

CHAPTER 5

The Conventional and Atomic Bombing of Japan

Introduction

The remarkable history of modern Japan began with the arrival of Admiral Perry from the United States during the 1850s.²⁰¹ Centuries of self-imposed isolation came to an end. During the following decades and long into the twentieth century Japan underwent a torturous modernisation process. Industrialisation and urbanisation swept through the country. Large multi-faceted corporations came into existence, many supported by modernisers in the Japanese government who looked to Germany and the United

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States as exemplars of commercial and manufacturing economies. Liberals in Japan were impressed by British parliamentary democracy and the social reforms of the Victorian and Edwardian years, and pushed for Japan to become more democratic, less hide-bound by religious and patriarchal traditions. Against these ambitious projects traditionalists in Japan invoked isolationism, the samurai military code, and the religious culture of a patriarchal Shintoism to prevent westernisation and the perceived pollution of moral values. A powerful reactionary, militaristic and conservative coalition of politicians versus a smaller clique of liberal reformers cleaved Japanese society and politics prior to, and during, the Second World War.²⁰²

Presided over by Emperor Hirohito, 1930s Japan aligned itself with the fascist dictatorships of Germany and Italy, creating the Axis Powers. This triangulation between Europe and the North Pacific led to catastrophe for the Japanese that few in the country envisaged prior to the air raids on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. This incursion brought the USA into the war and marked a huge step on the road to the devastation and defeat of Japan.

The Pacific War and the Conventional Bombing of Japanese Cities

A foretaste of the conventional air campaigns over Japan came during the 'Doolittle Raid' in April 1942, named after their mission leader Lieutenant Colonel Jimmy Doolittle. Also known as the first Tokyo Raid, sixteen US bombers attacked military and industrial targets in and around the Japanese capital as payback for the attack on Pearl Harbor. A number of civilians were killed, and a small number of American pilots were captured and executed. While returning from the raid, however, some members

of the air crews made it to China where they bailed out or crash landed due to inadequate fuel supplies.²⁰³

With help from many friendly Chinese people, most of the pilots made it home following 'America's first World War Two victory'. Yet Doolittle and his crew had inadvertently and tragically sowed the seeds of a vicious revenge taken by the Japanese against the Chinese who had assisted the American airmen. In his study of the Doolittle Raid and their aftermath, James M. Scott argues that the Japanese began their terrible revenge from June 1942. Subsequently, the Japanese Air Force mounted raids on the Chinese city of Chaozhou, killing over 10,000 people, leaving 27,000 destitute, and devastating the urban infrastructure and agriculture of the surrounding region. Many suffered from the appalling treatment that the Japanese had meted out to the Chinese since the 'Rape of Nanking' in 1937.²⁰⁴ The ferocity of Japanese behaviour in China was symptomatic of the wider course of Japanese history. The historic nature of Japanese military culture was a legacy of hundreds of years of atavistic isolationism that explained the conservatism and intransigence of hyper-nationalist Japanese leaders until the very end of the War in the Pacific.

In his famous address to the US Congress in May 1943, Churchill summed up Allied war aims for Japanese cities in stark terms. 'It is the duty of those who are charged with the direction of the war':

to begin the process, so necessary and desirable, of laying the cities and other munitions centres of Japan in ashes, for in ashes they must surely lie before peace comes back to the world.

It was an apocalyptic vision of urban destruction in the cause of global democracy. Churchill was well aware of the power of

bombing to turn cities to ashes. The firestorms caused by the area bombing in Germany had also convinced the USAAF that incendiary devices would be particularly effective in Japan, where light construction materials and wooden houses would go up in flames relatively quickly.²⁰⁵

Tokyo was attacked from the air many times from November 1944. American air raids on Japan were celebrated in *Target Tokyo*, an official military documentary film dedicated to all personnel on the mission. Narrated by the actor who would become President, Ronald Reagan, the film begins with preparations for the bombing campaigns in American air bases. Unashamedly patriotic, visuals and voiceover play to the fact that young American men from all walks of life and states of the country are serving their nation. This was an American trope of wartime unity and national effort, wherein a vast teeming continent could come together in the singular aim of defeating Japan. The iconic B-29, or Superfortress, is also celebrated in the film: 'designed to carry more destruction, to carry it higher, faster, farther than any bomber built before'.

