

# Japan and the Last Days of World War II

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On 3 Nov 2007, The Hindu carried a news item that Japanese survivors of the World's first nuclear attack on Hiroshima voiced regret that Colonel Paul Tibbets Jr, the pilot of the B-29 bomber that dropped the first atom bomb, died without saying sorry. Nori Tohei, who survived that bombing, told AFP, "He was following orders as a military man, but I wanted him to recognise it (the bombing) was a mistake and apologise to those who were killed or were long suffering side effects". The survivors observed that the US never formally apologised for the attacks.

It is the normal human tendency to look for external causes for one's misfortunes. It has been common to blame the US for a massive overkill for dropping the two atom bombs, causing misery to the Japanese people. The fallacy of this impression has been brilliantly exposed by Major General D K Palit, VrC (Retd) in his article "The Atom Bombs That Saved Millions of Lives" (USI Journal Oct-Dec 2006). General Charles Willoughby, Chief of Intelligence to the Supreme Commander of the Southwest Pacific Command estimated that "American forces alone would suffer one million men by the autumn of 1946. As part of the defence plan of the home islands, codenamed "Ketsu-Go", the Japanese had planned for a huge number of suicide attacks by aircraft and rocket-propelled bombs, similar to the German V-1, but flown by suicide pilots. As General Palit has brought out, 28 million Japanese had been formed into a National Volunteer Force, armed with all sorts of weapons from rifles, Molotov cocktails, long bows and bamboo spears. The author observes that had these atom bombs not been dropped and the invasion launched as scheduled, combat and civilian casualties in Japan would have been in millions. Far worse would have been the fate of Japan as a nation and as a culture. The blood bath would have been the worst in the history of warfare.

The news items of 3 Nov 2007 mentioned earlier cites "a horrific price of 1,40,000 dead immediately and 80,000 other Japanese succumbing in an aftermath". A similar number may have perished in Nagasaki. Although large, the total number pales in comparison with the millions of lives that would have been lost had the invasion taken place. One fact, which is often lost sight of is that at the time of surrender, Japan had 2 million men under arms in the homeland. Had the invasion gone through, a great proportion of them would have perished and in addition there would have been hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties by conventional bombing. It is a strange paradox that people who accepted the national war time slogan "One hundred million will die for the Emperor and the Nation", still continue to bemoan the loss of a few hundred thousand lives lost in the atom bombs. Even these could have been avoided had Japan accepted the Potsdam declaration of United States, Britain and China released on 26 July 1945. It is also a myth that dropping of the two atom bombs immediately led to surrender by Japan. It was after several more days of dithering, negotiations, crassness and sheer stubbornness to see the writing on the wall and a failed coup attempt, that Japan surrendered on 15 Aug 1945.

The predicament that Japan created for itself was the culmination of a series of diplomatic and strategic miscalculations. In the First World War, Japan had joined the Allied powers but had played only a minor role in fighting German colonial forces in East Asia. Western arrogance and racial discrimination towards the Japanese had plagued the Japanese-Western relations in the period between the two World Wars. The Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and the great depression of 1929, adversely affected Japan's economy. During the 1930s, the military established almost complete control over the government. Many political enemies were assassinated and communists persecuted. Indoctrination and censorship in education and media were intensified. Navy and army officers soon occupied most of the important offices, including that of the prime minister.

Japan's influence over Manchuria had been growing since the end of the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05. When the Chinese Nationalists raised the banner of revolt, the Kwantung Army (Japanese armed forces in Manchuria) retaliated by occupying Manchuria and setting up a puppet government. Japan followed the example of the Western nations and forced China into unequal economic and political treaties. Japan was heavily criticised for this and reacted by withdrawing from the League of Nations. In July 1937, the Second Sino-Japanese war broke out. The Japanese forces succeeded in occupying almost the whole coast of China and committed terrible atrocities on the Chinese population. The war continued on a reduced scale till the surrender of Japan on 15 Aug 1945. In 1940 Japan occupied French Indo-China (Vietnam) through an agreement with the French Vichy Government. The US and Britain retaliated with an oil boycott. The resulting oil shortage made Japan give the highest priority to capture the oil fields of Dutch East Indies (Indonesia). Japan had envisaged fighting a limited war, with a view to establishing a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" under Japanese hegemony. To achieve this, the Japanese strategy was to neutralise the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbour, before moving southward and eastward to occupy the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaya, Thailand, Burma and the various islands of South China Sea and the Solomon Sea. The coastal areas of China were already under Japanese control. The operational strategy of Japan to fight a limited war received a blow as the bombing of Pearl Harbour hardened the American resolve to fight a total war on its own terms. Japan lost the initiative. They had thought that the Allies would wear themselves out in fruitless frontal assaults against Japan's defensive perimeter and would settle for negotiated peace that would leave it in possession of most of its conquests. That did not happen. Allies began to seek means to strike back. Japan made a serious miscalculation in attacking Pearl Harbour. By mid-summer of 1945 most responsible leaders in Japan realised that the end was near.

