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The Atomic Bombing and Soviet Union's Expansion in the Far East

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At the Yalta conference in February 1945, the big three, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin met to plan the defeat of Nazi Germany. They decided that Germany would be divided into four occupational zones ruled by Britain, the USA, Soviet Union, and France. Additionally, Stalin agreed that the defeated countries of Eastern Europe would be able to choose their government through free elections. Furthermore, Russia would enter the war against Japan on the Pacific front in two or three months after Germany's defeat and would obtain the Kurils and the territories lost during the Russo-Japanese War as concessions. To reach Germany, Soviet troops began advancing into Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and occupied large areas of Eastern Europe. Finally, Soviet forces invaded Germany who formally surrendered on May 8, 1945. Eventually, Roosevelt became heavily criticized for Yalta as it became apparent that Stalin violated policies regarding the political freedom of Poland and other Eastern European countries by establishing communist states. Meanwhile, the US developed the first atomic bomb through the Manhattan project in 1945. When Roosevelt died on April 12, the new president, Harry S. Truman, found out about the atomic bombs from Henry L. Stimson, the former Secretary of War, and James F.

Byrnes, Secretary of State, and had to decide whether to authorize the use of the A-bombs against Japan.

Truman's decision to drop the atomic bombs "Little Boy" on Hiroshima and "Fat Man" on Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, 1945 is one of the most historically controversial decisions. The decision has sparked disagreements between historians, with the main three groups being orthodox, revisionist, and post-revisionist. Orthodox historians argue that the atomic bombs were necessary and saved both American and Japanese lives.¹ On the other hand, revisionist historians argue that the bombing was unnecessary and used to intimidate the Soviet Union and limit its expansion in East Asia and Europe. Lastly, post-revisionists argue that the bombs would be used regardless of the Soviets but the Soviet problems added a supplementary reason for their use. Despite Hiroshima and Nagasaki being credited to prevent the world from nuclear wars, around 2,000 nuclear weapons were tested in the last five decades.² Thus, the nuclear danger is present nowadays and, by having a better understanding of why the A-bombs were used against Japan, it becomes easier to prevent their future usage. This brings forth the important question: "To what extent was Truman's decision to deploy the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 intended to limit Soviet influence in the region?" This essay will address this question, using these three schools of thought, primary and secondary sources with incorporated source evaluation to answer the question at hand. After extensive research, it appears that the atomic bombs were dropped to some extent as a diplomatic tool to limit the Soviet expansion in East

¹ Barton J. Bernstein, "Understanding the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender: Missed Opportunities, Little-Known Near Disasters, and Modern Memory," *Diplomatic History* 19, no. 2 (1995): 227-73.

² "End Nuclear Tests Day - History," United Nations, accessed September 2, 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/observances/end-nuclear-tests-day/history>.

Asia but also intimidating Russia to obtain better peace terms in Eastern Europe and the war could have ended without the use of the bombs with limited casualties.

Roosevelt had kept the bombs as an option for future bargaining lever or threat against the Soviets, but Truman's policies demonstrate a considerable change from his predecessor aimed at reducing Soviet influence in Europe and Asia.³ When the atomic bombs were developed they appeared so powerful that they became an alternative to the Soviet intervention, hence, offering a solution to containing Soviet expansion in the Far East. Not only that, but the Russian entry alone would likely have forced Japan to surrender, eliminating the need for an American invasion of Japan, which the Americans most likely knew of through intercepted messages. Therefore, the conventional belief that the bombs were used solely for military purposes, saving American lives, and avoiding public backlash if Truman decided to send the Americans back into the war, appears not as the prime reason for the use of the bomb. Furthermore, Truman and his advisors viewed the bombs as an atomic monopoly to intimidate the Soviet Union, free Eastern Europe, and establish better peace terms, thus adding another reason for their use. The connection between the bombs and the issues of Eastern Europe is undeniable, making them a significant reason the bombs, equally important as limiting Russian expansion in Asia. Thus, knowing that surrender could be achieved with little American lives, policymakers focused their attention primarily on containing Stalin's growing power in both East Asia and Europe.