Taking off from Saipan, the bombers fly high and away, reaching Tokyo as Reagan states 'Within a radius of fifteen miles of the Imperial Palace live seven million Japanese':

people we used to think of as small, dainty, polite, concerning themselves only with floral arrangements and rock gardens, and the cultivation of silk worms. But it isn't silk worms, and it isn't imperial palaces these men are looking for. In the suburbs of Tokyo is the huge Nakajima aircraft plant. Well bud, *what are you waiting for?*²⁰⁶

The bomb doors open to expose the expansive city below. Martial music accompanies the sight of B-29s raining HE bombs

on Tokyo. No destruction is pictured but the Battle for Japan is declared underway.

Yet from March 1945 the bombing of Japan was intensified. Authorisation for the firebombing of Japanese cities was given by General Curtis LeMay. In charge of the Eighth Air Force, he led bombing missions over Germany from late 1942 until he was transferred into the Pacific War operations, taking charge of 21st Bomber Command in July 1944. Having witnessed the firestorms in Germany, LeMay felt that firebombing would shorten the war in Japan. During the final year of the war the USAAF engaged in a huge and coordinated firebombing of Japanese cities. In addition to HE bombs, incendiary devices now rained down upon hundreds of thousands of commercial and municipal buildings and on homes made of wooden frames and interior paper walls.

The Great Tokyo Air Raid on 9–10 March 1945 threw into relief the nature and consequences of the new campaign. Nearly three hundred B-29 bombers unloaded over 1,665 tons (1,510,463 kilograms) of incendiaries. Over 100,000 people were killed, mostly by the conflagration that engulfed the Shitamachi district of Tokyo and its environs. Thousands were burned alive, others suffocated as the oxygen was consumed by fire. A million were rendered homeless and almost 16 square miles (41.4 square kilometres) of Tokyo were, as Churchill had wished, in ashes.²⁰⁷

An oral history of the Japanese people at war provides vivid memories of the effect on those below the bomb doors. With faint but discernible echoes of the 'Phoney War' in Britain, one woman recalled being sent home with her friends from their evacuation area in a nearby town just days before the raid because of the relative infrequency of attacks. Then the incendiaries began hitting

the school and other public buildings as people rushed to the air raid shelters. Flames soared from factory windows, people rushed into the nearby park, while others threw themselves into the river to escape the searing heat. Many were drowned. Others burned to death in streets and shelters. And many also rushed to the safety of the nearby countryside, a common form of escape from air raids.²⁰⁸

Japan is a mountainous and wooded country whose lowlands host the vast majority of the population in towns and cities of varying sizes. Across the length and breadth of the main island of Honshu, the smaller northern island Hokkaido, and the southern island of Kyushu, American area bombing did enormous damage. The architectural historian Neil Jackson points to important differences between the Japanese and European experiences of urban bombing. European cities were bombed to almost complete destruction over relatively long periods but their ruins remained partly inhabitable. The urban bombing experience in Japan, however, saw large swathes of cities razed to the ground in just a few hours by incendiary bombing.²⁰⁹ Homelessness became an immediate and pressing issue.

Even swifter devastation was visited on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945: both of these southern Japanese cities were wiped out in less than three minutes by the atomic bomb.²¹⁰ The atomic bombings held within their impact and the devastating aftermath a question mark for the future survival of humanity. Three important questions can be asked here, which historians profoundly disagree upon. First, why did the USA knowingly kill so many innocent civilians in the final phase of the war? Second, did the devastating raids on Hiroshima and Nagasaki actually terminate the Pacific War, or was this caused by other factors, thus

rendering the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki unnecessary tragedies? Third, were the atomic bombings of Japan ethically and morally worse than the conventional air raids that killed greater numbers of people?

