The world entered the dangerous and uncertain nuclear age in early August 1945, when two atomic bombs were dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The decision—made by U.S. President Harry S. Truman—to use these new and powerful weapons of mass destruction remains highly controversial today. The use of the bombs was almost immediately followed by the surrender of Japan to the Allies—and the end of the war in the Pacific.

This conflict, which began with Japan’s surprise attack on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 7, 1941, was mainly fought between American and Japanese forces, but Canadian forces also participated. Many Canadian troops were taken prisoner following the Japanese capture of the British colony of Hong Kong on Christmas Day, 1941, and spent a long ordeal in Japanese POW camps, where they were subjected to brutal treatment at the hands of their captors.

One of these prisoners was John Ford, who was just a teenager growing up in Port aux Basques, Newfoundland, when the war began. At the time Ford enlisted, Newfoundland was not yet part of Canada and was still a British colony. After training in England, Ford was sent to Singapore, which, like Hong Kong, was also an important British colony and naval base in the South Pacific. After it fell to the advancing Japanese forces, Ford and his fellow servicemen found themselves prisoners in the hands of the Japanese, having to endure years of hardship, suffering, and the almost constant threat of being tortured or killed in POW camps.

On August 9, 1945, Ford was in a camp just outside the Japanese city of Nagasaki, where he had been sent a few years before. To him, it was just another day to survive in captivity, since he was unaware that the war was nearly over and Japan was on the brink of annihilation and defeat. Looking toward the city around 11:00 in the morning he saw a blinding flash of light and a swiftly rising mushroom cloud. He felt a blast of intense heat.

He had no idea that he had just witnessed the dropping of an atomic bomb. The bomb almost completely destroyed the city and caused the deaths of 70,000 Japanese civilians. Many years later Ford made a return visit to Nagasaki in order to come to terms with his horrifying ordeal there. He also wanted to learn more about the catastrophe that had struck the city on that terrible day and to meet and reconcile himself with some Japanese survivors of the blast who were once his enemies but who have now become his friends.

To Consider

1. How much do you know about the dropping of the atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War?

2. Why do you think the dropping of the atomic bombs was such an important event at the time and continues to be so today?

3. Do you think that many Canadians at that time would have felt much sympathy for the Japanese victims of the atomic bomb?

4. Why do you think U.S. President Harry Truman’s decision to drop the atomic bombs is still so controversial today?
JOURNEY BACK TO NAGASAKI

Video Review

Pre-viewing Questions
With a partner or in a small group, discuss and answer the following questions.

1. What do you know about Canada’s participation in the war in the Pacific against Japan during the Second World War?

2. What do you think life would have been like for captured soldiers being held in prisoner-of-war camps?

3. What do you know about the destructive power of atomic bombs?

4. Why is the dropping of the atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki still commemorated in Japan and around the world 65 years after the event?

5. Do you think the world still faces the dangerous possibility of a nuclear war today? Explain your answer.

Viewing Questions
As you watch the video, respond to the questions in the spaces provided.

1. Why was August 9, 1945, such an important date in history?

2. To what British base was John Ford dispatched after he completed his training in England?

3. What evidence does Ford provide to support his depiction of Fukuoka prison number two as “hell on earth?”

Further Research
Learn more about Canadian prisoners of war (POWs) held in Japanese camps by visiting the online exhibition of the Canadian War Museum at www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/newspapers/canadawar/forces/prisoners_e.shtml.

Read the stories of Canadian soldiers who survived the war in the Pacific by visiting the Web site of Veterans Affairs Canada at www.vac-acc.gc.ca/general. Type “Pacific War” into the search box.
4. How were the fortunes of war turning against Japan by mid 1945?

5. Describe what Ford saw around 11:00 a.m. on August 9, 1945. What did he think he was witnessing? Why?

6. How many people died immediately as a result of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Nagasaki? _________________________

7. What happened to Ford following Japan’s surrender?

8. What were Ford’s reactions upon returning to Nagasaki?

9. What did he say about the other young soldiers that died at the site of his former prison camp?

10. Who is Koichi Wada and why was his meeting with Ford so significant?

Post-viewing Questions
1. Now that you have watched the video, revisit your responses to the Pre-viewing Questions. Have your opinions changed in any way? Explain.

2. What is your reaction to the story of John Ford and his return visit to Nagasaki? Share your responses with a partner or in a small group.