What Changed from Yalta to Potsdam?

³ Barton J. Bernstein, "Roosevelt, Truman, and the Atomic Bomb, 1941-1945: A Reinterpretation," *Political Science Quarterly* 90, no. 1 (1975): 31; Michael O'Neal, *President Truman and the Atomic Bomb: Opposing Viewpoints* (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1990), 87.

Truman inherited some anti-Soviet policies from Roosevelt but his experience with Russian expansion of power in Asia and Europe played a greater role in his decision of dropping the bombs than the pressure of following Roosevelt. Churchill believed that an atomic monopoly, where the bombs would be kept a secret, would have a significant advantage on postwar terms. When Churchill and Roosevelt signed the Agreement and Declaration of Trust on June 13, 1944, seeking control of available supplies of uranium and thorium, it became apparent that Roosevelt pursued policies consistent with Churchill. Thus, evidence suggests that Roosevelt recognized the diplomatic value of the bombs against Russia. When Truman came to the presidency, he was following a very prestigious president, who was loved by Americans so it would take immense effort and self-confidence to strike out on a completely new course of policies from Roosevelt.⁴ Also, Truman was restricted by Roosevelt's decision to exclude the Soviets on the partnership of the bomb and depended on Roosevelt's advisors who were anti-Soviet. Given Truman's personal respect for Roosevelt, Robert Lifton argues from an Orthodox perspective that Truman felt the psychological presence of Roosevelt in his early phase of the presidency and clung onto his policies.⁵ Lifton is an American psychiatrist, known for his studies of psychological causes and effects of wars. Accordingly, his argument may be limited as he has a psychological perspective rather than a diplomatic one. On the contrary, the two presidents practiced policies differently. Roosevelt followed careful diplomacy of incremental gains and believed the concessions at Yalta were a restoration of Russia's pre-1905 rights and reasonable.⁶

⁴ Barton J. Bernstein, "Seizing the Contested Terrain of Early Nuclear History: Stimson, Conant, and Their Allies Explain the Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," 34.

⁵ R. J. Lifton and G. Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: Fifty years of denial* (New York: Avon Books, 1995), 124-125.

⁶ Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam; the Use of Atomic Bomb and the American Confrontation with Soviet Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 92.

Yet, Truman distrusted Stalin and after 11 days in the office, he confronted Molotov, the Soviet foreign minister, about the Yalta terms of Eastern Europe that were being broken.⁷ Also, Truman was the ultimate decision-maker and taking into account the limitation of Lifton's argument, it is likely that the psychological pressure of Roosevelt's legacy did not affect Truman's decision as much as other factors such as the Russian expansion and military necessity did. Additionally, it was never determined under Roosevelt that the bombs should be used against Japan, and Truman made that decision. So although Roosevelt's legacy provided Truman with some anti-Soviet policies it was the atomic bomb that shaped Truman's foreign policies regarding Russia, as later examined.⁸ The immediate benefit of containing Soviet expansion in East Asia and the eventual diplomatic upper hand compared to Russia that the bombs gave the US, provided a much greater motivation for the use of the bomb as opposed to Roosevelt's legacy. Therefore, Truman inherited anti-Soviet views from Roosevelt which he adopted in his early presidency but it was the ability to limit Soviet borders in East Asia and influence on Europe that led him to use the bombs.

The war could have ended without the use of the atomic bomb but Truman purposely used the bomb to limit the Soviet expansion in East Asia. The solution to an unconditional surrender without using the bombs was a two-step invasion of the home islands Kyushu in November 1945 and Honshu in March with the help of Russia. By 1944, the role of the USSR was to lessen the American casualties by containing and defeating the Kwantung Army in Manchuria and preventing reinforcement in the home islands. At the Yalta conference in 1944, the entry of Russia into the war was deemed as necessary since the war against Germany had not

⁷ Alperovitz, 106.

