

The Price of Peace: A Justified Tragedy?

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (May 2025)



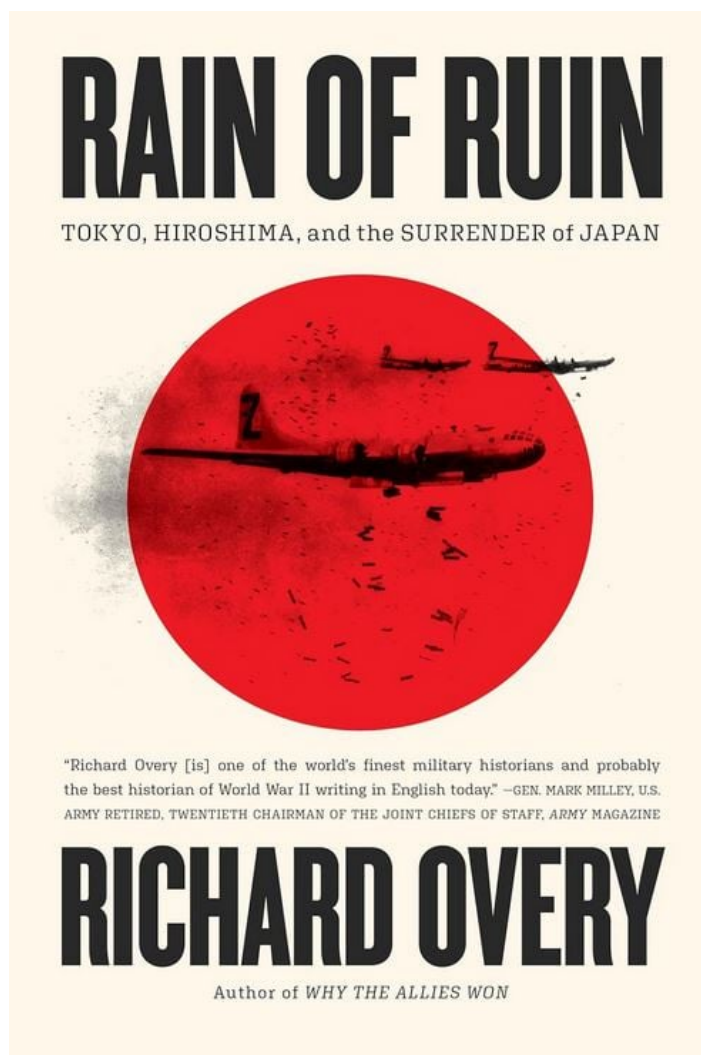
Teishin Shudan Paratroopers attacking an American Airbase at the Battle of Leyte, December 1944 (Kenji Yoshioka, 1945)

My father's first memory in life was of the Zeppelin air raids on London during the Great War, in which about 550 people were killed. My mother remembered the Blitz on London during the second war—her flats were bombed, but she slept through the bombing, waking to find the outer walls of her flat destroyed and her bedroom open to the air. Over five years, about 50,000 people were killed in London by the Luftwaffe.

On March 10, 1945, the massive American firebomb raid on Tokyo killed 100,000 people in one day. On August 6, 1945, a single bomb dropped on Hiroshima was responsible, ultimately, for 140,000 deaths.

You can't stop the march of progress.

The use of nuclear weapons against Japan by the Americans at the end of the war in the Pacific has, from the first, aroused deep moral controversy, which is hardly surprising. Certainly, it ushered in a new source and era of terror for the human psyche: a terror held in relative abeyance for more than fifty years after the Cuban Missile Crisis but recently renewed by President Putin's recent blood-curdling threats to the West.



Richard Overy is Britain's most distinguished historian of the Second World War, and in this short and incisive book he examines the morality of the use of nuclear weapons against Japan from an historical perspective. His fundamental assumption is that the question can only be decided, or at least properly discussed, from the point of view of the contemporaries who had to make the decisions, which can only be reconstructed from the historical record. We always live forwards rather than backwards, and our powers of foresight are inherently limited, though not entirely inexistent. This

often, though not always, makes moral judgment of the actions of the past ambiguous or contentious.

