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As 60th Anniversary of End of WWII Approaches, UCSB Historian Says Research Shows American A-bombs Were Not Primary Cause of Japanese Surrender

While many Americans believe that World War II ended in the blinding flashes of the atomic bombs dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945, historians have hotly debated if the American use of the atomic bombs was justified.

With their exclusive focus on the atomic bombings, however, historians have not fully examined other important factors---the entry of the Soviet Union into the war and a confused and divided Japanese leadership.

But in his new book, "Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan" ([Harvard University Press](#)), Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, a professor of history at the University of California, Santa Barbara, presents a broader view that the New York Times has called "a brilliant and definitive study of American, Soviet, and Japanese records of the last weeks of the war." Examining in detail the deliberations of the Japanese leadership immersed in squabbling over how to end the war with the emperor system intact, Hasegawa claims the bombs were not the most decisive

factor in Japan's decision to end the war. Only when the Soviets, jockeying with the United States for post-war influence in Asia, declared war and invaded Japanese-held Manchuria did the Japanese leadership capitulate to prevent falling under Soviet dominance.

"The Soviet factor has been treated as a sideshow by traditional history," said Hasegawa, who is fluent in Japanese, English and Russian and studied documents and conducted interviews in Japan, the United States and Russia in researching this book.

"I bring it to center stage.

I think the Soviet presence was crucial."

The American account of the Japanese surrender heretofore has been heavily influenced by an American need to justify the horrifying nuclear blasts, Hasegawa said.

"I think the use of the atomic bomb is an issue that still bothers the American conscience," Hasegawa said. "This book is going to give an unsettling feeling to the Americans who firmly believe that the bombs were justified, since they directly resulted in Japan's surrender.

But if you look at the decision-making process in Japan, neither the Hiroshima bomb nor the Nagasaki bomb really played a decisive role."

Hasegawa said the Americans misunderstood the Japanese value system.

"The American assumption was that if you dropped the bomb on Japan, Japanese leaders would immediately surrender because that's what American leaders would do in that situation," Hasegawa said. "But not everyone has the same value system. However sad or tragic, Japanese leaders were more concerned with maintenance of the Japanese emperor system than with the lives of ordinary citizens."

Hasegawa points out that by July of 1945, the Japanese leadership knew the war was lost.

And an argument was going on at the highest levels of government whether to surrender immediately or hold out in hope of negotiating peace conditions favorable to maintaining the imperial system of government. Both sides in the dispute hoped

to petition the Soviet Union to mediate a peace with the United States and its allies.

Even though the Soviets had let the Japanese know in April 1945 of their intention to abrogate the neutrality pact when it expired one year later, they "lulled the Japanese to sleep," as Soviet premier Josef Stalin put it, by leading the Japanese to believe that the neutrality pact was still in force. But secretly, the Soviets were sending troops, tanks, artillery, and equipment to prepare for the war against the Japanese.

Earlier, the United States had wanted Soviet entry into the war in the Pacific to help finish off the Japanese. President Franklin Roosevelt concluded the Yalta Secret Agreement in February 1945, granting to Stalin privileges and territorial gains in the Far East in return for the Soviet entry into the war in the Pacific.

But after April, President Harry Truman, who succeeded Roosevelt in April, began to have second thoughts about Soviet expansion in Asia. So when the Japanese refused to accept an ultimatum for unconditional surrender at the end of July 1945, hoping to hold out for a better deal through Soviet mediation, the United States followed with the August 6 atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

According to Hasegawa, the bomb was intended to force immediate unconditional surrender before the Soviets could declare war and enter the fight.

Hasegawa also claims that the Potsdam ultimatum that contained the unconditional surrender demand was issued, not as a warning, but as an excuse to justify the use of the atomic bomb.

Stalin had expected to be invited to sign the ultimatum against Japan.

This would justify the Soviet violation of the neutrality pact.

But Truman's decision to issue the ultimatum without inviting Stalin prompted Stalin to move up the date of attack against the Japanese forces in Manchuria by 10 days to August 11. The race had begun.

But despite the devastation and horrific carnage of the Hiroshima blast, Japanese leaders continued to argue and to hope for Soviet mediation.

The atomic bomb on Hiroshima shocked Stalin, however.

Stalin was convinced that the bombing of Hiroshima would immediately lead to Japan's surrender.

He thought he had lost the race.

But upon learning that the Japanese government continued to seek Moscow's mediation to terminate the war, he again moved up the date of attack against Japan by 48 hours, to the midnight of August 9, Far Eastern time, which was 6 p.m., August 8, Moscow time.

When the Japanese ambassador met with the Soviets in Moscow at 5 p.m. on August 8, however, he got unexpected news. The Soviets declared war on Japan and within one hour invaded Manchuria.

Several hours later, the United States dropped a second atomic bomb on Nagasaki. Again the Japanese authorities were unswayed.

Despite the destruction visited upon a second Japanese city, it was the invasion by the Soviet Union that got Japanese attention.

Finally, on August 14, with the Soviets gobbling up Manchuria, the Japanese, extremely fearful of falling under the influence of the Communists, tendered their unconditional surrender,

Hasegawa said the Japanese should have exited the war by accepting the Potsdam ultimatum.

Had the Japanese government had the foresight to do so, there would have been neither the atomic bombs nor the Soviet entry into the war. He also raised the question of the Emperor's responsibility.

He said that the Emperor should have abdicated after the war.

"After all, the war was fought in his name," Hasegawa said. "If he was crucial in Japan's decision to end the war, he was also responsible for prolonging the war until August."

This view is also likely to provoke debate among the Japanese who believe that the emperor, in his intervention in the decision to surrender, saved Japan.

According to John Dower, Pulitzer Prize winning author, Hasegawa's "Racing the Enemy" is a "lucid, balanced, myth-shattering analysis of the turbulent end of World War II."

Another Pulitzer winning author, Herbert Bix, comments: "Few have so thoroughly documented the complex evasions and Machiavellianism of Japanese, Russian, and especially, American leaders in the process of war termination."

Fredrik Logevall, Cornell University historian and author of "Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam," said "Racing the Enemy" "is required reading for anyone interested in World War II and in 20th-century world affairs."

Related Links [Harvard University Press](#)
[Tsuyoshi Hasegawa's Web site](#)

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