Japan's leaders were divided, in the means to end the war. The "peace" camp, which favoured a diplomatic initiative to persuade Joseph Stalin to mediate a settlement between the Allies and Japan and the "hardliners" camp, which favoured fighting one last "decisive" battle to get the US to offer more lenient terms. Both

approaches, based on Japan's experience in the Russo- Japanese war, forty years earlier, were way off the mark. The peace settlement then, was mediated by President Teddy Roosevelt. This time they expected Stalin to play that role, but unknown to them as early as the Tehran conference in late 1943, Stalin had promised to enter the war against Japan and it was agreed at Yalta in February 1945 that USSR would do so three months after the defeat of Germany. Thus the diplomatic feeler to Stalin was doomed to failure and "One more decisive battle" remained elusive.

At the Potsdam Conference in July 1945, Stalin reaffirmed his agreement to attack Japan. Earlier in July 1944 General Tojo was replaced as Prime Minister by General Kuniaki Koiso, who believed that Philippines would be the site of the decisive battle and the Emperor expected that General Yamashita could defeat General Douglas Mac Arthur's invasion of Luzon. None of these hopes were borne out. The War Journal of the Imperial Headquarters recorded "We can no longer direct the war with any hope of success. The only course left is for Japan's one hundred million people to sacrifice their lives by charging the enemy to make them lose the will to fight". In February 1945 Prince Fumimaro submitted a memorandum to Emperor Hirohito about his analysis of the situation in which he stated plainly that if the war continued, the Imperial house might be in greater danger from our internal revolution than from defeat.

In April 1945, Admiral Kantaro Suzuki was chosen to replace General Koiso as the Prime Minister. The fundamental policy of the Suzuki Government was to fight on, and accept "honourable death of 100 million over surrender". At another level, despite Stalin's announcement that it would not renew its neutrality pact, Japan continued to make overtures to Soviet Union to at least maintain neutrality. On 9 June 1945, the Emperor's confidante, Marquis Koichi Kido, warned that by the end of the year Japan's ability to wage modern war would be extinguished and the Government would be unable to contain civil unrest. The Supreme Council, the Big Six, was a divided house. Togo supported Kido's proposal offering to end the war on "very generous terms". Admiral Suzuki and Admiral Yonai, the Navy Minister was cautiously supportive. General Anami, the Army Minister was ambivalent, still clinging to the dream of one more decisive gain. After the loss of Okinawa, Emperor Hirohito lost confidence in the ability of Japan to achieve a military victory. On 22 June the Emperor summoned the Big Six and told them that he desired that concrete plans be drafted to end the war. Overtures to the Soviet Union continued. Throughout July, efforts to win over Soviet Union continued. Allied cryptographers had broken most of Japan's codes, as a result the contents of messages between Naotake Sato, Japan's ambassador in Moscow and Foreign Minister Togo were known to Allied policy makers.

On 26 July 1945, the USA, Britain and China issued the Potsdam Declaration announcing the terms for Japan's surrender, with the clear warning " We will not deviate from them. There are no alternatives. We shall brook no delay". In view of subsequent controversy, here is the full declaration:-

- (1) The elimination "for all time [of] the authority and influence of those who have deceived and misled the people of Japan into embarking on world conquest".
- (2) The occupation of "points in Japanese territory to be designated by the Allies".
- (3) "Japanese sovereignty shall be limited to the islands of Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku and such minor islands as we determine." As had been announced in the Cairo Declaration in 1943, Japan was to be stripped of her pre-war empire, including Korea and Taiwan, as well as all her recent conquests.
- (4) "The Japanese military forces shall be completely disarmed"
- (5) "Stern justice shall be meted out to all war criminals, including those who have visited cruelties upon our prisoners".
- (6) "We do not intend that the Japanese shall be enslaved as a race or destroyed as a nation, ... The Japanese Government shall remove all obstacles to the revival and strengthening of democratic tendencies among the Japanese people. Freedom of speech, of religion, and of thought, as well as respect for the fundamental human rights shall be established."
- (7) "Japan shall be permitted to maintain such industries as will sustain her economy and permit the exaction of just reparations in kind, ... Japanese participation in world trade relations shall be permitted."
- (8) "The occupying forces of the Allies shall be withdrawn from Japan as soon as these objectives have been accomplished and there has been established in accordance with the freely expressed will of the Japanese people a peacefully inclined and responsible government.
- (9) "We call upon the government of Japan to proclaim now the unconditional surrender of all Japanese armed forces, and to provide proper and adequate assurances of their good faith in such action. The alternative for Japan is prompt and utter destruction.

