

WEBINAR SUMMARY:

Did the Atomic Bombs end World War II?

Talk by Professor Richard Overy, moderated by Ken Endo

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Professor Richard Overy's Talk:

I'd like to start off by thanking the Daiwa Foundation very much for inviting me to present the results of my research and the book on Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I want to start off by saying that one of the purposes of this talk is really to put the atomic bombs in context. Still, even today, the assumption always is that the two atomic bombs were sufficient to force Japan's surrender. In fact, I read a book just very recently on the Pacific War, in which the conclusion said exactly that: two atomic bombs were dropped and Japan surrendered.

Now, this is the 80th anniversary not only of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but also the 80th anniversary of Tokyo, where more than 83,000 people died after three hours of intensive incendiary bombing. Now, these three raids, Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, resulted in the deaths of more than 300,000 Japanese civilians, a quite extraordinary figure from just three hours of conventional bombing and two nuclear strikes. This is why these attacks are still worth talking about and discussing 80 years later.

One of the things I want to do first is to look at what happened before the two atomic attacks, and in particular the incendiary campaign launched by the United States Air Force against Japan's cities from early 1945 onwards. The most damaging part of that campaign began with the attack on Tokyo on the night of 9–10 March, when 16 square miles of the capital were burned down and, as I said, 83,000 people were killed. The bombing of Japanese cities went on over the course of the whole summer. The very last raid occurred after the emperor had finally made the decision to accept capitulation in August. The result of the incendiary attacks was the destruction of 60% of Japan's urban area. Again, if you think about that statistic, it's an extraordinary statistic. Imagine 60% of the urban area of some other developed industrial power being completely destroyed.

What were the social and economic consequences of this campaign? Well, the economic consequences were much more muted than the American Air Force had hoped. The American Air Force wanted to demonstrate that they could end the war on their own, that they would undermine Japan's war economy and destroy Japan's capacity to make war. In fact, that had already been done by the United States Navy, with its extensive blockade,

cutting Japan off from overseas supplies of foodstuffs, which was essential, and overseas supplies of many key war materials. The Japanese war economy was running out of material even before the bombing started. What the bombing did, though, was to create widespread social disruption. As a result of the raid on Tokyo, 10 million people left Japan's cities and went to the countryside. That prompted all kinds of problems. It was difficult to track down the workforce and keep the workforce together. More importantly, it was very difficult to feed them because the rationing system relied on people being in their neighbourhood community. When they went to the countryside, there was no guarantee that they would be able to find food. Many of the village peasantry resented the intrusion of the urban population and very unwillingly agreed to share their produce.

By June, July there were widespread signs of popular protests, graffiti being written on walls, and the secret police were hearing all kinds of complaints from people. There was no open protest because open protest would have been very brutally suppressed, as it was throughout the 1930s and 1940s. However, there was an evident sense that the Japanese population could not sustain the hardships of war for very much longer. What worried the Japanese elite, both military and civil, was the possibility of widespread social unrest, even perhaps the possibility of communism, about which Japan's conservative elite were obsessed. The idea that communists still existed in Japan, hidden away in various parts of the community, fueled that fear that perhaps the Japanese war effort would actually end up like the Russian war effort and the German war effort in 1917 and 1918. That's the last thing that Japan's elite wanted.

By June, it was already evident that Japan could only continue its war effort for a very short period of time. But perhaps more importantly, even before the bombing started with the raid on Tokyo, there were elements in the military and civilian elite that were looking for ways of terminating the war. This included the Emperor, who from late 1944, but certainly from the time of the Tokyo raid, encouraged his immediate entourage to try to find ways of terminating the war. He didn't want the burden of war to be imposed on his own people any longer. As the bombing went on across the summer of 1945, the Emperor became more and more anxious about what effect this was having on his people, not just because he feared political unrest, but I think because he genuinely realised the bombing would produce enormous human suffering.

By June, July, at the point, in fact, when the Allies had decided they would present Japan with a final ultimatum, the so-called Potsdam Declaration from the Potsdam Conference in late July, it was already evident that Japan's war effort was finite and already evident that from the Emperor downwards, there was a growing desire to find a way to terminate the war. The difficulty was the Japanese army. The Japanese army did not want to terminate the war on Allied terms. They thought it was more honourable for Japan if Japan went down fighting a final battle for the homeland. I think some army generals assumed that they might win that battle. I think quite a few army generals realised it was unlikely. But nonetheless, unlikely or not, a final suicidal battle was regarded as more honourable than capitulation. Now that made it very difficult for the emperor, who couldn't in fact take the decision to end the war on his own. The way they decided was to try to get the Soviet Union to intervene. Japan was not at war with the Soviet Union, and there was a growing sense that perhaps the Soviet Union could

intercede with the other allies, and they would find some way of reaching an agreed termination of the war, even with major concessions, but nonetheless using the Soviet Union for diplomacy.

