

## The Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima and its Impact on the Timing of the Soviet Union's Declaration of War on Japan and its Invasion of Manchuria

By August 1945 Japan's war position had grown increasingly desperate. In June 1945 the U.S. had completed its conquest of Okinawa and it was clear that the next American landing would be on one of Japan's main islands. The naval blockade, consisting of submarines, aircraft and mines, had virtually eliminated Japan's naval commerce. Japan had started the war with the U.S. to gain access to oil in Southeast Asia, but now it was cut off from any oil supplies, and even food was starting to become critically short. Since March 1945, the U.S. had been firebombing Japanese cities and most of them had suffered extensive damage. Japan's once mighty fleet had been virtually eliminated and U.S. and British warships were bombarding targets on the main Japanese island, Honshu. Yet Japan would still not surrender.

Then a series of rapid events forced Japan's surrender.<sup>2</sup> On the morning of August 6, Hiroshima was heavily damaged by an atomic bomb. In the early morning of August 9, Japan learned from radio Moscow that the Soviet Union had declared war on Japan. The Soviet invasion of Manchuria was already underway. Near midday on August 9, Nagasaki was hit by the second atomic bomb. On August 10 (Japan time) Japan radioed that it would surrender with the proviso that Japan could retain its emperor. By August 12 (Japan time) the U.S. stated that this proviso was acceptable so long as "the authority of the Emperor and the Japanese Government to rule the state shall be subject to the Supreme Commander of the Allied powers."<sup>3</sup> On August 14 Japan accepted this term and despite the threat of a coup, on August 15 the emperor made a radio broadcast to Japan stating that the war was over.

While this sequence of events is not in question, there remains to this day considerable dispute over the relative contribution of the atomic bombings versus the Soviet declaration of war and the invasion of Manchuria to the Japanese surrender. Some believe that the atomic bombings were the main impetus for the Japanese surrender. Others totally discount the impact of the atomic bombings and claim that it was solely the Soviet declaration of war that led to the surrender.<sup>4</sup>

What is missing from most of these discussions is the recognition that the atomic bombing of Hiroshima accelerated the Soviet declaration of war by approximately two weeks and perhaps even more. Therefore, even if it was only the Soviet declaration of war that led to the Japanese surrender, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima significantly shortened the war. Further, this

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is the product of the author's personal research and the analysis and views contained in it are solely his responsibility. Though the author is also a part-time adjunct staff member at the RAND Corporation, this paper is not related to any RAND project and therefore RAND should not be mentioned in relation to this paper. I can be reached at [GregJones@proliferationmatters.com](mailto:GregJones@proliferationmatters.com)

<sup>2</sup> Robert J. C. Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender*, Stanford University Press, 1954.

<sup>3</sup> The Supreme Commander, unsurprisingly, turned out to be General Douglas MacArthur.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Gar Alperovitz and Martin J. Sherwin, "We didn't need to start the nuclear age," *Los Angeles Times*, August 5, 2020, p. A11.

episode reflects some serious deficiencies in Soviet intelligence, which is sometimes portrayed as virtually all-knowing.

### **The Timing of the Soviet Invasion of Manchuria**

The Soviets launched an attack on Japanese forces in Manchuria just after midnight (local time) on August 9, 1945. In most accounts the timing of this attack is attributed to a Soviet pledge to declare war on Japan three months after the end of the war in Europe. Since the Soviets considered the war in Europe to have ended on May 9, the attack on August 9 has been viewed by many as simply a precise fulfillment of this pledge.<sup>5</sup> However, the reality is more complicated.

The Yalta conference took place from February 4 through February 11, 1945. As a result of the conference, it was agreed that the Soviets would enter the war on the side of the Allies two to three months after Germany had surrendered.<sup>6</sup> However, this agreement was conditional: “The former rights of the Soviet Union violated by the treacherous attack of Japan in 1904 shall be restored.” These rights included the return of the southern part of Sakhalin Island. In addition, the Kurile Islands were to be handed over to the Soviet Union. Further, the Soviet Union would be granted access to ports in Manchuria by the internationalization of the port of Dairen and the Soviets would be permitted to lease Port Arthur as a naval base. In addition, there was to be joint Chinese-Soviet operation of some railroads in Manchuria. The Chinese were to retain sovereignty of Manchuria. The conditions regarding the ports and railroads would “require the concurrence of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek.”<sup>7</sup> The Generalissimo, who was head of the Nationalist Chinese government, was not at the Yalta conference.

David Glantz has written a detailed account of the Soviet August 1945 offensive in Manchuria.<sup>8</sup> The Soviets began planning for the Manchurian campaign in March 1945, not long after the Yalta conference. By April 1945 the Soviets were sending equipment to the Far East to re-equip units already there. In June and July the Soviets directed the large-scale movement of men and materiel to the East. By July 25 the Soviet forces were in position and there was only the need to set the date for the attack.<sup>9</sup>

On July 17, at the beginning of the Potsdam conference, Stalin told President Truman that Soviet forces would be deployed by the middle of August but the Soviets wanted to have an agreement with the Chinese before ordering an attack.<sup>10</sup> Important differences remained with the Chinese on the issues of the Manchurian ports and railroads, with the Chinese saying that the Soviets were making demands beyond what had been promised at Yalta.<sup>11</sup> On the afternoon of July 24, there was a tripartite military meeting at Potsdam. At this meeting Soviet general Alexei

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<sup>5</sup> The Western Allies consider the war in Europe to have ended on May 8.

