

The Bomb Didn't Beat Japan ... Stalin Did

Have 70 years of nuclear policy been based on a lie?

By Ward Wilson May 30, 2013

This excerpt is from a longer article. At this point, Wilson has already established that Japan had already been severely bombed for months, with some attacks much worse than Hiroshima in many regards.

The Japanese were in a relatively difficult strategic situation. They were nearing the end of a war they were losing. Conditions were bad. The Army, however, was still strong and well-supplied. Nearly 4 million men were under arms and 1.2 million of those were guarding Japan's home islands.

Even the most hard-line leaders in Japan's government knew that the war could not go on. The question was not whether to continue, but how to bring the war to a close under the best terms possible. The Allies (the United States, Great Britain, and others — the Soviet Union, remember, was still neutral) were demanding "unconditional surrender." Japan's leaders hoped that they might be able to figure out a way to avoid war crimes trials, keep their form of government, and keep some of the territories they'd conquered: Korea, Vietnam, Burma, parts of Malaysia and Indonesia, a large portion of eastern China, and numerous islands in the Pacific.

They had two plans for getting better surrender terms; they had, in other words, two strategic options. The first was diplomatic. Japan had signed a five-year neutrality pact with the Soviets in April of 1941, which would expire in 1946. A group consisting mostly of civilian leaders hoped that Stalin might be convinced to mediate a settlement between the United States and its allies on the one hand, and Japan on the other. Even though this plan was a long shot, it reflected sound strategic thinking. After all, it would be in the Soviet Union's interest to make sure that the terms of the settlement were not too favorable to the United States: any increase in U.S. influence and power in Asia would mean a decrease in Russian power and influence.

The second plan was military, and most of its proponents were military men. They hoped to use Imperial Army ground troops to inflict high casualties on U.S. forces when they invaded. If they succeeded, they felt, they might be able to get the United States to offer better terms. This strategy was also a long shot. The United States seemed deeply committed to unconditional surrender. But since there was, in fact, concern in U.S. military circles that the casualties in an invasion would be prohibitive, the Japanese high command's strategy was not entirely off the mark.

One way to gauge whether it was the bombing of Hiroshima or the invasion and declaration of war by the Soviet Union that caused Japan's surrender is to compare the way in which these two events affected the strategic situation. After Hiroshima was bombed on Aug. 6, both options were still alive. It would still have been possible to ask Stalin to mediate. It would also still have been possible to try to fight one last decisive battle and inflict heavy casualties. The destruction of Hiroshima had done nothing to reduce the preparedness of the troops dug in on the beaches of Japan's home islands. There was now one fewer city behind them, but they were still dug in, they still had ammunition, and their military strength had not been diminished in any important way. Bombing Hiroshima did not foreclose either of Japan's strategic options.

The impact of the Soviet declaration of war and invasion of Manchuria and Sakhalin Island was quite different, however. Once the Soviet Union had declared war, Stalin could no longer act as a mediator. So the diplomatic option was wiped out by the Soviet move. The effect on the military situation was equally dramatic. Most of Japan's best troops had been shifted to the southern part of the home islands. Japan's military had correctly guessed that the likely first target of an American invasion would be the southernmost island of Kyushu. The once proud Kwangtung army in Manchuria, for example, was a shell of its former self because its best units had been shifted away to defend Japan itself. When the Russians invaded Manchuria, they sliced through what had once been an elite army and many Russian units only stopped when they ran out of gas. The Soviet 16th Army — 100,000 strong — launched an invasion of the southern half of Sakhalin Island. Their orders were to mop up Japanese resistance there, and then — within 10 to 14 days — be prepared to invade Hokkaido, the northernmost of Japan's home islands. The Japanese force tasked with defending Hokkaido, the 5th Area Army, was under strength at two divisions and two brigades, and was in fortified positions on the east side of the island. The Soviet plan of attack called for an invasion of Hokkaido from the west.

It didn't take a military genius to see that, while it might be possible to fight a decisive battle against one great power invading from one direction, it would not be possible to fight off two great powers attacking from two different directions. The Soviet invasion invalidated the military's decisive battle strategy, just as it invalidated the diplomatic strategy. At a single stroke, all of Japan's options evaporated. The Soviet invasion was strategically decisive — it foreclosed both of Japan's options — while the bombing of Hiroshima (which foreclosed neither) was not.