Ever since I can remember, there have been two main schools of thought on the dropping of the bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The first is that, without it, the invasion of Japan by conventional means that was necessary to bring the war to an end would have cost more lives—especially American lives—than were lost to the bombs. This argument depends, of course, on the validity of the utilitarian theory of morality.

The second is that Japan was all but ready to surrender anyway, and that therefore the resort to nuclear weapons was completely unjustified, in fact a terrible war crime. Some have argued that the bombs were intended as a demonstration and warning to the Soviets of American power, and not directed against the Japanese at all, who were but sacrificial lambs to the geopolitics of the time. Professor Overy does not think that there is any evidence for this theory.

Both these arguments rely on empirical assumptions that require historical research for their justification, but in any case Professor Overy rejects the idea that the development of nuclear weapons posed new and unprecedented moral questions in the waging of warfare. Would it have consoled the 100,000 people killed in the Tokyo raid to know that at least they had not been killed by nuclear weapons? The horror of that raid was as great as the horror of Hiroshima, and in fact killed more people than were killed at Nagasaki, albeit that the nuclear bombs continued to kill in horrible ways long after they were dropped (something that was not anticipated).

Moreover, by the end of the war, 50 per cent of the Japanese urban landscape had been destroyed, overwhelmingly by conventional bombing, which continued well after the nuclear bombs had been employed. This makes the assessment of the effect of the bombs on the Japanese decision to surrender rather difficult. If half of your towns and cities have

already been destroyed, and none of the towns or cities of your enemies has, it is obvious that your war is not going very well. If, in addition, your ability to import what is necessary to feed your population and to supply your industry with its necessary inputs has been reduced effectively to nil, the unviability of your position is clear. Sooner or later—probably sooner—you must give up.

Were the Americans aware that Hirohito was increasingly in favour of 'terminating' the war even before the atomic bombs were dropped (the word 'surrender' was anathema to the Japanese)? The Americans were convinced that the Japanese were so fanaticised that they would fight to the last man, which, while not entirely true, was an understandable misapprehension considering the kamikaze attacks on American ships that sunk many and killed 5000 American sailors.

Moreover, there was a desire for vengeance on the Japanese population as a whole. The extreme cruelty of the Japanese towards their captives was well-known and advertised. This was not just propagandistic mythology of the kind usually employed in war: I remember meeting an American doctor who had been a prisoner of the Japanese in the Philippines. Half of his unit had been starved to death and he himself had very nearly starved to death, emerging on liberation with severe beriberi. It is unfortunately perfectly normal for the perpetrators of such ill-treatment to be taken as representatives of their nation as a whole, and therefore for many Americans to have thought that the hundred thousand people of Tokyo reduced to charred cinders deserved their fate.

Moreover, in total war, in which whole populations are mobilised for a war effort, the distinction between military and civilian targets is blurred. When my mother's flat was bombed, she was working in a factory making tanks (she had three jobs). Was she therefore a legitimate military target?

On humanitarian grounds, the Americans had been critical of

the British bombing of German cities, which they called 'area bombing.' They saw this as the illegitimate targeting of non-combatants; the British argued that it had two justifications, the first being that it would reduce German morale and the second being that the distinction was no longer valid in any case. They claimed, for example, that Dresden, besides being the Florence of the Elbe, had installations of military importance and therefore was suitable as a target for destruction. Never would they admit that they did it because, by then, they hated the Germans, who after all had done much the same within the limits of their capacities.

Planning the raid on Tokyo, the Americans claimed that it was justified because Japanese industry was disseminated through the city, for example in small family workshops. This allowed them to think that their bombing was, morally, superior, to that of the British, but fundamentally it was the same. It was surely not a coincidence that they chose as their target that part of the city with the highest density of population, living in highly inflammable wooden housing. They could not admit to themselves that bestial emotions of sheer hatred could have played any part in their decision. Every combatant in a desperate war needs to feel itself superior to the enemy, either morally, culturally or spiritually.