The Manhattan Project

In order to understand the widespread deadly and destructive consequences of the atom bomb, and the reasons why it was deployed, some knowledge of its provenance is necessary. The atomic bomb was developed in the USA during the course of the Second World War. While forever associated with American technological prowess and power, the Manhattan Project drew upon weapons research in Europe. As Paul Ham argues, the 'Paris Group' of scientists for example first discovered the power of nuclear fission in 1939, while the wartime Maud Committee in Britain initiated the Tube Alloys programme to develop a British atomic weapon. While German bombs were raining down on London and other British cities the Maud Committee was, in effect, unwittingly preparing the ground for the instantaneous destruction to be visited upon Japan. The British atomic weapons programme and some key personnel were subsumed into the Manhattan Project once the USA entered the Second World War.²¹¹

Fear that Nazi Germany might reach the terrible achievement of atomic weaponry before the Allies drove research and development into the controlled destructive potential of uranium and plutonium. A further justification for the Manhattan Project in the USA and the development of the atomic bomb was the great strides that Nazi Germany made in guided missile and rocket technology during the Second World War, technology that had

visited death and destruction on British and European cities in 1944. Supposing the Germans been a few steps ahead of the Allies, and particularly the Americans, the terrible counterfactual scenario could have seen the Nazis dropping atomic bombs on London and New York. As President Truman noted privately at the Potsdam Summit in July 1945, 'It is certainly a good thing for the world that Hitler's crowd or Stalin's did not discover this atomic bomb.'²¹²

The USSR, although an ally against the Germans following the collapse of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1941, was also deemed to be a post-war threat, lending further urgency to the Manhattan Project. Chief among the foreign experts heading up the research was Julius Robert Oppenheimer, a Jewish physicist investigating the formula at which uranium would reach the critical mass that led to a ferocious chain reaction. He calculated the critical mass of uranium-235 to make the atomic bomb effective, and together with his team of brilliant expat physicists developed the construction of graphite blocks embedded with uranium that formed the atomic bomb.²¹³

The first nuclear bomb in history was not dropped from the air but was detonated in the New Mexico desert on 16 July 1945. As an American scientific advisor to the government wrote:

in a remote section of the Alamogordo Air Base, New Mexico, the first full-scale test was made of the implosion type atomic fission bomb. For the first time in history there was an explosion. And what an explosion!²¹⁴

Following the death of Roosevelt in 1945, Harry S. Truman was sworn in as the US President. According to the Truman Library website, the favourite poem of the president was *Locksley Hall* by Tennyson, with its prognostications of celestial warfare.²¹⁵

Truman informed Churchill and Stalin of the momentous event in New Mexico at the Potsdam Summit which began on 17 July. Truman and his Secretary of State for War Henry Stimson were persuaded by US scientific advisors that dropping the atom bomb on significant Japanese targets would hasten the end of the war and save American lives. As Robert Griffith has argued, however, in a paragraph worth quoting at length, the decision to use atomic weapons raises ‘chilling moral questions’:

To what extent was the decision influenced by racial prejudice and by the institutionalised wartime depiction of the Japanese as evil and inhuman? Before using the bomb should the United States have demonstrated its terrible destructiveness – perhaps in Tokyo harbour, as some scientists suggested at the time – or at least have provided an explicit warning? Was the use of atomic bombs, weapons that in a blinding instant killed tens of thousands of men, women and children, immoral? Was the bombing any more immoral than the reliance on weapons that produced the millions of other deaths during World War 2, than the aerial assaults on London or Dresden, or than the awful firebombing of Tokyo? What is one to say of a weapon that not only kills, but through radiation and the resulting genetic damage, continues to kill long after the debris settles?²¹⁶

‘Even if the Japs are savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic,’ argued Truman:

we as the leader of the world, for the common welfare of humanity, cannot drop this terrible bomb on the old capital [Kyoto] or the new [Tokyo]. [The] target will be a purely military one and we will issue a warning statement asking the Japs to surrender and save lives.²¹⁷

Accusations of racism sometimes form too quickly on the lips and keypads of many left and liberal academics today, but it is not unreasonable to highlight the brutal behaviour that led to the stereotypes.²¹⁸ Truman would have been fully aware of the terrible atrocities committed by the Japanese against the Chinese during the later 1930s and the Second World War, while in the arenas of combat between Japan and the Allies, American and British prisoners of war were tortured, starved, kicked, doused in petrol and set on fire, beaten, or beheaded. Over 150 Australian soldiers were bayoneted to death after being tied to trees. And in one unconscionable episode, an American crew were dissected by Japanese doctors who extracted vital organs and performed invasive brain surgery while their victims were alive and conscious.²¹⁹

Truman was writing on 25 July. The Japanese government was issued with the Potsdam Declaration the following day, in which Britain, China and the US called for unconditional surrender from Japan. The Japanese government rejected the declaration. And while some Japanese politicians were softening their stance on surrender, fearful of the consequences, others were not so inclined. This culture of defiance persisted despite the fact that much of the Japanese economy was unable to function. The Soviet Union was by then fighting back Japanese forces in China, bringing further humiliation, but no declarations of surrender.²²⁰ Hence to hasten victory, the Americans decided to target the port cities of Hiroshima in Honshu, the largest of the Japanese islands, and Nagasaki, in the island of Kyushu. Both contained industry and military facilities, and were not associated with large numbers of prisoners of war.