⁸ Alperovitz, 661.

been won and the Allied powers needed their help to win the war. However, in 1945, the war on the European front had ended and the US could defeat the Japanese regardless of Soviet entry.⁹ Yet, Russian entry was beneficial by saving American lives. However, the disadvantage of Russian entry was its expansion in East Asia due to the concessions promised at Yalta. Thus, welcoming Russia into the war was Truman's dilemma. Moreover, there was an increasing concern for Soviet Union's growing power. As Stimson, in his letter to the Byrnes on May 21, 1945 on War Department views about Russia noted, Russians had the military power to exercise control over the areas promised at Yalta and would come into war regardless of what America did.¹⁰ This analysis shows policy makers like Stimson desired to limit Soviet expansion in the Far East but there was no benefit in rediscussing Yalta concessions as Soviet Union had the power to take them regardless. This source provides valuable information as it reveals the perspective of the US War Department on Soviet Union and its expansion in the Far East at the time. However, it is possibly limited by its content as it does not mention the A-bombs and their potential use. Nevertheless, it is evidence of American distrust towards the Soviets and their desire to alter the Yalta concessions. The bomb provided an advantageous opportunity for the Americans to force Japanese surrender before the Soviet intervention and restrict Russia's expansion in Asia. Since the bombs were a theoretical weapon until they were tested on July 16, Truman postponed the Potsdam conference twice¹¹ to a final date of July 17, 1945, until their

⁹ Goode Hillis, and Joint Secretaries, "Atomic Bombing of Japan and Occupation Plans," August 6, 2016, <https://archive.org/stream/AtomicBombingOfJapanAndOccupationPlans/World%20War%20II%20-%20U.S.%20Invasion%20Of%20Japan%20%26%20A-Bomb%20Decision%20Military%20Files/Operation%20OLYMPIC#page/n23/mode/2up>, 10.

¹⁰ Henry Stimson, "The Secretary of War (Stimson) to the Acting Secretary of State," U.S. Department of State (U.S. Department of State), accessed September 2, 2020, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v07/d612>.

¹¹ O'Neal, 92.

proven combat use. Likewise, at a meeting between Stalin and Harry Hopkins, one of Roosevelt's retired advisors from May 26 to June 6, Stalin made it clear that he supported unconditional surrender and believed a ground invasion of Japan was absolutely necessary.¹² Historian Tsuyoshi Hasegawa interprets this evidence as Stalin prolonging the war by insisting on unconditional surrender until his preparations for intervention were complete and Truman prolonging the war by postponing Potsdam until the atomic bombs were ready to shock Japan into surrender.¹³ Hasegawa has used primary evidence from Russia, Japan, and America to build his argument from an international, well-balanced viewpoint. Taking into account Hasegawa's argument and evidence of America's desire to limit communist power, it is evident that the decision to postpone Potsdam indicates that Truman considered the bombs critical to limiting Soviet expansion in East Asia.

After the denotation of the A-bombs and their proven power, they became an alternative to Soviet entry, so the major goal of Truman and Byrne became securing Japan's surrender before the Soviets intervention.¹⁴ At Potsdam, it was decided that Russia would enter the war mid-August and Truman mentioned that the US had a "new weapon of unusual destructive force"¹⁵, which Stalin seemed uninterested in. However, after Potsdam, Stalin began war preparations to enter the war earlier than expected. He moved the attack date from the predicted date of August 11 by forty-eight hours, as he ordered on August 7 to begin the Manchurian

¹² Hasegawa Tsuyoshi, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2005), 82-84.

¹³ Hasegawa, 256.

¹⁴ Lifton, 150.

¹⁵ Andrew Glass and Joshua Zeitz, "Truman Told of Successful Atomic Bomb Test, July 17, 1945," Politico, July 17, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/07/17/this-day-in-politics-july-17-1945-716916>.

