight. The Cold War really started in 1947, and the first signs of it in Truman's mind scarcely go back beyond January 1946 when one can observe a turnaround in his position towards the "Soviets", perhaps motivated by a brutal and outrageous "outburst" by Stalin against him at the end of December 1945, mentioned later by Khrushchev in his memoirs and that may have been reported to Truman at the time through his minister Byrnes. Until then, he was not at all in a "cold-war" frame of mind. At Potsdam and in the months following, he considered "Uncle Joe" to be a personal friend - in September 1945 he wrote he would always keep his picture as a happy memento of their very pleasant collaboration at Potsdam - and viewed Stalin politically as a sort of Tsar who could be handled quite easily provided one stayed firm. At Potsdam, far from discouraging Stalin from entering the war against Japan (as had been planned at Yalta), Truman urged him to do so as soon as possible. The Hiroshima bomb was to be another contributing factor: it was on the night of 8-9 August that the USSR declared war against Japan, immediately launching its strike against Manchuria. It is noteworthy too that the minister in Truman's cabinet then most hostile to the USSR - Navy Secretary Forrestal - was a declared opponent of the use of atom bombs. Forrestal was perhaps the most lucid about the real nature of Stalin's regime and about the longterm consequences of atom-bombing.

The real reasons for the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are rather to be found elsewhere. They are of three kinds. First, the Americans had a score to settle with the Japanese. This is actually what Truman said first in his speech of 9 August, before declaring his wish to shorten the war and spare American lives. According to him, the Americans had used [the atom bomb] against those who treacherously attacked them at Pearl Harbor, those who starve, maltreat and execute American prisoners of war, those who violate every international rule. Revenge - one may venture the term - revenge was paramount. Secondly, the bombs were available. The A-bomb operation had mobilised some 150 000 people, and required considerable financial, scientific and military efforts which needed appropriate justification: therefore they had to be used. Finally, last but not least, the pure and simple will to power - power to affirm an overwhelming domination over the other, and to be masters over physical nature in a way that was quasi-divine (delegated by God, as it were) and in fact diabolical (being utterly destructive) - this will to power certainly played a determining role, though not one that could be avowed.

It would be a mistake to think that the poignant testimonies of the "hibakusha" - such as Keiji Nakazawa Six Years Old in Hiroshima or Dr Shuntaro Hida Little Boy : What Happened at Hiroshima - can forever immunise the world's political and military leaders against the temptation to do it again. Nevertheless, these must be read. But there are too many interests at play - the will to power, the taste for grand exploits, the hatred of the enemy, fear, the wish for revenge - too many to permit us any confidence in human wisdom. A French academic working in the US asked recently in *Le Monde* : "What Head of State attacked by a first strike would take revenge with a second strike and thus risk putting a end to the human adventure?" He had doubtless not read these sentences of Giscard d'Estaing : "Whatever happens I will never take an initiative that would lead to the annihilation of France. But if the [nuclear] destruction of France were begun by the enemy, I would immediately take the necessary decision to avenge her." It

HIROSHIMA, NAGASAKI: a poorly-known story and some lessons of burning relevance

is true that he added: "Otherwise I would refrain, wishing and hoping that her landscape, the faithfulness of her inhabitants, and their inner convictions, albeit hidden [in the presence of occupying forces], will seize the final chance and one day revive French culture." (Le pouvoir et la vie, II, 1991, 210). We can therefore hope that the previous remark by this ex-President was only a "grand phrase", one of the left-overs of the "dissuasive posture" that was intended to protect France from a nuclear attack which her own nuclear-power status actually might have attracted - a posture chosen because it might not be possible to avoid being defeated and occupied through conventional arms. But the "Samson Complex" ("Better all die than let our enemies survive") exists in many places besides Israel - a nation where various people claim to have observed it, notably General Buis.

Besides, it is a mistake to trust technology. There are numerous accidents : nuclear submarines have disappeared with all their crews, bombers have crashed or ditched into the ocean with nuclear bombs on board, false alarms have been triggered by radar and computers confusing wild geese or weather phenomena with nuclear attacks. When a blocked pipe can decide the fate of a city, how can one trust cybernetic and nuclear technology? And here we have a strange twist: in the spring of 2000 the vast nuclear research complex of Los Alamos, the very place where the first A-bombs were conceived and built, was ravaged by a huge fire, apparently accidental, which destroyed 400 buildings, caused the evacuation of thousands of people, covered several American states with a huge plume of smoke, and emitted into the atmosphere, in all probability, uncontrolled amounts of radioactive dust.

Yet people still claim that they can control the stockpiling, the transport, and the non-use of thousands of nuclear weapons, and even position them in space, as part of the projected US "nuclear shield", the National Missile Defense touted as a security system ! How long will the craziness last ?

In reality it is absurd to opt for the policy of MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) or its variants, such as NUTS (Nuclear Utilization Target Selection). Without exception, every nuclear strategy has passed its use-by date; they must all be condemned, because any one of them, or a combination of them, can one day lead to a deliberate or accidental catastrophe. The five main nuclear weapons states seem to have recently admitted this, when on May 19 (in fact 21) in New York they promised to engage "unequivocally" in a process aimed at "total elimination" of nuclear weapons. But it is another thing for their leaders to really want that, and to embark on this process without delay. Unless they do, the other known nuclear powers - Israel, India and Pakistan, all located in regions of tension - will retain their nuclear option and join neither the Non-Proliferation treaty (NPT) nor the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Besides, they may be joined by other "threshold states". This will mean the permanent risk of a future "actual use", like the 1945 deed which was ordered by Harry Truman - that true democratic and Christian man - at a time when there was no really serious reason obliging him to do it.

The only reasonable and rational solution is complete, universal, verified disarmament - of nuclear weapons as of chemical and biological ones. When will our leaders grasp this point and understand the urgency of the moment ? Will not the peoples of the world have to make their voices heard ? And since in other places the people already have done so - with the result that seven states are proposing in the UN a "New Agenda" for disarmament - why shouldn't the French people, after debate and information, make known its will? When will there be a referendum on this matter?"

Translated from the French by Peter Low (New Zealand)