It will be readily seen that "Unconditional Surrender", only applied to the last clause. Sunichi Kase, Japan's ambassador to Switzerland observed that unconditional surrender applied only to the military and not to the Government or the people and he pleaded that it should be understood that the careful language of Potsdam appeared "to have occasioned a great deal of thought" on the part of the signatory governments - "they seem to have taken pains to save face for us on various points". The four military members of the Big Six rejected it outright and the other two soon fell in line. On 28 July 1945 Japan rejected the Potsdam Declaration and in doing so, sealed the fate of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The ambivalence and dithering continued. On 30 July 1945, Ambassador Sato wrote from Moscow that "there is no alternative but immediate unconditional surrender if we are to prevent Russia's participation in the war. This advice, too, was ignored.

On the morning of 6 Aug 1945, confused reports reached Tokyo that the city of Hiroshima had been hit by an air raid that had levelled the city with a "blinding flash and violent blast". Later President Truman's broadcast confirmed that it had been an atom bomb and promising further action if the Potsdam ultimatum was not accepted. Two days passed before the government met to consider the changed situation.

At 0400 hrs on 9 Aug 1945, news reached Tokyo that the Soviet Union had launched an attack in Manchuria. The Japanese army leadership was not unduly perturbed, grossly underestimating the scale of attack. The Supreme Council met at 1030 hrs. Prime Minister Suzuki, who had just come following a meeting with the Emperor said, it was impossible to continue the war – yet the ambivalence continued. Togo proposed an additional clause to guarantee the Emperor’s position. During the meeting news arrived that Nagasaki had been hit by a second atom bomb. Yet the meeting ended with a 3-3 stalemate. Admiral Suzuki, Admiral Yonai and Togo favoured Togo’s stand while General Anami, General Umezu and Admiral Toyoda wanted three modifications to the Potsdam Declaration. Later that day the full cabinet met and likewise split. It is indeed amazing that this ambivalence continued even after two cities had been destroyed. However, the cabinet left it to the Emperor to choose between the two sides, who gave sanction to accept the Allied proclamation on the basis outlined by Foreign Minister Togo. The cabinet accepted the Emperor’s direction and conveyed it to the Allies, whose response was received on 12 Aug 1945. On the status of the Emperor it said, “From the moment of surrender the authority of the Emperor and the Japanese government to rule the state shall be subject to the Supreme Commander of the Allied powers.....The ultimate form of government of Japan shall, in accordance with the Potsdam Declaration, be established by the freely expressed will of the Japanese people”. At the following cabinet meeting Admiral Suzuki and General Anami stuck to their respective positions.

In a meeting with the Emperor, Admiral Yonai spoke of his concerns about growing civil interest. He said “The atom bombs and the Soviet entry into the war are, in a sense divine gifts. This way we don’t have to say that we have quit the war because of domestic circumstance”. Late on the night of 12 Aug 1945 a minor drama took place. Major Hatanaka along with Lieutenant Colonels Ida, Takeshita, Masao and Colonel Arao began plans to pull off a coup and continue the war.

On 13 Aug 1945, the Big Six and the cabinet were still deadlocked. next day, the B-29's dropped leaflets describing the Japanese position and Allied response. The Emperor requested his military leaders to cooperate with him in ending the war. He asked them to, at once, prepare an imperial rescript for his broadcast to the nation.

Meanwhile Hatanaka spent much of 13 and 14 Aug, gathering support and at 2130 hrs by sheer bluff and bravado, he and the rebels occupied the Palace. Hatanka killed Lieutenant General Takeshi Mori, Commander of the 1st Imperial Guards Division, for opposing him. Lieutenant Colonel Shiraishi, staff officer of the 2nd General Army, was also killed. The rebels spent most of the night searching for the surrender speech, which they could not find. During the night they captured 18 people, including Ministry staff and Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK) (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) workers sent to record the surrender speech. By 0800 hrs on the morning of 15 Aug 1945, the rebellion fizzled out.

At the same time on the night of Aug 14/15, the final and largest bombing raid of the Pacific war was launched. Eight hundred bombers and two hundred fighter planes dropped over 6000 tons of explosives and incendiary weapons on eight Japanese cities inflicting significant damage to them.

At 1200 hrs on 15 Aug 1945 the Emperor’s Broadcast of surrender took place. An hour earlier, Major Hatanka had shot himself.

Japan’s forces were still at war against the Soviet and Chinese, so managing their surrender was difficult and took time. The Soviet forces continued to fight till early September and took the Kuril Islands. On 28 Aug 1945, the occupation of Japan began under the direction of General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers. The formal surrender took place on 2 Sep 1945, aboard the USS Missouri.

There is no doubt that the two atom bombs hastened the end of the war. If the Japanese were prepared to sacrifice one hundred million lives, that was entirely their business. The pragmatic Americans saw no reason to sacrifice one million military men if the same result could be achieved without a single casualty. I leave it to the reader to judge who should apologise for the loss of lives in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXXXVIII, No. 572, April-June 2008.