operation at midnight on August 9. Additionally, a condition for Stalin to be able to claim concessions was to reach an agreement with the Chinese government, which Stalin decided to discard and enter the war. Historian David Holloway interprets this evidence as Stalin speeding Soviet intervention due to the A-bombs, “it is possible that Stalin believed Truman used the bombs to thwart Soviet purposes in the Far East.”¹⁶ Holloway’s perspective is valuable because his book *Stalin and the Bomb* is from a Russian perspective, based on Russian archives. Thus, it appears, considering Stalin’s orders after finding out that the atomic bombs were to be used, he felt the need to secure his concessions. Stalin, who wished to seize the Kurils and northern half of Hokkaido, was stopped by Truman from invading Hokkaido. Also, on August 16 it was announced that Japan would not be divided into occupation zones and the Chinese would not make concessions to Russia.¹⁷ Without the use of the bomb, Russia would be in the position to seize Manchuria, dominate Northern China, control Korea, and demand to be part of Japan’s occupation.¹⁸ Truman, however, successfully contained Russia’s expansion. Therefore, the A-bombs proved successful in limiting USSR’s expansion in East Asia. After all, considering the A-bombs and Soviet intervention were alternatives which would both lead to an unconditional surrender, Truman preferred to use the bomb to prevent the expansion of Soviet borders in East Asia. The postponed Potsdam conference is evidence of Truman’s desire to make use of the bombs in a diplomatic way. Besides, Stalin’s rush to gain its concessions before Japan’s surrender showed that he felt the bombs were intended to limit his expansion. Hence, Truman and Stalin both recognized that the bombs could be used to limit Soviet power in the Far East.

¹⁶ David Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb: the Soviet Union and Atomic Energy, 1939-1956* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 128, 134.

¹⁷ Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy*, 192.

¹⁸ O’Neal, 94.

So, one of the main reasons that the bombs were used was to limit the inevitable expansion of Russia in East Asia upon a ground invasion. Consequently, the war would have ended with the ground invasion, however, the bomb was used to prevent the Russian entry into the war and their expansion in Asia.

Saving American Lives?

Soviet intervention alone could have led to the surrender of Japan with minimal American lives but the A-bombs contained the Russian expansion and saved American lives which made them the best option. The official justification for the use of the bomb was to bring a speedy end to the war and to save American lives, allowing them to be used instead of an invasion. The first phase of an American ground invasion called the *Olympics* would take place on November 1, 1945, in Kyushu. The second phase called *Coronet*, in March 1946, in Tokyo. According to military planners in 1945, the estimated American fatalities were about 25,000 for the Kyushu campaign and 21,000 more for the Tokyo Plain assault in 1946.¹⁹ Russian entry would lessen American casualties and was always kept as an option. Furthermore, the mass killing of enemies was normalized due to the concept of total war so a few Americans were troubled by the killing of the Japanese. So, as an orthodox historian, Robert Maddox argues: the American leaders feared a political backlash if they chose to send the Americans to war against Japan instead of using the bombs which cost two billion dollars to develop.²⁰ Maddox's view is valuable because he is a well-informed historian who teaches at Pennsylvania State University.

¹⁹ Bernstein, "Understanding the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender, 232.

²⁰ Robert J. Maddox, *Weapons for Victory: the Hiroshima Decision* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 155.

However, he has made it his mission to expose the revisionists as dishonest so his inability to accept their perspective may indicate bias.²¹ Therefore, if the A-bombs were the only way to avoid a November invasion they saved American lives and helped Truman avoid public backlash. However, given the limitation of Maddox's perspective, it is important to take into account the Revisionist argument that the bombs were not the only way to end the war with minimal casualties.

The Japanese would probably have surrendered before the November invasion based on Soviet entry alone which takes away value from the argument that the bombs were used solely to save lives. The Japanese military Ketsu-go strategy of destroying the American forces was based on Soviet neutrality, so when Russia invaded Manchuria the military was taken by complete shock. Also, Japan was aware of the danger of Soviet expansion beyond Manchuria, Korea, Sakhalin, and the Kurils if it did not surrender.²² The US was aware of how Japan had approached the Soviets for mediation and was desperate to keep them neutral through "Magic" intercepts. An intercepted message in March from Japan's ambassador to Naotake Sato, a Japanese diplomat, predicted that Soviet entry would lead them into "unprecedented despair and despondency."²³ This source gives the Japanese perspective on Soviet entry and the importance of keeping the Soviet Union neutral for them. However, it is possibly limited by its content as it does not state if Japan was willing to surrender upon Soviet entry. Taking into account the limitation of this source in combination with Japan's other efforts to keep the Soviet Union out of the war, it is expected that American officials understood the political-military shock of

²¹ Victor Fic, "Hiroshima Revisionism: An Interview with Robert Maddox," History News Network, accessed September 2, 2020, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/55076>.