Now that, as we know, of course, was a really foolish decision. The Soviet Union had already committed itself to war with Japan six months after the end of the war with Germany. Stalin moved huge quantities of equipment and troops to the Far East and was getting ready for the invasion of Manchuria at some point in August. So Stalin strung the Japanese leadership along, saying he couldn't reach a decision yet because he was at the Potsdam Conference and so on. That resulted in a curious hiatus. The Japanese had to wait until the Soviet Union responded. While they were waiting, the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima.

Now, we might ask the question, why the atomic bomb? The atomic bomb appeared actually in August 1945, actually more by chance, in fact, than design. There was no plan to produce a bomb by August. Throughout 1943 and 1944, the military and scientific teams preparing the bombs worked frantically to see if they could produce a bomb before the end of the war. There was no certainty that would happen. Germany would have surrendered beforehand. The initial target was going to be Germany. But throughout 1944, engineering the atomic bombs proved extremely difficult. Scientists worked 18 hours a day. They were also equally frantic under Oppenheimer's leadership to produce an atomic bomb and also to see how it worked.

I think that in many of the discussions about the decision to use the bomb, historians focus on Truman, on Stimson, the Secretary of War and so on. Actually, the most important cohort were the scientists producing the fissile material and engineering the bombs. Without their enthusiastic support, without their hard work, without the drive to get a bomb completed, there would have been no atomic bombs in August. Even then, there was a great deal of uncertainty about whether it would work, so the test had to be undertaken in July. The test is known as the Trinity test, and it showed that the plutonium bomb, one of the two kinds being engineered, worked. The potential was catastrophic if the bomb were actually dropped on anyone.

Who decided they would be dropped? Again, everybody focuses on Truman because Truman says in his memoirs, you know, it was a terrible decision to make, but I had to make it and I did. Not true. The decision to use the bomb went back to 1944 when the Air Force already began training the units that were going to be dropping them. By the spring of 1945, when it became clear that bombs would be available, probably from August or September, committees were organized to plan what the targets would be. They chose a number of Japanese cities. They told the American Air Force not to bomb them with incendiaries because they wanted a complete city so they could see what the effect would be. By May, a list of cities had been drawn up. The list changed, in fact, over the summer, but Hiroshima was certainly on that list.

In May, Truman and Stimson set up a special committee, an interim committee, and Oppenheimer set up a scientific committee, and they both considered how the bomb should be used. There were some people who thought the bomb should be used simply as a demonstration. What you should do is drop it on a barren island or a distant naval base or something like that, just to signal to the Japanese what kind of weapon the Americans

now had. But neither the political committee nor the science committee favoured that. Indeed, Oppenheimer's committee was strongly in favour of dropping the bomb on the centre of a city in order to see what its impact would be. From June 1945 onwards, there was never any doubt that the bomb would be used once it was ready, and it would be used on Japanese cities, mirroring, in fact, the incendiary campaign on Japanese cities. Dropping the atomic bombs is often treated as if it were a step change, something completely different. In fact, from the Air Force's point of view, and indeed from the point of view of the American leadership, the atomic bombs continued the campaign against Japan's cities. But it was hoped that the level of destruction would be such that it would frighten the Japanese government into immediately accepting surrender. So the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, and then, three days later, on Nagasaki.

Now, we need to ask ourselves, what was the effect of the atomic bombs? Was it exactly what the Americans hoped, what Truman hoped? Was it exactly the bombs that finally catapulted the Japanese into accepting surrender? I would argue it wasn't. One of the problems was that the bomb was dropped, but nobody really knew what it was. News arrived that Hiroshima had been bombed and that the casualties seemed catastrophic, but then so had the effects of bombing on all the other Japanese cities. An expert committee was sent, organised by the army, but Japan's leading nuclear scientists didn't arrive, in fact, until the morning of August 9th. And it took some time to draw up reports to indicate exactly what the bomb was. There was still a great deal of doubt about whether it was an atomic bomb or another super bomb. One of the theories put forward by army engineers was that this was a magnesium bomb. In other words, magnesium had been distributed in the atmosphere above Hiroshima, ignited the following morning, and that explained the flash and the widespread fire. We need to be aware of this. When we think of an atomic bomb, we think everybody knew what it was, and that the Japanese put their hands up. No, the Japanese didn't put their hands up because they didn't really know what it was or what the potential was for waging nuclear war.

Much more important, I think, by this stage, was all these other elements, the military failure on the ground, the loss of Okinawa, for example, in June, the prospect of an American invasion, the growing social crisis, the evident widespread hunger now developing in Japan. All of these things contributed to a realization that the war simply could not be continued. In the two or three days after the Hiroshima attack, the peace faction began to insist that a way had to be found to terminate the war. That decision was accelerated, I would argue, not by Hiroshima, but by the Soviet declaration of war.