On the early morning of 6 August 1945 a Boeing B-29 Superfortress infamously named 'Enola Gay' flew from the American Pacific Base on the island of Tinian toward the city of Hiroshima,

a large industrial, commercial and maritime centre with a population of 350,000 people. Piloted by Colonel Paul W. Tibbets, the B-29 was carrying *Little Boy*, a 9,000-pound uranium-235 device attached to a parachute. It detonated some 200 metres above the hypocentre marked by the domed Industrial Promotional Hall. Apart from a few steel-framed and reinforced concrete buildings almost everything within a two-kilometre radius of the hypocentre, including some 50,000 buildings and homes, was obliterated. Estimates vary, but at least 70,000 people died almost instantaneously, and at least 40,000 more subsequently perished from cancer and other terminal illnesses related to the radiation that seared through the city and its suburbs.²²¹

The death and destruction caused by *Little Boy* might have been the context for a Japanese surrender. Griffith points to the judgement of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey in 1946 that Japan was about to surrender even if no atomic bombs had been dropped. This has been a keystone of the anti-war position toward Hiroshima and Nagasaki ever since, and also of those who view the atomic bombings as a 'crime against humanity'. The philosopher A. C. Grayling, for example, also appears to accept uncritically the view that the Japanese were 'suing for peace' months before the atomic bombs were detonated.²²² As Robert Maddox argues, however, while the Japanese were certainly on the verge of defeat, the real problem was 'how long Japanese militarists were willing to go on fighting in hope of gaining a negotiated peace through Soviet intercession'. In that hiatus, many thousands of American lives could have been lost.²²³ The distinguished Japanese historian Mikiso Hane argues that the influential militarists and many right-wing nationalist politicians were prepared to fight not only to the death, but even to call for 'one hundred million' to commit the glorious sacrifice of death or suicide to defeat the enemy.²²⁴

In other words, Japanese leaders were prepared for the collective suicide of a nation. Hastings agrees, pointing out that many Japanese generals preferred death to humiliation, while the war party in the Japanese government remained intransigent to the last, even following the Nagasaki bombing.²²⁵ As a former President of the Japanese Medical Association stated bluntly but honestly:

When one considers the possibility that the Japanese military would have sacrificed the entire nation if it were not for the atomic bomb attack, then this bomb might be described as having saved Japan.²²⁶

That was a brave statement to make in the face of strong nationalist currents of opinion in Japan that refuse to this day to say sorry for the Japanese war record. A toxic combination of Japanese intransigence and American determination led to the devastation of Nagasaki just three days after the incineration of Hiroshima. Smaller than Hiroshima, Nagasaki was a maritime city with shipyards and a sizable naval presence. A B-29 Superfortress, *Bockscar*, piloted by Major General Charles W. Sweeney and Tibbets, flew from Tinian, detonating a 10,000-pound plutonium bomb nicknamed *Fat Man*. Within seconds the blast from the bomb killed over 30,000 people, causing injuries and suffering to many thousands more. Because Nagasaki was partly surrounded by a hinterland of ravines and hills the spread of the radiation blast was less extensive than Hiroshima, but the devastation was still considerable.²²⁷

Having steadfastly refused to surrender, the Japanese now did so. In his speech declaring the end of Japanese hostilities, Emperor Hirohito showed himself to be a master of understatement. He was also something of an existentialist, grasping the ter-

rible realities that came with total war and now atomic weaponry. The sacrifice of dignity would save not only Japanese lives, but the existence of humanity:

But now the war has lasted for nearly four years. Despite the best that has been done by everyone – the gallant fighting of the military and naval forces, the diligence and assiduity of Our servants of the State, and the devoted service of Our one hundred million people – *the war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan's advantage*, while the general trends of the world have all turned against her interest.