3. Do you think that remembering/commemorating the dropping of the atomic bombs helps to prevent atomic bombs from being used in future?
Focus for Reading

In your notebook create an organizer like the one below. As you read the following information on the history of the first atomic bombs, write down key points in your organizer. You should be able to enter at least two or three points in each section of your chart. You will be using this information in the activities that follow the text material.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The History of the First Atomic Bombs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Einstein’s Letter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In 1939 physicist Albert Einstein informed U.S. President Roosevelt about the possibility of an atomic bomb using uranium.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Einstein was worried that Nazi Germany might develop the bomb first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Roosevelt read the letter but chose not to act on it when the war broke out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The Manhattan Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The Trinity Explosion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The Decision to Drop the Bomb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The Bombing of Hiroshima</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The Bombing of Nagasaki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The Surrender of Japan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Einstein’s Letter

On August 2, 1939, Nobel Prize-winning scientist Albert Einstein wrote a letter to U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt explaining some recent developments in nuclear research in which he had played a part. It was less than one month before the outbreak of the Second World War in Europe, and Einstein and his fellow scientist Leo Szilard believed that the message to the President was urgent.

In the letter, Einstein explained that their research had led them to the conclusion that it would be possible to construct an atomic bomb using uranium as the main ingredient in the device. By isolating a rare isotope of this element, scientists could trigger a nuclear chain reaction causing an enormous release of energy in a matter of seconds. In Einstein’s view, such a bomb would give the country possessing it a huge advantage in wartime over any of its adversaries, and he was extremely concerned that Nazi Germany was on its way to developing such a doomsday weapon using uranium from Czechoslovakia.

Roosevelt read the letter, but after the Nazi invasion of Poland a month later and the onset of the war, his attention was diverted to other matters. Roosevelt was trying to remain neutral and keep his country out of the war while at the same time doing all he could to assist the United Kingdom, which, with Canada and the rest of its empire, was opposing Hitler and Germany.

The Japanese Attack Pearl Harbor

All this changed after the sudden Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Abandoning its traditional policy
of isolationism from Europe, the U.S. not only declared war on its attacker, Japan, but also on Nazi Germany. Along with the Soviet Union—which Hitler had invaded the previous June—the U.S. and Britain were now known as the Allies, a formidable group of countries pledged to the total defeat and unconditional surrender of Germany and Japan, which were known as the Axis powers.

The Manhattan Project Begins
To further this goal, in August 1942, Roosevelt authorized the creation of the Manhattan Project. This was the code name for the operation that would lead to the construction of the first atomic bomb in history. The combined resources of government, academia, the military, and industry were harnessed in a major undertaking that would employ over half a million people and cost in excess of USD$2-billion at the time, or at least 10 times that amount in today’s currency.

One of the key factors behind the success of the project was the fact that many of the world’s top nuclear scientists had fled the Nazi takeover of Europe and were residing in the United States. The Manhattan Project took shape in two top-secret locations: Los Alamos, New Mexico—where the bomb itself was developed—and Oak Ridge, Tennessee—where experiments on the separation of the two key uranium isotopes—U235 and U238—were conducted. As one of the world’s major sources of uranium, Canada played a major role in supplying this essential material, from a mine on the shores of Great Bear Lake in the Northwest Territories.

Testing the Atomic Bomb
By the early summer of 1945, the bomb was ready to be tested. At this point, Nazi Germany had surrendered and the war in Europe was over. But Japan and the U.S. were still locked in a vicious battle in the Pacific. Some American military leaders were worried that it would take a full-scale invasion of Japan to end the war, an operation that might mean hundreds of thousands of U.S. casualties. Roosevelt had died in April of that year and had been succeeded as president by Harry Truman.

Truman was faced with a momentous decision—whether or not to use this deadly weapon against the Japanese to end the war and demonstrate to the world the formidable military power of the U.S. But before it could be deployed, the bomb had to be tested, a risky undertaking since no such weapon had ever been detonated before. Some scientists worried that the nuclear chain reaction that triggers the explosion of an atomic bomb might become so uncontrollable it would incinerate the entire United States!

