

## 6.11 WHY DID THE ALLIES DROP THE ATOM BOMB?

### EMPATHY

On 6 August 1945 a US plane dropped the first atomic bomb on the city of **Hiroshima**. It killed more than 70,000 people in a flash, and about as many died a lingering death later. Three days afterwards a second A-bomb killed another 40,000 people in **Nagasaki**.

It had taken three years to make these bombs. Scientists and engineers and more than 30,000 other people in factories and laboratories all over the USA had spent most of the war on **Operation Manhattan** – the code-name for the bomb project. Why did the Allies work so hard to make such dreadful weapons? And when they were ready, why did they drop them on cities, killing so many ordinary Japanese civilians?

The answer to the first question is straightforward: Germany was known to be making nuclear weapons too. Before the war there was nothing secret about nuclear physics, and scientists in all countries could see from discoveries made in 1938–9 that a nuclear bomb might be possible. Hitler often boasted of his 'secret weapons' that were to win the war for Germany, and the Allies knew from their spies that the Germans were working on a nuclear bomb. They were determined to make it themselves first.

### Why drop the bomb?

The second question is more difficult. Three months before the bomb was ready, Germany surrendered. The USSR promised to join in the attack on Japan which was bound to come soon. Japan would not stand a chance. Then, on 12 July 1945, nearly a month before the first atomic bomb was dropped, the Japanese asked for peace talks. So why drop the bomb at all? To answer this question you need to look at it from the point of view of people involved in the decision at the time (Sources A to F).

### SOURCE A

'Any weapon that would bring an end to the war and save a million casualties among American boys was justified, and we were talking about people who hadn't hesitated at Pearl Harbor to make a sneak attack destroying not only ships but the lives of many American sailors . . . I would have been satisfied had the Russians determined not to enter the war against Japan. I believed the A-bomb would be successful and would force the Japanese to accept surrender on our terms. I feared what would happen when the Red Army entered Manchuria.'

*James Byrnes, US Secretary of State in 1945.*

### SOURCE B

'The decision whether or not to use the atomic bomb to compel the surrender of Japan was never even an issue. There was a unanimous, automatic, unquestioned agreement (on the use of the bomb) around our table; nor did I hear the slightest suggestion that we should do otherwise.'

*Winston Churchill, describing the meeting of Allied leaders at Potsdam, 18 July 1945.*

### Count-down to surrender, 1945

12 July	Japan asks for peace talks.
17 July	Test bomb. It works.
17–26 July	Allied leaders meet at Potsdam. They decide: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• USSR to declare war on Japan in August,</li> <li>• Japan must surrender completely or be destroyed.</li> </ul>
28 July	Japan refuses to surrender.
2 August	Japan asks again for talks.
6 August	Hiroshima bomb.
7 August	Japanese army opposes surrender.
8 August	USSR declares war on Japan.
9 August	Nagasaki bomb.
14 August	Emperor of Japan orders surrender.

### Two other air raids

Tokyo	14 March 1945	197,000 killed and missing
Dresden	13–14 February 1945	120,000 killed and missing