<sup>6</sup> *The Avalon Project*, Yale School of Law, “The Yalta Conference,” <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/yalta.asp>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> LTC David M. Glantz, “August Storm: The Soviet 1945 Strategic Offensive in Manchuria,” Leavenworth Papers, Combat Studies Institute, February 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Richard G. Hewlett and Oscar E. Anderson, *The New World: A History of the United States Atomic Energy Commission*, Volume 1 1939/1946, WASH 1214, U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, 1962, p. 385.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 391.

Antonov said that the attack date had slipped to the last half of August.<sup>12</sup> Again, this was conditioned on first reaching an agreement with China. On July 29, Soviet foreign minister Molotov reiterated to President Truman, that any Soviet attack on Japan depended upon first reaching an agreement with China.<sup>13</sup>

Glantz cites a Soviet military source saying that the original attack date was between August 20 and August 25.<sup>14</sup> Given the importance the Soviets placed on first achieving an agreement with China, the attack might well have been delayed past the end of August, though eventually the threat of the Siberian winter would likely have led the Soviets to attack even without an agreement with China.

Then suddenly, late on August 7, Stalin ordered the attack to begin just after midnight on August 9 (local Manchurian time), little more than 24 hours later. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima had apparently changed Stalin's priorities. He was likely concerned that the war might end before the Soviet Union could enter it. If that were the case, then the concessions promised to the Soviet Union at the Yalta conference might no longer apply. Consequently, achieving a deal with China was no longer a high priority and the attack started without one. Stalin's determination to acquire the promised territorial gains is illustrated by the Soviet invasion of the Kurile Islands on August 18, when Japan had already surrendered. This operation continued until September 1.

Therefore, as a result of the atomic bombing, the Soviet declaration of war and the attack into Manchuria was accelerated by roughly two weeks, if not more. Even if one believes that the Soviet declaration of war was the main factor in bringing about Japan's surrender, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima significantly shortened the war. Further, this episode should cast some doubt on this view that the Soviet declaration of war was solely responsible for the Japanese surrender. Apparently, Stalin believed that there was a significant chance that the atomic bombing alone could quickly end the war. Regardless, one way or the other, the atomic bombing did bring a swift end to the war.

### **Soviet Intelligence and the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima**

On July 24, 1945, at the Potsdam conference, President Truman approached Stalin to tell him about the U.S. development of the atomic bomb. However, Truman did so only rather obliquely, telling him that the U.S. had a new weapon of unusual destructive force.<sup>15</sup> Stalin showed no special interest, saying only that he hoped it would be put to good use against the Japanese. At the time, U.S. officials were surprised that Stalin did not ask any questions and doubted that Stalin had understood what he was being told. Many years later, when Soviet sources became available, it became clear that due to Soviet intelligence, Stalin already knew about the U.S.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 393.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 397.

<sup>14</sup> LTC David M. Glantz, "August Storm: The Soviet 1945 Strategic Offensive in Manchuria," Leavenworth Papers, Combat Studies Institute, February 1983, p. 212.

<sup>15</sup> Richard G. Hewlett and Oscar E. Anderson, *The New World: A History of the United States Atomic Energy Commission*, Volume 1 1939/1946, WASH 1214, U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, 1962, p. 394.

atomic program.<sup>16</sup> Stalin's reaction was to order the acceleration of the Soviet nuclear weapon program. Later Soviet intelligence would provide design details about the Nagasaki nuclear weapon. These events create the impression that Soviet intelligence was almost all-knowing.

However, it is difficult to square this impression with Stalin's surprise about the timing of the Hiroshima atomic bombing. It seems that Stalin may not have even known the weapon had been successfully tested on July 16 in New Mexico. Soviet intelligence apparently had no insight into the operational use of the weapon. The Soviets did not know that weapon components had been shipped to Tinian and that the 509<sup>th</sup> bomb group was waiting there to receive and use them. The Soviets certainly did not expect that the weapon would be used so quickly. Indeed, the weapon could have been used as early as August 1. It was only bad weather that delayed its use. Soviet intelligence regarding U.S. plans for the use of the atomic bomb evidently had some significant limitations.

## Conclusions

At the beginning of August 1945, the Soviet army was in position to attack the Japanese in Manchuria. However, Stalin was in no hurry to commence the attack until he had wrung concessions out of the Chinese over access to ports and railroads in Manchuria. It was not expected that the attack would occur until sometime in the third or fourth week in August. Indeed, if the Chinese continued to be recalcitrant, the attack might have been delayed even longer.

Soviet plans for the invasion of Manchuria changed significantly when the atomic bomb was used against Hiroshima on August 6. Stalin was likely concerned that the war might end before the Soviet Union had entered the war and obtained the concessions it had been granted at the Yalta conference. He abruptly ordered the attack to start just after midnight on August 9. As a result, the Hiroshima bombing accelerated the Soviet attack by about two weeks, if not more. Therefore, regardless of one's view of the relative importance of the Hiroshima bombing versus the Soviet attack in Manchuria in causing the Japanese surrender, the Hiroshima bombing brought about a swift end to the war.

Stalin was clearly surprised by the timing of the bombing of Hiroshima. Soviet intelligence might have been good in other areas, but the Soviets apparently had no insight into the operational use of the atomic bomb.

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<sup>16</sup> David Holloway, *Stalin & the Bomb: the Soviet Union and Atomic Energy, 1939-1956*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1994, p. 117.