What is the practical effect of the mass bombing of civilians, from the point of view of military efficacy? After all, if it is not efficacious militarily, it can have no justification whatsoever, not even utilitarian. The consensus now seems to be that this is not very effective in undermining civilian morale and has even less effect on military production. (The famous Harvard economist, J.K. Galbraith, was part of a commission immediately after the end of the war, to examine the effects of such bombing, and came to this conclusion.) I confess that I am sceptical about this: all that one can say is that targeting transport facilities might be more effective at a lower cost in life. I find it difficult to believe that

the destruction of half a country's towns and cities had little effect on either morale or production.

It is often said, plausibly enough, that the ability to deal death and destruction at a distance, almost in the abstract, conduces to the ease of large-scale massacre. If those who dropped the bombs on Tokyo, for example, had been able to see the effect of what they were doing, they would have refused to continue (there is a horrific photograph in this book of the aftermath of that bombing raid). This is reassuring, but I am not certain that it is true. All genocides have plenty of witnesses and very few perpetrators who object.

One of the most alarming episodes recounted in this book is the reaction of the scientists at Los Alamos (where the bombs were designed) when they learnt that the bombs had worked exactly as planned. There was prolonged cheering and celebration: the technical problem of killing hundreds of thousands of people with only one or two bombs had been solved. Only later did a kind of moral hangover set in.

What part did the dropping of the bomb play in the surrender of Japan? I am sure that if you asked a hundred people in the street, at least the first hundred who had any historical knowledge whatever (it would be an interesting study in itself to know how many people you would have to approach to find that hundred), at least ninety-nine of them would say that it had been decisive. Hirohito's famous speech, in which he had said there had been developments not necessarily in Japan's favour, was supposedly a response to the two bombs.

Professor Overy, however, takes a different view. He does not deny that the nuclear bombs exerted an influence on the Japanese decision not to fight on, but it was in conjunction with other factors. Even without the bombs almost half the country had already been destroyed; it was so blockaded that it could import almost nothing; its population was starving and even if the Japanese political elite had little feeling

for its own population, it was obvious that such a population was not in a condition to resist much further (Overy does not mention this, but by the end of the war, Japanese life expectancy had fallen much below that of Sub-Saharan African countries today, and was possibly the lowest in the world, certainly of any industrialised country.) There remained a war party to the end, and many generals committed ritual suicide on the order to lay down their arms, but even in a society as attached to military honour as almost the ultimate good, not everyone was prepared to die in a hopeless war.

Possibly the decisive factor was the decision of the Soviet Union to declare war on Japan, when defeat was already assured. The Japanese (who still held their Asian empire) were in no position to resist the Soviets, who would have taken Manchuria and Korea without difficulty, and would have invaded, and taken Hokkaido. The Japanese elite was more afraid of Soviet communism than of American occupation, and surrender to the Americans was the only way to avert a Soviet takeover of not only the empire but of part of Japan itself.

The book does not say much about the aftermath of the war. Not surprisingly, when Japan had recovered sufficiently for it to concern itself with such matters, a strong pacifist, anti-militarist and especially ant-nuclear weapon movement grew up, but it should be said that the American Occupation was possibly the most successful occupation in world history, insofar as it averted hatred of the victors, allowed for some but not total national continuity, allowed an astonishing economic recovery, and restored sovereignty to a nation that had not long before been hated and despised. This all showed a wisdom not often on display in history and I suspect that even to this day not many people appreciate just how extraordinary it was.

This book would make excellent reading for students of moral philosophy. It could serve as a template for an infinite and endless number of discussions: for example on the question of

ends and means, and the role of inherently uncertain knowledge of the effects of actions on the future on the subsequent moral evaluation of those actions.

I should add that the Professor's prose is a pleasure to read, which one quite often reads these days is an added bonus, as if bonuses were not inherently additional.

[Table of Contents](#)

Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are [*Neither Trumpets nor Violins*](#) (with Kenneth Francis and Samuel Hux) and [*Ramses: A Memoir*](#) from New English Review Press.

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