On the 8th of August, the Japanese ambassador in Moscow, Sato, had finally managed to get an interview with Molotov, the Soviet foreign minister, in the hope of getting them to intercede with the other allies to produce a negotiated settlement. Molotov invited Sato to sit down and read out a declaration of war. Now, this arrived in the morning in Tokyo, and it was a shock to the Japanese cabinet. Perhaps it shouldn't have been a shock. I mean, if they'd been more aware of the position of the Soviet Union, perhaps they would never have tried that ploy in the first place. The Supreme War Council and then the cabinet met all day discussing the fact that they would have to accept the Potsdam Declaration now that the Soviet Union had entered the war. What they were really worried about was the Red Army defeating them in Manchuria, very quickly entering Korea and then

perhaps even invading the Japanese home islands. The last thing they wanted was for the Red Army to get there before the Americans did. That really did concentrate their minds.

Coupled with that growing elite fear of the possibility of a communist revolution, it was this, I think, that propelled the peace faction to finally ask Hirohito to do something exceptional, which was to make a sacred decision, a *seidan*. This was something constitutionally quite complex because according to the Constitution, the cabinet should reach an agreement before they meet the Emperor. They hadn't reached an agreement. The two chiefs of staff and the War Minister still wanted some conditions attached to acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration. They met with the emperor very late at night, and the emperor said: 'It's no good, we can't defend Japan properly. The bombing is going on all the time. The suffering of Japanese people gets worse and worse. We simply have to accept reality. I don't think that if we accept the American Potsdam Declaration, it will mean the end of Japan, or indeed the end of the imperial system. So we will have to accept it.' With reluctance, of course, even the military leadership agreed to abide by the sacred decision. It was relayed to the United States, and the United States then had to consider whether the terms in which it was relayed, i.e. asking that the emperor should remain in power, was acceptable to the Americans.

In the meantime, the bomb had been dropped on Nagasaki. Interestingly, even less attention was paid to Nagasaki than originally to Hiroshima. Investigation committees didn't arrive until the 14th of August, by which time, of course, the emperor had finally made his irrevocable decision to accept the Potsdam Declaration. After the 10th of August, the problem really remained for the Americans to decide whether they would allow the Emperor and the imperial system to remain in Japan or not. Finally, they sent a message to Tokyo saying that, yes, that's all right, but he will be subject to the Allied Supreme Command of General MacArthur. Hirohito thought that that reply was satisfactory, even though the army was clearly restless, and indeed there were army factions thinking about staging a coup or assassinating the peace faction and so on.

On the morning of the 14th Hirohito called them all together again to his bunker in the palace grounds, and there he finally said: 'Enough is enough. We have to accept it. There's nothing we can do. I want you all to agree with me.' They did. He agreed that he would make a broadcast for the Japanese people the following day. But in the meantime, the decision was relayed to Washington, and the war was effectively brought to an end. Now, we all know the following day or the following night, a group of army radicals did try to storm the palace, find the broadcast disc that the emperor had made to destroy it, even perhaps find members of the peace faction and assassinate them, but they failed, and the following day their commanding officer came and told them to stop. On the 15th, the Emperor's broadcast was made, and the Japanese people themselves knew that the end of the war had come. Significantly, I think, they never used the terms 'surrender' or 'capitulation'. They said 'termination' of the war. After the 15th of August, Japanese media began to talk about the benevolence of the Emperor in bringing the war to an end and bringing the suffering of all the warring peoples to an end as well, but very little, I have to say, on the suffering that the Japanese Empire had imposed on many of its imperial subjects. It took time before the surrender was actually ratified on 2nd September in Tokyo Harbor. In the meantime, some effort was made to modify the agreement to be made on the 14th of August, but to no success.

The important thing for the Americans, but also, of course, for Hirohito and the Japanese government, was to keep Stalin at arm's length. Now Stalin, it's often argued, was supposed to be frightened by the atomic bombs. It was a way of showing that the Americans had the power and that the Soviet Union would have to behave itself better than it had done in Eastern Europe. I think there's very little evidence to support that argument. In fact, the opposite happened. Once Stalin understood what had happened at Hiroshima, he immediately sped up the invasion of Manchuria and the plans to occupy those parts of East Asia agreed with Roosevelt and Churchill. He even began to think now about occupying Hokkaido, the northern island of Japan, and perhaps having a zone shared with the Americans and the British in Tokyo, as he had in Berlin. So far from forcing the Russians to be more circumspect, the impact of the atomic bombs was in fact to accelerate Stalin's pressure in East Asia and the transformation of the geopolitics of that area. In fact, Stalin wanted to occupy Hokkaido. The troops already embarked in boats on their way to Hokkaido. Then Truman said: 'No, you're not to do it. You're not coming to Hokkaido. We are occupying the Japanese mainland.' Stalin wanted to avoid an open breach with the Americans, even perhaps the violence of the Americans, and finally held back. He got everything else he wanted in East Asia, but he didn't get a share in the occupation of Japan – to the relief, one has to say, of the conservative elite in Japan, because the last thing they wanted were communists stamping all over the main islands.