²² Bernstein, "Compelling Japan's Surrender without the a-Bomb, Soviet Entry, or Invasion: Reconsidering the Us Bombing Survey's Early-Surrender Conclusions," 96.

²³ Alperovitz, 20.

Russian entry and probable surrender of Japan.²⁴ Therefore, had the American policymakers taken into account Japan's military situation and its efforts to keep the Soviet Union neutral, the war could have ended by Soviet entry, without the bomb or November invasion. Thus, the bombs were not used solely to save American lives but to restrain Soviet power in Asia and Europe.

Additionally, the official motivation for saving American lives for the bombing is exaggerated. According to Truman's speech draft on December 15, 1945, "quarter of a million of the flower of our young manhood was worth a couple of Japanese cities and I still think they were and are"²⁵. This source is possibly biased, as it is an official speech, meant as a justification for the use of the bomb. In fact, the numbers presented in this draft for American casualties are higher than the numbers predicted during the time the invasion was being planned. Yet, Truman wrote this a few months after the bombings and it reflects part of his reasoning for the use of the bomb. Thus, taking into account the limitation of this source, Truman viewed the bombs as a way to save American lives but this justification is exaggerated and was not the only motivation. In short, the evidence above suggests that while the surrender of Japan and saving of the American lives were a factor for dropping the bombs, they were not the only factors. Once Truman knew the war against Japan could be won, he focused on the diplomatic and militaristic advantages of the A-bombs.²⁶ Therefore, the bombs were used primarily for diplomatic advantages against the Soviet Union over invasion with the benefit of saving American lives and limiting Soviet expansion.

²⁴ Alperovitz, 117.

²⁵ Harry Truman, "Truman Speech Draft, Dec. 15, 1945," *Truman Speech Draft, Dec. 15, 1945* (1945), <https://www.stripes.com/news/special-reports/world-war-ii-the-final-chapter/wwii-victory-in-japan/when-the-president-said-yes-to-the-bomb-truman-s-diaries-reveal-no-hesitation-some-regret-1.360308>.

²⁶ Lifton, 160.

Atomic Diplomacy

The A-bombs were not only used to contain the Soviet Union's expansion in East Asia but also to dictate post-war terms in Eastern Europe. America and Russia had different views on post-war Europe: America had the "universalists" view in which all nations shared a common interest in the affairs of the world and Russia believed in the "sphere-of-influence" in which each power had their individual sphere of interest.²⁷ During Truman's presidency it became evident that Stalin had established a communist state in Poland and was simply seizing territory.²⁸ Consequently, the US feared Russia's growing power in Europe. Truman did not avoid the problem and followed a strategy of immediate showdown with Russia. On April 23, Truman became furious with Molotov, Soviet foreign minister, when he refused to accept Soviet restraint in Eastern Europe. Additionally, by the last week of April, the President had adopted a tough attitude toward its troops in the Soviet Zone of Germany and the issue of Poland being communists but there was no sign that the Soviets would yield to the issue of Poland. Realizing the ineffectiveness of immediate showdown, Truman sent Harry Hopkins, one of Roosevelt's retired diplomats on a goodwill mission about Poland to Stalin. At the same time, Truman asked to speed up the testing of the bombs. Revisionist historians argue that the Hopkin mission was intended to stall time until the bombs were tested to threaten the Soviets, force them into cooperation, and establish peace in Europe without keeping a large army there.²⁹ From the perspective of Revisionist historian Gar Alperovitz, considering that Truman desired to limit the

²⁷ Arthur Schlesinger, "Origins of the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs* 46, no. 1 (1967): 22-52.

²⁸ O'Neal, 86-87.

²⁹ O'Neal, 91.