Moreover, the enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bomb, the power of which to do damage is, indeed, incalculable, taking the toll of many innocent lives. Should we continue to fight, not only would it result in an ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation, but also it would lead to the total extinction of human civilization.²²⁸

It is no exaggeration to argue that the blinding light of the atomic bombs put an end to what many Japanese refer to as *kurai tanima*, the 'dark valley' of the 1930s and the Second World War.²²⁹ Yet the bomb alone did not end the war. It was the most spectacular manifestation of the air campaign over Japan, operating in synthesis with the advances made by the American navy, and the USSR attack on Japanese forces in China in the summer of 1945.²³⁰

Yet the fallout from those blasts has reverberated throughout post-war history, polarising public and professional opinions, and creating a powerful pacifist sentiment in Japan which gained considerable sympathy worldwide. More than that, as Oppenheimer and many experts in the summer of 1945 realised, the history of the future had now changed irrevocably from what it had been

before the bomb detonated in the New Mexico desert. Atomic weaponry could not be un-invented, and the shadow of nuclear catastrophe became a background insecurity for everyone on the planet who was aware of the bomb as the Cold War evolved from the late 1940s.²³¹

The Effect on Civilians and the City

The environmental devastation to Hiroshima and Nagasaki has been widely depicted and described. Contemporary photographs and films by the United States Strategic Bombing Survey evidence an obliterated landscape, with only a few reinforced concrete buildings standing in ruins above the incinerated remains of the buildings and natural landscape. In Hiroshima, the skeletal frame of the dome of the Industrial Promotional Hall in the heart of the city marked the spot where the detonation of *Little Boy* occurred some metres above it. Like St Paul's Cathedral, it is crowned by a dome. Yet all around the charred trees, flattened shops, offices and houses, and the twisted tram lines, reflected the commonplace devastation wrought by aerial bombing and the accompanying firestorm.

Over 100,000 people had been killed instantly by the atomic bombs, a shocking statistic yet representing a lower death toll than the mortality rate caused by conventional air raids on Japan. The nature of the mass injuries and deaths at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was entirely new, however, creating 'injuries never before seen on mortal creatures':

the cavalry horse standing pink, stripped of its hide; people with clothing patterns imprinted upon their flesh; the lines of schoolgirls with ribbons of flesh dangling from

their faces; doomed survivors, hideously burned, without hope of effective medical relief; the host of charred and shrivelled corpses.²³²

Testimony from a survivor from Hiroshima vividly describes the impact on the bodies of civilians:

I was a 14-year old high school boy at the time of the atomic bombing. Students at that time were mobilized to tear down certain houses to make firebreaks in the city. I was 1.7 kilometres (1 mile) from ground zero on the morning of August 6, 1945, so I suffered many serious burns on my face and hands, which left large scars known as keloids. On the same day, my mother was killed by the bomb as were many of my friends and teachers. All these sorrows came to me all at once. I was suffering and ashamed of my keloid burns all the time, and I did not know how to make a living. I felt like shouting at the top of my voice in despair. But I could only murmur, 'If only the A-bomb had not been dropped!' I was completely overwhelmed with grief, which resulted in the autism from which I suffered for a long time after the war.²³³

My father has a special ID which is called *The Certification of Victims of the Atomic Bomb*. It guarantees he can receive free medical care until he dies.²³⁴

In the immediate aftermath of the bombing, survivors sought shelter as well as medical treatment and water to relieve their burns. Many were traumatised by the violent loss of loved ones, and the horribly disfigured human casualties dying in front of them. Hundreds of others trekked into the nearby countryside out of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, away from homes, streets and neighbourhoods that had been extinguished forever. Others kept walking as far as the next bomb-torn town. In the graphic novel series *Barefoot Gen*, among many testimonies of a survivor of

the atomic bombings, the terrible disruption and death wrought by the bomb is sketched in gory detail from the perspective of a young boy whose family home was obliterated by the blast.²³⁵