Nonetheless, in the early morning of July 16, 1945, the first atomic bomb was exploded on U.S. soil. “Trinity” was the code name for the successful test explosion in the Alamogordo desert, in New Mexico. As the huge mushroom cloud ascended from the test site, Robert Oppenheimer, the scientific director of the Manhattan Project, said: “We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed, a few people cried, most people were silent. I remembered the line from Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita. Vishnu is trying to persuade the prince that he should do his duty, and to impress him takes on his multi-armed form and says, ‘Now, I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.’ I suppose we all thought that one way or another” (“Now I am become death,” www.atomicarchive.com/Movies/Movie8.shtml).

After the success of Trinity, Truman and his military advisors had to decide what to do next. Some recommended that instead of dropping the bomb, the United States set off another test detonation to which Japanese observers would be invited. It was hoped that after witnessing the
awesome power of the bomb the Japanese would be willing to negotiate an end to the war. But others worried that if the explosion failed, it might stiffen Japanese resolve to continue fighting to the bitter end.

If the bomb were to be dropped on Japan, what should be the target? Most of the county’s main cities, including Tokyo, had already been almost totally levelled by massive U.S. Air Force bombing campaigns. One of the most deadly of these bombing raids had practically incinerated the Japanese capital, whose buildings were mainly constructed from wood. The bombing raid created a giant firestorm and resulted in the deaths of an estimated 100,000 people.

Hiroshima
In the end, Truman and his advisors determined that the world’s first atomic bomb would fall on Hiroshima, a city that had so far been spared from bombing. On the night of August 5, a B-29 bomber named the Enola Gay took off from the U.S. naval base at Tinian Island in the Pacific and headed for Hiroshima. On board was its deadly cargo, an atomic bomb nicknamed “Little Boy” in honour of Roosevelt. It was about 3 metres in length, weighed 3,600 kg, and had the explosive power of 12.5 kilotonnes of TNT.

At approximately 8:15 the next morning the bomb was dropped. Descending by parachute, it exploded at about 580 metres above ground. Almost instantaneously, a huge flash of light burst over the defenceless city, followed by an intense fireball and a massive shock wave. The temperature at ground zero, the spot just below where the bomb exploded, rose to several million degrees Celsius, and anyone in the area was instantly vaporized.

As the Enola Gay quickly flew away from the blast, the crew saw a huge mushroom cloud rise. Below the cloud was a “rolling black mass” that looked like a huge vat of boiling tar. On the ground, hundreds of thousands of Hiroshima residents who were not killed immediately by the bomb were enduring a nuclear hell on earth, suffering prolonged and agonizing deaths from terrible wounds and burns to their bodies.

Still others would linger on for weeks, months, and years, only to succumb from the fatal effects of radiation poisoning. The bomb had released large amounts of toxic radioactive substances that cause cancer and other diseases. Fetuses still in their mothers’ wombs would be born with serious birth defects and deformities, marking them for life as victims of Hiroshima.

In all, the total death toll from the dropping of the world’s first atomic bomb was approximately 200,000. The vast majority of those killed were Japanese civilians. It was a day the residents of Hiroshima would never forget and still solemnly commemorate every August 6th.

Nagasaki
Three days after Hiroshima was bombed, the Japanese had still not surrendered, and Truman made the very controversial decision to drop a second atomic bomb. The second bomb was a plutonium-239 bomb nicknamed “Fat Man” after British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. The original target of the second bomb was the city of Kokura, but on the day of the bombing run the city was obscured by dense clouds and the crew was ordered to drop the bomb on Nagasaki, the secondary target.

At 11:02 a.m. Fat Man exploded at an altitude of about 800 metres directly over an industrial area that included two major Mitsubishi war-materials factories. Although much of the city was destroyed, Nagasaki’s geographic location in a valley between a ridge of hills limited the power
of the blast. Despite this, the final death toll would eventually rival Hiroshima’s, at approximately 140,000 five years after the bomb fell.

Japan Surrenders
Less than a week after the bombing of Nagasaki, Japanese Emperor Hirohito delivered a radio address to his people, informing them that Japan had indeed lost the war and would be forced to surrender. Hirohito had overruled some of his top military advisors who encouraged him to keep fighting, even after two of Japan’s cities had been almost totally destroyed by atomic bombs.

Japan’s surrender, on September 2, on the decks of the aircraft carrier USS Missouri, was just short of unconditional, since the U.S. permitted Hirohito to remain on the throne. In what must rank as one of the greatest understatements in modern history, Hirohito told his subjects that “the war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan’s advantage” and that “the enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bomb” (The Manhattan Project: An Interactive History, U.S Dept. of Energy Office of History and Heritage Resources, www.cfo.doe.gov/me70/manhattan/index.htm).

