

Two Historical Narratives

Name _____

Document A: Textbook

Source: Excerpts from "Three Narratives of our Humanity" by John W. Dower, 1996. The following is from a book written by a historian about how people remember wars. John W. Dower explains the two different ways that the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki is remembered.

Hiroshima as Victimization

Japanese still recall the war experience primarily in terms of their own victimization. For them, World War II calls to mind the deaths of family and acquaintances on distant battlefields, and, more vividly, the prolonged, systematic bombings of their cities.

If it is argued that the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima was necessary to shock the Japanese to surrender, how does one justify the hasty bombing of Nagasaki only three days later, before the Japanese had time to investigate Hiroshima and formulate a response?

Hiroshima as Triumph

To most Americans, Hiroshima—the shattered, atomized, irradiated city – remains largely a symbol of triumph – marking the end of a horrendous global conflict and the effective demonstration of a weapon that has prevented another world war.

It is hard to imagine that the Japanese would have surrendered without the atomic bomb. Japanese battle plans that were in place when the bombs were dropped called for a massive, suicidal defense of these islands, in which the imperial government would mobilize not only several million fighting men but also millions of ordinary citizens who had been trained and indoctrinated to resist to the end with primitive makeshift weapons. For Japanese to even discuss capitulation (surrender) was seditious (against the law).

Guiding Questions

- 1. In 1-2 sentences each, explain the two narratives (stories) about Hiroshima.
2. Which narrative do you agree with more? Why?

Even before the bomb was tested, American officials began to debate how to use it. Admiral William Leahy, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, opposed using the bomb because it killed civilians indiscriminately. He believed that an economic blockade and conventional bombing would convince Japan to surrender.

Secretary of War Henry Stimson wanted to warn the Japanese about the bomb while at the same time telling them that they could keep the emperor if they surrendered. Secretary of State James Byrnes, however, wanted to drop the bomb without any warning to shock Japan into surrendering.

President Truman later wrote that he "regarded the bomb as a military weapon and never had any doubts that it should be used." His advisers had warned him to expect massive casualties if the United States invaded Japan. Truman believed it was his duty as president to use every weapon available to save American lives.

Source: American History Textbook, American Vision, pg. 615.

Document B: Thank God for the Atomic Bomb

My division, like most of the ones transferred from Europe was going to take part in the invasion at Honshu (an island of Japan). The people who preferred invasion to A-bombing seemed to have no intention of proceeding to the Japanese front themselves. I have already noted what a few more days would mean to the luckless troops and sailors on the spot.... On Okinawa, only a few weeks before Hiroshima, 123,000 Japanese and Americans killed each other. War is immoral. War is cruel.

Source: Paul Fussell, a World War II Soldier, Thank God for the Atom Bomb, 1990.

Document C: Stopping Russia

"[Byrnes] was concerned about Russia's postwar behavior. Russian troops had moved into Hungary and Romania, and Byrnes thought it would be very difficult to persuade Russia to withdraw her troops from these countries, that Russia might be more manageable if impressed by American military might, and that a demonstration of the bomb might impress Russia."

Source: James Byrnes was one of Truman's advisors on the atomic bomb. In addition to defeating Japan, he wanted to keep the Soviet Union from expanding its influence in Asia and to limit its influence in Europe. Manhattan Project scientist Leo Szilard met with Byrnes on May 28, 1945. Leo Szilard wrote about his meeting with Byrnes in 1980.

Document D: Survivor

One of my classmates, I think his name is Fujimoto, he muttered something and pointed outside the window, saying, "A B-29 is coming." He pointed outside with his finger. So I began to get up from my chair and asked him, "Where is it?" Looking in the direction that he was pointing towards, I got up on my feet, but I was not yet in an upright position when it happened. All I can remember was a pale lightening flash for two or three seconds. Then, I collapsed. I don't know much time passed before I came to. It was awful, awful. The smoke was coming in from somewhere above the debris. Sandy dust was flying around. . .

I crawled over the debris, trying to find someone who were still alive. Then, I found one of my classmates lying alive. I held him up in my arms. It is hard to tell, his skull was cracked open, his flesh was dangling out from his head. He had only one eye left, and it was looking right at me. . . he told me to go away.

I, so, was running, hands were trying to grab my ankles, they were asking me to take them along. I was only a child then. And I was horrified at so many hands trying to grab me. I was in pain, too. So all I could do was to get rid of them, it's terrible to say, but I kicked their hands away. I still feel bad about that. I went to Miyuki Bridge to get some water. At the river bank, I saw so many people collapsed there. . . I was small, so I pushed on the river along the small steps. The water was dead people. I had to push the bodies aside to drink the muddy water. We didn't know anything about radioactivity that time. I stood up in the water and so many bodies were floating away along the stream.

Source: Yoshitaka Kawamoto was thirteen years old. He was in the classroom at Zakoba-cho, 0.8 kilometers away from the hypocenter. He is now working as the director of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, telling visitors from all over the world what the atomic bomb did to the people of Hiroshima.

Document E: Hiroshima and Nagasaki Casualties

TABLE A: Estimates of Casualties

Table with 3 columns: Category, Hiroshima, Nagasaki. Rows include Pre-raid population, Dead, Injured, and Total Casualties.

TABLE B: Cause of Immediate Deaths

Table with 2 columns: Cause of Death, Percent of Total. Rows include Burns, Falling debris, and Other for Hiroshima.

Table with 2 columns: Cause of Death, Percent of Total. Rows include Burns, Falling debris, Flying glass, and Other for Nagasaki.