So, in conclusion, did the atomic bombs end the war? I would argue that they didn't. They have to be put in context. There were a great many factors that contributed to Japan's growing determination to find a way of terminating the war. A determination we could trace right back to the summer of 1945, even before, certainly long before the coming of the atomic bombs. What accelerated that decision was, first of all, fear of domestic unrest, the desire not to repeat the Russia of 1917. Also fear of what would happen if the Red Army reached Korea and then reached the Japanese islands before the Americans did. The atomic bombs contributed to that, just as the conventional bombing contributed to that. But I think it's time that we set aside the assumption that's widely held that atomic bombs equal surrender. Thank you very much.

Q&A with Professor Overy, moderated by Ken Endo:

Ken Endo: Thank you very much indeed for inviting me to such a prestigious webinar like this. I'm so happy to be back here. A few years back, I gave my own speech in London, and it is a cherished memory of mine. I'm so happy to be able to comment on such great work by Professor Overy. I have to admit that I'm no expert on the Pacific War, the atomic bombs or anything like that. I'm an expert of European international affairs. Many of my comments may well be completely out of tune.

First, I have to thank Professor Overy for your talk, such a vividly written history of our part of the Second World War in the East. Your talk today, as well as your book, reminds us of how bloody the previous war was and how complex its final phase was. I thoroughly enjoyed reading that book.

In my view, the strength of this book lies in the fact that it links three matters. One, an indiscriminate air bombing strategy that the U. S. had harbored so long since 1923. Also the strategy that the U. S. actually practiced in Tokyo, Osaka and elsewhere in Japan. Second, the atomic bombings themselves of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which were by their nature indiscriminate. Then, third, the decision of Japan to surrender. The air bombing, atomic bombings and the Japanese surrender are closely linked in this book. In doing so, Professor Overy challenged the official interpretation by the United States, or the mainstream interpretation, which asserts that the atomic bombings were necessary to hasten Japan's surrender and reduce the casualties of the United States, as well as of the Japanese side too, and in the end actually induced Japan to accept the Potsdam Declaration in August 1945.

I have long been somewhat dissatisfied by the relative lack of attention paid to the indiscriminate air bombing during the war, which was almost as cruel as the atomic bombing for the victims. Therefore, I would like to really thank and congratulate Professor Overy for guiding us through these matters and for linking them together in one book. I would like to also add that the subject matter of this book is unfortunately very timely now as we witness the indiscriminate bombings in Gaza. We are obliged to face and think through this contemporary phenomenon while reading this historical work.

At the same time, however, I strangely felt a sense of déjà vu while reading it; it felt somewhat familiar. Perhaps because I'm Japanese and I'm often exposed to these sorts of narratives. Every summer when we commemorate the end of the war, we have an avalanche of TV programs and newspaper articles on war. In that context, let me ask a few academic questions to understand the subject better.

First, the long journey from the conception of air war in the work of Julio Dewey, William Mitchell and these sort of figures, to the actual air bombings of Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki executed by figures like LeMay, is really beautifully traced in Professor Overy's book, but has also long been rather well known. Yuki Tanaka and Marilyn Young edited a book called *Bombing Civilians: A 20th Century History*, published in 2009, for instance. It's a collection of articles tracing the history of such bombings from H. G. Wells through to the Great Tokyo Raid, and the atomic bombings to the Iraq War back in 2003. In Japan, we usually use books like *Kūbaku no Rekishi* [*The History of Air Raids*] by Shinichi Arai, published in 2008. These books trace and problematise the theme in a historical manner, too. So it's perhaps part of the reason that I feel somewhat familiar with this sort of historical analysis.

Second, the questions of why the U.S. dropped the two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as how and why the governing circles of Tokyo decided to surrender, have perhaps been even more closely studied. As cited a few times in the book itself, Andrew Rotter's *Hiroshima: The World's Bomb*, published in 2008, alerted us already to the widespread racism in the thinking of the U.S. military, as well as the political elites in using nukes, and about the infighting amongst the decision makers, particularly between Truman, Burns and Stimson. So I think Rotter went even further, suggesting bureaucratic accountability was why the atomic bombs had to be used.

In his talk Professor Overy already touched on the fact that the scientists themselves wanted to see them used, but it was also due to the huge sums that the United States invested in their development, and the need to demonstrate this to Congress, taxpayers, etc., that they advocated the use of the atomic bombs. The entire government machine had worked for that bomb to be used in that sense. In that way, Rotter relativised the official ideology of the United States since Truman, which is that nukes were necessary to induce Japan to surrender and reduce casualties.