Those who survived the atomic bombings in August 1945 possess a uniquely Japanese noun to describe them: they are the *hibakusha*, or ‘bomb-affected people.’²³⁶ Beyond the survivors of the concentration camps of the Second World War, theirs are among the most harrowing accounts of how war disrupts, degrades and destroys lives. In his moving account of the *hibakusha*, Ham interviewed many whose lives had been changed for ever, yet who were enormously brave: a woman whose face and body bore terrible scars but who refused to accept a date with a man she did not like because she would not let her appearance affect her self-esteem; a young girl, whose body was burnt, infected, crawling with maggots, and unrecognisable to her father who picked her up from the hospital, yet who lived while her pretty friend who appeared to have been unblemished by the bomb died in terrible pain from radiation sickness a few days after the detonation. Age was no barrier to succumbing to terminal illness.²³⁷ Yet the stories of survival, of the endurance of pain and suffering, represent the fact that even the most appalling bombing did not ultimately break the will of the people on the ground.²³⁸ This lesson had not been learned by the Nazis who attacked London again in 1944–5, despite the Blitz of 1940–1, nor was it absorbed by the Allies whose ambition to bomb the German people into submission was mostly unfulfilled.

Towards the end of the 1940s the American psychologist Irving L. Janis argued in *Air War and Emotional Stress* that ‘chronic psychological disorders were rarely produced by heavy bombing

attacks'. He concluded that while enhanced levels of anxiety, apathy, depression, pessimism and stress were observed in the population under the bomb, these were temporary.²³⁹ Tom Harrisson of Mass Observation drew upon these conclusions as proof that even the worst episodes of heavy aerial bombardment, be they on British, German and Japanese cities, would not definitively destroy the resilience of their citizens.²⁴⁰

More than that, however, the sense of defeat felt in the immediate aftermath of the bomb was transformed into powerful sentiment of opposition to nuclear weaponry, a process of commemoration and memorialisation that, whilst unique to those Japanese civilians who overcame the atomic bombs, shared key similarities with memorialisation in other countries. The important historical legacy of the *hibakusha* is discussed further in chapter eight.

Verdict

A documentary film by the US War Department in 1946, sharing the title of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, emphasised the justifications for the attacks on the 'arsenal cities' of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The film was made for members of the American armed forces. That the bombs helped to shorten the war is a key theme, and the US War Department did not hold back when depicting the devastation to the two cities. It also drew upon the testimony of a Roman Catholic Priest to detail the death and injuries to the bodies of the Japanese.²⁴¹ Yet the American interpretation was not one of uncritical triumphalism, and the film ends by asking whether the future has to be one of destruction.

One of the pilots who dropped the bomb on Nagasaki, Charles Sweeney, returned to the city soon after the war. His feelings were

fairly straightforward, as far as this testimony allows, although more complex emotions may be hidden beneath his words:

‘I took no pride or pleasure then, nor do I take any now, in the brutality of war, whether suffered by my people or those of another nation,’ he wrote. ‘Every life is precious. But I felt no remorse or guilt that I had bombed the city where I stood.’

‘The true vessel of remorse and guilt belonged to the Japanese nation, which could and should call to account the warlords who so willingly offered up their own people to achieve their visions of greatness,’ he said.²⁴²

The American feature film *Above and Beyond* (1952) tells the story of Colonel Paul W. Tibbets, the B-29 pilot who was trained to release the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Tibbets was played by the American actor Robert Taylor, who had served in the US Naval Air Corps during the Second World War, and was better-known for his starring roles in Westerns. A key scene depicts *Enola Gay* banking as it turns away from the blinding flash below, and the realisation of Tibbets of the magnitude of his task, now completed.

In his autobiography, Tibbets recalls how he felt about flying over Hiroshima to drop the bomb. ‘In the buildings and on the streets there were people, of course’:

but from 6 miles up they were invisible. To the men who fly the bombers, targets are inanimate, consisting of buildings, bridges, docks, factories, railroad yards. The tragic consequences for humanity are erased from one’s thoughts in wartime because war itself is a human tragedy.²⁴³

Such sensitivities raise questions about simplistic views of warfare as the product of testosterone-driven machismo. In his play

Happy Birthday, Wanda June (1970), made into a film of the same name, Kurt Vonnegut introduces the fictional character of Colonel Loosleaf Harper, a pilot of the B-29 that bombed Nagasaki. Alongside the dark humour there are insights into war, connections with the macho hunter of wild animals, and hints of post-traumatic stress disorder. This is another trope about war in general and bombing in particular: it is an extension of competitive masculinity, a powerful sexual tendency to humiliate, dominate, destroy or control. As the writer Oliver Kamm argues, sometimes a lack of sophistication and negativity runs through Vonnegut's writings.²⁴⁴ Men were peacemakers too. And those who facilitated the development of the atom bomb held nuanced views of it. During the Falklands War, moreover, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was gung-ho for military intervention compared with some male Conservative politicians whose objections to war were viewed as a 'deficiency in the spirit of machismo.'²⁴⁵ Ultimately, the decision to drop the bomb was not taken lightly.

