

## Remembrance, Reflection and Resistance

By David Krieger

We remember the horrors of the past so that we may learn from them and they will not be repeated in the future. If we ignore or distort the past and fail to learn from it, we are opening the door to repetition of history's horrors.

In August, we remember the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which took place on August 6 and 9, 1945, respectively. Both were illegal attacks on civilian populations, violating long-standing rules of customary international humanitarian law prohibiting the use of indiscriminate weapons (as between combatants and non-combatants) and weapons that cause unnecessary suffering.

In a just world, those who were responsible for these attacks, in violation of the laws of war, would have been held to account and punished accordingly. They were not. Rather, they were celebrated, as the atomic bombs themselves were celebrated, in the false belief that they brought World War II to an end.

The historical record is clear about these facts: First, at the time Hiroshima and Nagasaki were leveled, each with a single atomic bomb, Japan had been trying to surrender. Second, the US had broken the Japanese codes and knew that Japan had been trying to surrender. Third, prior to the use of the atomic bombs, the only term of surrender offered to Japan by the US was "unconditional surrender," a term that left the Emperor's fate in US hands. Fourth, the precipitating factor to Japan's actual surrender, as indicated by Japanese wartime cabinet records, was not the US atomic bombs, but the Soviet Union's entry into the war against them. Fifth, when Japan did surrender, after the atomic bombings, it did so contingent upon retaining the Emperor, and the US accepted this condition.

The US drew a self-serving causal link from the bombings, which was: we dropped the bombs and won the war. In doing so, we reinforced the US belief that it can violate international law at times and places of its choosing and that US leaders can attack civilians with impunity.

Following the victory in Europe, the Allied powers held the Nazi leaders to account at the Nuremberg Tribunals for crimes against peace, war crimes and crimes against humanity. The Charter creating the Nuremberg Tribunals was signed by the US on August 8, 1945, two days after it had dropped an atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima. One day after signing the Charter, the US would drop a second atomic bomb on the city of Nagasaki. Both atomic bombings were war crimes that, if they had been committed by Nazi leaders, most certainly would have been universally denounced and punished at Nuremberg.

Upon reflection, we must come to understand Hiroshima and Nagasaki as war crimes, if such crimes are not to be repeated. We must resist the double standard that makes crimes committed by our enemies punishable under international law, while the same crimes committed by our leaders are deemed to be acceptable. We must resist nuclear weapons themselves. They are city-destroying weapons whose possession should be considered *prima facie* evidence of criminal intent.

It has been two-thirds of a century since Hiroshima and Nagasaki were destroyed by atomic bombs. There remain over 20,000 nuclear weapons in the world. We must resist the tendency to normalize these weapons and consign them to the background of our lives. They reflect our technological skills turned to massively destructive ends and our failed responsibility to ourselves and to future generations.

Looking back at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, General Eisenhower said that the bombings were not necessary because Japan was already defeated; and Admiral William Leahy, Truman's chief of staff, compared us to barbarians of the Dark Ages and said that he was not taught to make war by destroying women and children. Einstein said that, looking forward, we must change our modes of thinking or face unparalleled catastrophe. Changing our modes of thinking begins with remembrance, reflection and resistance.

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