Soviet power in both Eastern Europe and Asia, the bombs gave him sufficient power to do so.³⁰ Gar's perspective is valuable since his book *Atomic Diplomacy* is based on a handful of primary sources and he is a leading Cold War historian. Therefore, the bomb provided an excellent solution to containing Russian power. Besides, after Japan's downfall on August 14, 1945, Truman made public his resolve to maintain the production of the new weapon secret. His declarations revealed that Stimson's early idea of building international control of the bombs was rejected and they were to be used to secure concessions and intimidate the Soviet Union to enhance America's political position.

The bombs were taken as a threat by the Soviets, providing additional evidence that they were, in fact, an atomic diplomacy. According to the memoirs of General Georgy Zhukov, a Soviet general, after Truman told Stalin that America had developed a new weapon, Stalin reacted in his chambers by saying "Let them. We'll have to talk it over with Kurchatov and get him to speed things up."³¹ Stalin already knew of the atomic bomb from his NKGB spies and according to this account, he realized that the bombs were meant to threaten them. The content of this source might not be entirely accurate because it is a memoir written from memory. However, it gives a first-hand account of Stalin's reaction which is valuable for this research. Hence, Stalin believed that the bombs were meant to intimidate him so he also had to build the bombs. This initiated the nuclear arms race; the main conflict of the Cold War, which lasted until 1991. Therefore, the initial belief that the dropping of the bombs would intimidate the Soviet Union instead led to the cold war. Examining Truman's policy regarding Eastern Europe and the growing concern for the Soviet Union's power, it is evident that the bomb and the issues of

³⁰ Alperovitz, 277.

³¹ Georgii Konstantinovich Zhukov, *The Memoirs of Marshal Zhukov* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1973), 674-675.

Eastern Europe were inseparable. Moreover, Stalin's recognition of American motives for the use of the bombs provides strong evidence that the bombs were used to intimidate the Soviet Union and ensure a stronger diplomatic position. In summary, the bombs were not only dropped to limit Soviet expansion in East Asia but to intimidate the Soviet Union into accepting peace terms for Eastern Europe as well.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Truman's decision to drop the atomic bombs was to a significant extent motivated by limiting Soviet expansion in East Asia and post-war diplomatic calculations on dominating peace terms in Eastern Europe rather than saving American lives. Among many of the factors that influenced Truman's decision were his psychological restrictions regarding the legacy of his predecessor and the fear of public backlash if he chose an invasion instead of using the bombs. However, based on the possibility that the war could have ended by a Soviet intervention, it is possible to argue that fear of public backlash played a less important role than containing Soviet influence in East Asia and Europe. Besides, on the basis that Russia's growing power became a serious issue during late Roosevelt's time and Truman's time, it is arguable that Truman's policies were different from Roosevelt and a significant reason why he dropped the bombs was the American distrust of Stalin due to the broken promises at Yalta. This is evident because Truman chose to use the bomb over the planned invasion to prevent giving the concessions promised at Yalta to Stalin which would lead to Soviet expansion in Asia. Although the Orthodox viewpoint believes that the bombs were used to save American lives and bring a speedy end to the war is true, they were not the only way to do this and the Russian entry alone,

arguably, could have achieved this. Again, this option was avoided to reduce the expansion of Soviet territories in Asia. Lastly, since Truman's first weeks of presidency in April, the post-war diplomatic advantages of using the bombs were recognized and the two issues became bound together. The bombs were crucial to Truman in intimidating the Soviet Union and having the dominant hand in determining peace terms for Eastern Europe and so played an undeniable role in his decision. Overall, Truman's decision was to some extent to limit Soviet expansion in East Asia and some other extent to dictate the post-war term in Eastern Europe, which were equally advantageous and important.

About the author

Negar is a Medical Sciences undergraduate student at the University of Western Ontario, Canada, with a fascination for historical subjects. She is intrigued by all aspects of History but her research particularly surrounds the events leading to the Cold War, late imperial Russia and the rise of Communism in Russia. Since 2018, she has expanded her knowledge on these topics through reading numerous books by famous Historians such as A.J.P Taylor, Richard Evans, Sheila Fitzpatrick, and writing her own research papers. Her first published paper, "The atomic bombing and Soviet Union's expansion in the Far East" attempts to provide a fresh perspective on Truman's intentions for dropping the A-bombs on Japan in 1945.

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