Paul Boyer argues that the atomic bomb became a powerful motif in post-war American culture. But any notion that the USA or the West in general was universally triumphant about the cataclysmic events in August 1945 is misleading.²⁴⁶ Many who visited the country soon after the war were aghast at what they witnessed. In 1946, the journalist Martin Halliwell wrote a report for *The Spectator* magazine entitled 'December in Hiroshima', which asked a series of significant questions about the dropping of the atom bomb that are still discussed today:

Would a bomb of such known destructive capacity, if ready say 6 months earlier, have been dropped without warning on a town in Europe? It is difficult to escape the feeling that the Japanese, by their remoteness from the

Western scene, have been regarded as teeming guinea-pigs for whom no particular pity need be felt. This is not of course a Christian conception.

Was a strategy worked out for the use of the atomic weapon, and who conceived the plan for dropping only two bombs, the second of which, at Nagasaki, was actually on a secondary target? It is again difficult to picture a responsible commander authorising the release of so novel an engine of destruction. Anywhere but on its primary target, or in the sea on the way home. (The Nagasaki bomb burst over the centre of the town and left the docks intact.)

Is there ultimately anything to choose between the Japanese massacre of 60,000 civilians in Manila, and the Allied massacre of 70,000 to 120,000 civilians in Hiroshima? The Japanese worked by hand, in cold blood, and were responsible for countless outrages against individuals, too horrible to describe; the Allies worked from the air, also in cold blood, and do not even care to know what suffering they caused.²⁴⁷

Halliwell was observing a landscape of devastation that would have moved most visitors to an emotional reaction. Less than eighteen months ago, Hiroshima had been a living noisy coastal city. Now its gutted terrain was slowly being repopulated and rebuilt, a haunted radioactive shadow of its former self. But his judgment was distorted. The comparison between Manila and Hiroshima was specious, given the wider geography of atrocities inflicted by Japan on its enemies. And there was certainly a lot 'to choose' between atomic bombing from a distance and the face-to-face slaughter of many millions of innocent civilians. The annihilation of Hiroshima was the product of what Hastings calls a total bomb for a total war.²⁴⁸ The architects of the bomb knew

that swift incineration of large numbers of people was inevitable, but preferable to the outcomes outlined above.

Conclusion

Cultural echoes of the Japanese military code still exist in contemporary Japan. In December 2016 during his visit to Pearl Harbor, the Japanese Prime Minister offered condolences but no apology for the attack in December 1941.²⁴⁹ This is partly because he was pressured to show no remorse by many Japanese conservatives who accepted expressions of honour to the war dead, but felt it shameful to demonstrate contrition for acts of murder committed in combat. That US President Barack Obama did not apologise for the atomic bombing when he visited Hiroshima, including the Peace Park, in 2016 also lent the American-Japanese interactions an air of tit-for-tat.²⁵⁰

The absence of an apology offends the *hibakusha*, and challenges the pacifist view that mass casualties from area bombings can only have negative consequences. The atomic bombing seared into the Japanese national consciousness, providing an enduring and catastrophic reminder of their martial stubbornness. The American 'occupation' of defeated Japan, moreover, from 1945 to 1952 has been viewed by a number of revisionist historians as an essential, if sometimes complex, phase in the democratisation and modernisation of the land of the rising sun.²⁵¹

In total, the Americans bombed 215 Japanese cities of varying size, killing over 330,000 people and destroying 2.3 million homes. Entire neighbourhoods were levelled to ashes while many cities had over half of their urban fabric swept away by fire and ruinous bombings.²⁵² The atomic bombings can be construed

figuratively as two almighty exclamation marks at the conclusion of the air raids that Japan endured before its ignominious defeat. National identity was profoundly wounded by the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.²⁵³ Across the urban lowlands of this mountainous and heavily forested country, furthermore, the immensity of the environmental destruction required extensive reconstruction. The next chapter focuses upon the three countries where bombing and its consequences was heaviest: Britain, Germany and Japan.