Third, the link, or lack thereof, between the atomic bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the decision of Tokyo to surrender is also well studied. Professor Overy drew on Gar Alperovitz's *Atomic Diplomacy* and *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*. The latter is widely read in Japan. In these books, Alperovitz stresses the Soviet factor, namely, that the Truman administration wanted to lead the post-war processes and did not want the Soviet Union to be involved in the occupation of Japan and therefore dropped the atomic bombs, one in Hiroshima before, and another in Nagasaki after, the Soviet invasion of Manchuria. These accounts already cast doubt on the official narrative of the United States.

I would like to ask about the relation between preceding work and this new book's findings, because partially those links have already been made in the previous studies. So I would like to ask you to expand on the link that you made this time. Also, if I may add, you emphasised the importance of British sources in the introduction. But since the UK contribution to air raids and atomic bombings in Japan was arguably less significant, I would also like to ask in what way that investigation into the British sources altered the picture.

Furthermore, incidentally, in 2017 a documentary film was made by NHK, the Japanese public broadcasting company, in Tokyo on the Great Tokyo Raid. It examined LeMay's thoughts and actions. He showed, obviously, no mercy. He justified the discriminatory raids throughout Japan and was absolutely convinced of their necessity to destroy the lives of ordinary people in Japan in order to save American soldiers' lives. This is a point that Professor Overy also stressed. It's almost comical that this guy got one of the highest medals in Japan for contributing, in the post-war period, to the reestablishment of the Air Force in Japan. There are a few episodes in that film that might merit discussion. Contrary to the justification he gave towards the end of his life, where he reiterated the official narrative of the United States, LeMay, at the time of war, did not think it necessary to drop nukes on Japan to force it to surrender. Different from Truman or Barnes, he didn't believe in either the atomic bombing nor Soviet participation in the Pacific War. He thought that surrender would be forthcoming in any case, with conventional air raids being sufficient.

Second, I wasn't sure, and perhaps I missed some important passages in the book, but the book apparently argues that the US military was critical about the British air raid against Germany. Certainly, there were some segments of the U.S. military that were dubious about the utility of high air bombing, which lacked precision and inevitably entailed civilian casualties. But LeMay was there in Europe before coming to China and the

Pacific, fully convinced of the need to air bomb. So isn't it the case that the U.S. here was consistent rather than contradictory? I would just like to know a little bit more about that.

Third, on the justification of air war. In Professor Overy's book, rightly so, the Japanese air raid against Chongqing is referred to at the end of the book. LeMay and many other military leaders thought Japan committed the same atrocities against China, which helped them to justify their own atrocities. It is said that around 10,000 people died in the Japanese air raids on Chongqing, which was the first systematic air war in history. There was a brief reference at the end of your book about this, but in a rather passing way. This sort of precedent on the part of Japan helped the U.S. military to justify their air war: they used that example in their favour, in my view.

So these are the comments. As I said at the beginning, I enjoyed reading this well-written work. What has become crystal clear to me is that the incremental radicalization of strategy, as put at the end of this book, a series of small steps in changing the war strategy, brought about really radical changes in the lives of ordinary people on the ground. It is a sharp reminder that we cannot and should not take our eyes off those small changes, essentially justifications that might well lead to atrocities in our time.

Professor Overy: Thank you. I want to make clear that a great deal has indeed been written on this subject. In fact, hundreds of books have been written on this subject, as I'm very well aware. What I've tried to do in this book is focus on the bombing, which is what the book is really about. There I have used quite an extensive range of archive sources. I've used them in ways that other people haven't used them, I think, particularly on how the United States was able to move from a strategy in Europe of bombing specific target systems, which it used right up until the end of the war, to area bombing. There was strong hostility in the American Air Force to the area bombing. The United States City Bombing Survey of Europe was highly critical of the British campaign and its results, which it regarded as more or less negligible.

However, the shift in LeMay's strategy is not, I think, due to Chongqing or thinking about the Japanese bombing of Chongqing. There were two factors. First, the American air leadership had already begun to shift to the idea that perhaps incendiary bombing was more useful than they'd realized. They spent a lot of time preparing it, designing the best bomb, thinking about incendiary tactics and so on. By the time LeMay attacked Tokyo, the American Air Force had shifted from mainly attacking precise targets with high explosives to attacking urban targets with incendiaries. LeMay did that for two other reasons. The first was simply technical: you couldn't bomb from a height over Japan because of the jet stream winds at 30,000 feet. So you would have to bomb low, and to bomb low, you'd have to bomb at night. The other thing was that LeMay was under strong pressure from Washington to produce results because the Air Force leadership wanted to use the bombing of Japan as a means to argue for a strategic Air Force after 1945, an independent strategic Air Force. I've referenced all that in the book. I mean, over and over again, the American leadership in Washington put pressure on LeMay to show results, quick results that could impress the American public.