Analysis
1. With a partner, compare the information in your summary chart. Help each other to complete any missing information.

2. “Counter-factual” history involves speculating on how history might have taken a different turn if a single event had occurred in another way. Some historians find this activity fascinating and instructive, helping them to develop different perspectives on the past and its impact on the present and future course of events. With a partner, develop a “counter-factual” or imaginary historical account outlining the series of events you think might have followed if one of the following hypothetical episodes in the history of the first atomic bombs had actually taken place:
   a) Nazi Germany develops an atomic bomb before the United States.
   b) The first test explosion of an atomic bomb in the New Mexico desert is a disastrous failure.
   c) U.S. President Truman stages a demonstration of an atomic bomb explosion that Japanese leaders attend prior to ordering the bombing of Hiroshima.
   d) Japan refuses to surrender and continues to fight even after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

3. With a partner or in a small group, discuss the policy alternatives Truman faced in deciding whether or not to drop the atomic bomb. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each alternative and then decide whether or not you think the decision Truman finally made was the best one available to him at the time.

4. Although Albert Einstein informed U.S. President Roosevelt about the possibility of the atomic bomb, he was totally opposed to it being used, especially on a civilian target such as Hiroshima. He believed that this would plunge the world into a new and dangerous nuclear age that might eventually lead to the total destruction of humanity. Over six decades later, do you think Einstein was correct? With a partner or in a small group assess the chances of a nuclear war taking place today and what you think would be the most likely consequences of such an event.
Did you know . . .
In the 1990s the Canadian government acknowledged the harm that uranium mining had caused the Dene people and agreed to clean up an estimated 1.7 million tonnes of radioactive waste created by the mining.

Reading Prompt
As you read the information in this section, ask yourself whether Canada should be proud of its contribution to the development of atomic bombs. Does our involvement in the Manhattan Project challenge our belief in ourselves as a peace-loving nation?

Canadian Uranium
A key ingredient needed for the success of the Manhattan Project was uranium. Fortunately for the United States—and the Allies in general—Canada possessed one of the world’s largest supplies of uranium. It was located in a remote part of the Northwest Territories on the shores of Great Bear Lake in a place called the Eldorado Mine.

The Manhattan Project needed 60 tonnes of uranium oxide. This was mined by the local Dene people, a semi-nomadic aboriginal group who followed the caribou herds in the area around Great Bear Lake. The Dene workers were paid three dollars per day to haul heavy 45 kg sacks of dusty uranium oxide, unaware at the time that the material they were handling, without even the protection of gloves, was extremely hazardous to their health.

The radioactive hazards of uranium and its danger to human health were well known at the time the Dene were working with this substance at the Eldorado Mine. However, neither the U.S. nor Canadian governments warned them of any potential risk. Almost half of the Dene labour force that once worked in the Eldorado Mine would eventually succumb, along with many women and children from the community.

Louis Slotin and the Manhattan Project
Louis Slotin’s name is not nearly as well known as that of J. Robert Oppenheimer, but this bright young Canadian nuclear scientist from Winnipeg played a key role in the development of the world’s first atomic bomb. In 1942 he was invited to join the Manhattan Project.

Slotin first worked first at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, before being transferred to Los Alamos in late 1944. At Los Alamos he took part in the construction of the first atomic bomb. There he was assigned the challenging task of determining critical mass—that is, the point where an atomic chain reaction would begin. This information was absolutely crucial to ensuring the successful detonation of the nuclear device.

The experiments Slotin conducted were technically known as “criticality testing” and involved bringing masses of nuclear materials to near-critical levels of fission in order to discover their critical mass values. The well-known physicist Richard Feynman called this delicate and dangerous procedure “tickling a dragon’s tail,” since it ran the risk of triggering a nuclear chain reaction by accident if the slightest error was made in the experiment.