So LeMay said: 'All right, we'll burn down the centre of Tokyo.' He sent the aircraft in at 5,000 feet, loaded with new incendiaries. There was almost no opposition. He said: 'Smother the central, most densely populated areas of Tokyo.' Now that raised, of course, immediate ethical concerns. It didn't concern LeMay, as he wrote in his own memoirs, to worry about the morality of what we were doing. So LeMay's decision was governed by a number of factors, and I've explored them, I think, at much greater length in the book.

Now, I want to come to the material on the decision to use the atomic bomb and its impact. I mean, I think I put quite a bit of material in there, which is a bit different from the way in which Rotter and others have treated the development of the bomb. I've emphasised much more how important the scientific and engineering pressure was to get a bomb dropped and to see what it did. I've also followed up on this in the final chapter, looking at the way that the Americans and the British used the atomic bombings to understand nuclear war. They had a lot of time looking at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, drawing up technical reports, arguing what would happen if it was dropped on San Francisco or on London, forming the basis, perhaps, of that shift in strategy made necessary by nuclear war. So it performed that utilitarian function too. They could actually see what an atomic bomb did and they could assess its consequences. I think we shouldn't set that aside. I mean, it's a cynical decision. But I think that by this stage of the war, cynicism was really what most people were into, not ethics.

You said I used Alperovitz, but I used him in order to criticize him. I don't think that what he says works at all. I don't think that there's any evidence that those people making the decision in the United States, and I should say seconded from London as well, thought that this would be a first step in the Cold War. I think that what they wanted to do was to end the war quickly, save American lives, and they persuaded themselves that the shock of the bombs would actually do that. I don't think that Alperovitz is right about that.

On the balance between the bombs and the Soviet invasion, I think I've disagreed, really, with much of the writing you've cited, because I do think that the fear of communism – based on much of the new material that's been written about the home front in Japan, which is really important and generally disregarded in much of the literature – at home and abroad played a very important part in accelerating the decision of the elite, both the military and peace faction, to capitulate. Much better to be occupied by the United States than to be occupied by the Russians. They were almost certainly right on that.

I think that the debate which features in Marilyn Young's book, which you've cited, has always been more even-handed. As I've tried to show in the book, the recent research shows just how little they knew about the atomic bomb and how long it took to get reports about it to Tokyo. It means it's not just a question of dropping the bomb and 'Oh, let's put our hands up.' There were many other things that they were worried about. The emperor was particularly worried about LeMay's incendiary attacks on August the 7th and 8th, where he continued to level almost 100% small Japanese cities. That too, I think, contributed to accelerating the decision on the 9th to finally accept the Potsdam Declaration.

I think I've put much of this into the book, even though I have indeed relied, as you say, on secondary sources. There's a very rich literature on this, but I think I'm trying to put them all into a slightly different relation and to highlight particular kinds of evidence at the expense of other bits of evidence. Much of the literature relies very heavily on the International Military Tribunal documents, and I've tried to avoid that. Many of them say what the Americans want them to say, or they don't remember very clearly what they were saying. So I've relied much more on the recent literature by Japanese historians, although I don't read Japanese, which look much more at the diaries and notes of people at the time and how they reacted. I think that tells you much more about the final decision. So there is a lot of literature, but I think my book, both synthesizes much of what we know but also I think takes us in rather new directions. That's really what I wanted the book to do.

One final thing: where does Britain come in? Well it's very important, in fact, not only because Britain began the development of the atomic bomb, but also because British scientists were then sent to Los Alamos, two hundred of them, and indeed made extremely important breakthroughs in engineering the plutonium bomb, which might not have been ready in 1945 had it not been for British participation. The British were very keen to teach the Americans what they could about incendiary bombing. I include in the book quite a lot about the collaboration between the British and Americans in 1943, 1944 and 1945, in which the British were trying to get the Americans up to speed on incendiary bombing, and spent a lot of time sharing technical data, encouraging them to think about the nature of the tactics. It's very interesting: the tactics used against Tokyo were almost exactly the tactics that Harris got Bomber Command to use in the bombing of Germany in 1943 and 1944. The British wanted to be there at the end. They wanted to be there flying from Okinawa or somewhere, bombing Japanese cities. They wanted to do what they'd done in Germany. They said: 'We'll join you in bombing at night.' The Americans said: 'No, we don't need that. There's nothing left to destroy.' What we do need are your big bombs. If there hadn't been atomic bombs, then they might have been using the huge British bombs, 'Tallboy' and 'Grand Slam', to finish the work that was being done in Tokyo and other major Japanese cities.

The British are always somehow or other brushed out of almost all the books on this aspect of the Pacific War, and I just thought it was important because it was an allied war. Britain observed very closely what was going on and contributed in some important ways to the campaigns waged by the Americans. They were there, as I said, in September 1945, going around deciding what the impact of an atomic bomb actually was. Anyway, that's a quick survey of your comments. Thank you.