Slotin’s contribution to the success of the Trinity explosion of the world’s first atomic bomb at Alamogordo, New Mexico, on July 16, 1945, earned him a place of honour in the project’s hall of fame. But he was horrified by the human toll of suffering, death, and destruction that the bombs had taken at Hiroshima and Nagasaki and longed to return to pure research once the war was over. But his participation in ongoing experiments at Los Alamos was still required.
Tragically, on May 21, 1946, Slotin was involved in what was to prove a fatal accident when a screwdriver slipped during an experiment. The accident resulted in the release of radiation, exposing him to a dose equivalent to what he would have received if he were standing 1,500 metres away from the explosion of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima. But his quick action after the accident ended the nuclear reaction and saved the lives of the seven scientists who were in the same room with him. Slotin suffered in agony for over a week before dying in late May 1946. He was only 36 years old. Robert Oppenheimer and other colleagues at Los Alamos were devastated by the loss of this promising young Canadian scientist who still had so much to offer in his chosen field of research. The 1989 motion picture *Fat Man and Little Boy*, which dramatizes the events leading to the development of the atomic bomb, includes a fictional character loosely based on Slotin, and in 2002 an asteroid was named after him in his honour.

**Analysis**

1. With a partner or in a small group revisit the question posed in the Reading Prompt at the beginning of this section. Are your answers to this question similar or dissimilar? Are there any points of view you did not consider before hearing your classmates responses?

2. How would you judge the actions of the Canadian and U.S. governments in not informing the Dene people of the hazards they were facing when working with radioactive material? What compensation, if any, do you think is owed to the Dene today for what their community had to endure?

3. Do you believe that the case of the Dene workers exposed to radiation at the Eldorado Mine is an example of “the end justifying the means,” that is, that the suffering of the Dene was an unfortunate but necessary price to pay for the development of the bomb? Give reasons for your opinion.

4. Do you think Louis Slotin deserves to be better known for his contributions to the development of the first atomic bomb? Why do you think he is not very famous, even in his home country of Canada?
JOURNEY BACK TO NAGASAKI

Life in the Camps

Focus for Reading
Consider the following questions before you read the information in this section.

1. What were the main problems Canadian prisoners of war (POWs) faced while being held in Japanese POW camps during the war?
2. How did the treatment of Canadian POWs in Japanese prison camps differ from POWs held by the Germans during the war?
3. Why did the Japanese believe that POWs did not really deserve to be treated humanely during the war?

A Personal Story
On Christmas Day, 1941, the life of Private Don Nelson of the Winnipeg Grenadiers changed forever. Along with approximately 1,700 other Canadian soldiers based in Hong Kong, Nelson was captured and imprisoned by the Japanese after they overran the colony. Most of the POWs were initially incarcerated at Sham Shui Po, which had served as a camp for Chinese refugees fleeing the Japanese invasion of their country. Later, many Canadian prisoners found themselves transported to a series of other POW camps the Japanese set up throughout their rapidly expanding Asian empire, including the Philippines or in Japan itself.

In a 1983 interview with Daniel Dancocks, author of In Enemy Hands: Canadian Prisoners of War, 1939-1945, Nelson recalled the conditions he and his fellow Canadian POWs faced as prisoners of the Japanese. “They were pretty rough on us,” he said. “They tied our hands together with barbed wire. A lot of boys that fell and couldn’t walk because they were wounded so badly, they were cut loose and bayoneted right there. They really didn’t believe in taking too many prisoners.”

Conditions in the Camps
For those POWs healthy or lucky enough to survive, life in the camps was a daily ordeal. Prisoners endured overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, meager and frequently inedible food rations, disease, and the constant threat of torture or mistreatment at the hands of their Japanese captors. Donald Geraghty of the Royal Rifles of Canada described the barracks at the Sham Shui Po camp as “the filthiest thing I’ve ever seen in my life” (Dancocks, In Enemy Hands: Canadian Prisoners of War, 1939-1945).

One of the prisoners’ main concerns was obtaining enough food to sustain their strength. The Japanese subjected them to long, gruelling hours of hard labour in the tropical heat. Lance-Corporal Harold Englehart of the Royal Rifles of Canada recalled that, “our primary concern was the food situation. We were always hungry. That’s all people used to talk about: food, or the lack of it.” And Corporal Lucien Bruneet of the Canadian Postal Corps remembered that he “ate with chop sticks. I had a spoon and fork, but you know the reason why I ate with chops sticks? It took me longer to eat my meal that way.”

Because of their poor physical condition, many POWs succumbed to illnesses such as diphtheria, malaria, or dysentery, which spread rapidly through their crowded quarters. The Japanese did not provide much medical assistance to them, and what they were able to receive came through the auspices of the International Red Cross. However, many
of those who fell ill died before they could receive any medicine or assistance.

**International Law**

Both Japan and Germany were signatories to the Geneva Conventions on the treatment of enemy troops in captivity. These agreements, dating from the 1920s, stated that POWs were to be treated humanely and provided with the necessities of life during their incarceration. In addition, the International Red Cross was to be permitted to send them food supplies, medicine, and letters from home.

While Germany adhered to these conventions to some extent, at least with Western prisoners at the beginning of the war, Japan made no attempt to apply them, and in fact disregarded them with contempt. This was probably because the Japanese military ethos of proper conduct regarded surrender as the most disgraceful fate that could befall a soldier in combat—and the POWs, therefore, were thus undeserving of humane treatment.

**Japanese Values**

Japanese troops were inculcated with the conviction that it was far more honourable to die fighting than to fall into enemy hands while still alive. This is why the advancing U.S. forces faced such dogged resistance as they battled to gain control of places such as Iwo Jima and Okinawa during the final months of the war. It also explains the remarkable phenomenon of Japanese *kamikaze* airmen, who eagerly volunteered for suicide missions, crashing their bomb-loaded fighter planes into U.S. ships in a last-ditch effort to turn the tide of the war. In addition, there were frequent examples of Japanese soldiers, isolated in remote jungle islands scattered throughout the Pacific, who remained in a state of combat readiness years after the end of the war, not knowing that the conflict was long over.

**Legacy of the Camps**

Of the approximately 1,700 Canadians who fell into Japanese hands in Hong Kong that fateful Christmas Day, 1,428 survived and eventually returned home. But their bitter experiences as POWs were to mark them for life. Veterans’ groups have continued to pressure the Canadian government to demand a formal apology from Japan for the treatment the POWs suffered as well as some form of financial compensation for their suffering. To date, this has not occurred, and some ex-POWs criticize Ottawa for placing good trade relations with Japan ahead of the justice to which they believe they are entitled.

Some Hong Kong veterans also opposed the 1988 decision of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney’s government to apologize and provide compensation to the relatives of Japanese-Canadians who were expelled from their homes and incarcerated in internment camps in Canada for the duration of the war.

**Follow-up**

1. With your partner or group, share your responses to the questions in the Focus for Reading activity.

2. Do you agree with veterans’ groups that Canada should do more to pressure Japan to apologize and provide compensation to surviving POWs who suffered in Japanese prison camps during the Second World War? Why or why not?

3. How would you explain the fact that many ex-POWs did not believe that the descendants of Japanese-Canadians who were interned during the war were entitled to any apology or financial compensation from the Canadian government for their losses? Do you share their views? Explain.
Activity: Understanding the Ethical Dimension

Historians who study historical events—such as the development of the first atomic bomb—are careful not to make explicit ethical judgments about those involved in the events. At the same time, they do seek to explain the reasons that people made the decisions they did. Historians—and students—should expect to learn something from the past that helps us to face the issues of today.

To consider the ethical dimension of the development and dropping of the first atomic bomb, we need to analyze U.S. President Harry Truman’s decision based on the information to which he had access at the time, his motivations, and the range of alternatives that were then available to him.

Aspects of the Ethical Dimension

• All accounts of significant historical events, such as the dropping of the atomic bombs, involve implicit or explicit ethical judgments.
• Ethical judgments of significant historical events are made more complex by changes over time. In making ethical judgments of past events, historians have to be careful not to apply their own present-day standards on historical actors in the past who were operating from a very different set of beliefs and did not have the benefit of hindsight.

Your Task

1. Working in small groups, research the U.S.’s decision to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Identify the perspectives of those who were involved at the time this decision was made and explain the reasons for their decision.

2. Then examine accounts that have been written by historians about the dropping of the atomic bombs, (for example, Gar Alperovitz or Robert P. Newman).

3. How were the accounts by modern historians different from those of the actors involved in the historical event?

4. Based on the evidence and historical accounts you explored, how would you judge Truman for his decision? Be prepared to share your conclusion, and your reasons, with another group or the entire class.

A worksheet to help you explore the ethical dimension of history is available at http://newsinreview.cbclearning.ca/worksheets/.

Suggested resources:

• Hiroshima & Nagasaki Remembered, www.hiroshima-remembered.com
• “Enola Gay: Was using the bomb necessary?” by Gar Alperovitz, www.commondreams.org/scriptfiles/views03/1214-06.htm
• Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam, by Gar Alperovitz
• Enola Gay and the Court of History, by Robert P. Newman