Ken Endo: Thank you very much indeed for answering my questions.

Audience Q&A:

Jason James: We'll have a few questions from the audience now.

Starting from myself, everyone seems to agree that even if the atomic bombs did not cause the Japanese to surrender, the reason for dropping them on the part of the Americans was primarily to cause the Japanese to

surrender. What was the position in terms of what the Americans knew about Russian intentions to invade, and was that not part of their thinking as well?

Professor Overy: They knew the Russians were going to invade Manchuria. By that stage, of course, the American military leadership was now in two minds. Some of them were saying, no, actually, maybe we don't need the Soviets. Actually, if we had the Soviets there, it's going to be pretty dangerous. Let's look at what they've just done in Eastern Europe. Set them loose in East Asia, and what's going to happen? Others said, no, it's part of the alliance agreement, so Roosevelt should honor it and we'll see where they go.

Once it was clear that the Red Army faced almost no opposition, I mean, their blitzkrieg in Manchuria was extraordinary. The Americans got more and more worried about what that actually intended. But yes, they had very little intelligence on it. You have to remember, this is not the digital age. Intelligence on what the Russians were doing in Eastern Russia was extremely limited, and Stalin made sure that it was limited. It should also be added, of course, that American knowledge of what was going on in Tokyo was also almost non-existent. There was no way of getting that intelligence, just as there was no way for politicians in Tokyo to know what was going on in Washington. You need to remember that one of the reasons why decisions were taken at the time was largely because of delusions about the intentions of others. There was no way of getting firm intelligence.

Jason James: Just picking up a couple of questions from the chat. I mean, I think these are both issues that have been touched on already. But someone is asking about the role of racism. Now, obviously, there was the bombing of civilian populations in Europe as well between the fighting powers, but do you think there was a significant role of racism, perhaps, in the decision to use this particular type of weapon in Japan?

A slightly related question from someone is about the nuclear bombs as an experiment, sort of like a biological experiment. Was it partly about trying to do this experiment to find out what the impacts on human biology would be?

Professor Overy: Well, the answer to the second part was I think it was an experiment. For the scientists involved, they really wanted to know what the impact would be. The British very obligingly in September drew up various statistical charts to show your chances of survival half a kilometre, a kilometre, one and a half kilometres away from the epicentre of the bomb. They produced a report which catalogued the kinds of injuries that would be done to people once they were a certain distance away from the bomb. So we shouldn't rule out the fact that dropping these two bombs was experimental. Nobody had done it before. There was a good deal of kudos here, too, I think, that the scientists who produced it thought, great, look what we've done. Nobody would have imagined five years ago that this was a possibility, and here we've got it. Let's drop it and see what it does.

The thing about racism is much more complicated because it was never a formal part, obviously, of any American military directive. But there's no doubt that the American military on the ground and the leadership

and the American public viewed the Japanese differently from the way they viewed the Germans. There was much less soul-searching about bombing Japanese cities than there would have been about firebombing German cities. I think if the bomb had been ready to drop on Germany, it's still very questionable whether Roosevelt and later Truman would actually have approved it. Hatred of Nazism was certainly there, but the Germans were regarded as racially equivalent, where the Japanese, of course, were not. Maybe Professor Endo would like to comment on that.

Ken Endo: I have no doubt about that, but I don't have any proof, historically speaking, but I do feel that that is the case. But I'm sorry, no other comments.

Audience member: Thank you very much, Professor Overy. Fantastic talk. You made this point before about the approaches of the Japanese Imperial Command to the Russians for peace by the Emperor's decision. Why were the Russians stalling, and was that anything to do with Barbarossa and the intelligence failure of the Russian intelligence machine, which was catastrophic when the 6th Army invaded Russia?

Also, talking about Germany, Germany also had its own nuclear programme, and were also in a race to develop it first. What I'd like to say is, why did the British role get more emphasis?

Professor Overy: I'll answer your first question first. This was partly based, I think, on extremely poor intelligence about what was actually going on in Moscow and what Stalin's view of the Pacific War was. Also, some of the leadership around Hirohito thought about the Russo-Japanese War of 1945, where they approached the United States to intervene and produce a diplomatic solution, which the United States did. That war was ended, in fact, by the Treaty of Portsmouth in the United States. I think there was some thinking that if that happened then, it might be possible to do it again with the Soviet Union. However, as I suggested, the Soviet Union was an extremely bad choice. I have to add, by the way, that much of Stalin's archive is still closed to researchers. So exactly what Stalin was thinking to himself in those weeks is something that we still speculate on, perhaps, rather than have absolutely hard evidence.

Your second question was about the role of the British. One has not been emphasized more. Well, of course, part of the problem is that the Pacific War and the final stages of the war against Japan were conducted, of course, by the United States. The British were at war with Japan, fighting a bitter war in Burma. Australia, the British Commonwealth partner, was fighting a bitter war against the Japanese in the South Pacific. But neither of those wars have ever been regarded as particularly important or as contributing to the final defeat of Japan. It is worth putting it in because there were two western allies fighting the Japanese from 1941 onwards, and you can't airbrush them out from the final year of the war because you want to demonstrate that it was American air power that made the difference.

Audience member: I have dealt with security in terms of Japanese security arrangements and also disarmament. I have discovered that there is a clear division between the people who are for nuclear disarmament and the

people who argue for the value of nuclear deterrence. I would like to pose a question to Professor Endo and perhaps Professor Overy as well. What are the chances of these two schools of thought coming together, and thinking together about the value of nuclear weapons in terms of deterrence in a clear, not emotionally laden, detached manner? Would it be possible?

Ken Endo: Now, I'm slightly pessimistic about these two camps meeting in one place to share the same concerns. One of the things that Putin has committed to during the past three-and-a-half years is showing, in a sense, the utility of nukes in actual warfare on the battleground back in 2022, August or September, when the Ukrainians were on the counteroffensive, cornering 30,000 Russians at the Dnipro River. At that time, the Russians were so vocal in terms of the possibility of using nukes. It was the United States administration that was seriously concerned about the actual possibility of using nuclear weapons, and basically stopped the Ukrainian military from attacking those Russian troops just about to cross the Dnipro river. So 30,000 Russians went across and even now they are still there. This showed the real utility of the threats of nuclear war and the use of nuclear weapons in an actual battleground. Everybody in the world has seen it, including North Korea and China. These threats would be useful in a real battleground. So that is an unfortunate situation of our time.

Audience member: My question is, given that Professor Overy seems to be saying that the firebombing of Tokyo and the atomic bombs were sort of unnecessary, apart from immoral, what would have happened if Truman had said, no, we can't do this: I'm not going to accept civilian casualties? How does he think the war would have progressed?

Audience member: I think mine's a very similar question because it was, had the US not dropped the bombs and gone instead with Operation Downfall or the proposed naval blockade, when do you think the war in the East might have ended and how?

Professor Overy: For the Americans, the bombing could have carried on, of course, attacking precise targets. The idea was to destroy the Japanese war economy. I have to say that the US Navy was much more effective in that, flying their fighter bombers off the coast of Japan, which they could do easily by the spring of 1945. They actually did much more damage to industrial installations than LeMay did. There are ways, in other words, of using tactical bombing to undermine the enemy's war economy.

One of the critical things was Japanese transport, which was very vulnerable, with lots of bottlenecks. So what you do is you have a transportation plan like you did against Germany in the winter of 1944-45, which the Americans were very good at. Why they didn't think about that in the Japanese case is still something of a mystery. The head of the United States Institute of Bombing Survey in Europe visited Arnold, the head of the American Air Force, and said: 'The critical thing is transport. Why don't you bomb Japanese transport?' Arnold said: 'Yes, you're probably right.' He hadn't thought anything about it. The transport plan was finally drawn up on August the 12th, 1945. By this time, of course, it was too late. So bombing civilians, burning down civilian

areas, killing 83,000 people in one night, was not necessarily a way to undermine Japan's war economy. There were more effective ways of doing it, as there had been for the British as well.

Regarding the second question about how long the war would have gone on: no, I think that Japan would have surrendered anyway. Within a few days, the Red Army was in Korea. How far is it before they reach Hokkaido? It's not very far. I think the Japanese would have surrendered. The food crisis, the collapse of the Japanese war economy – all of these things together would have been enough without having the two atomic bombs at the same time. I don't think the war would have gone on until 1946-47, but the Americans were very worried that it would. They had all kinds of scenarios about fighting on until autumn 1946 and so on and so forth. All quite unrealistic, but that's because the Americans didn't really know what the conditions were like in Japan. But I think, from the Japanese perspective, surrender would have come pretty quickly after the Soviet invasion.

Jason James: As a final word, because we're running out of time, do either of you think there are any lessons we can draw from your book for the present, Richard?

Professor Overy: Well, I hope one lesson is don't wage nuclear war. I don't think people need to be told that, but there's so much rhetorical threat around at the moment, worrying about whether Iran has nuclear weapons and so on. I mean, we need to be realistic about this. Modern thermonuclear bombs create a level of destruction more than 10 times worse than the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. No power is going to engage in nuclear warfare because both sides are equally vulnerable. I think it's time we recognise that and actually begin to move more firmly towards the idea of more widespread nuclear disarmament.

Jason James: I think it's time we wrapped up, but thank you so much to both of you. There's a link in the chat for those of you who'd like to read Richard's book. Thank you very much indeed, Endo-sensei, for staying up late for us in Tokyo and devoting your evening to what's been a really fascinating discussion. Thank you all for attending.