

The Rapid Postwar Increase of America's Nuclear Arsenal. Churning out Nukes "Like Sausages"

The nuclear scarcity of the early postwar years soon gave way to nuclear plenty.

By [Shane Quinn](#)

Global Research, August 09, 2022

Region: [Russia and FSU](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Militarization and WMD](#)

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First published by GR on June 28, 2018

By New Year's Day 1951, the United States had increased its atomic bomb stockpile by many times over, enough to wipe out the Soviet Union. In June 1946, to the frustration of US war planners, the military possessed a modest nine atomic bombs. However, less than five years later, the world's leading power acquired an arsenal of 400 such bombs. As the postwar years further advanced America was churning out nuclear weapons "like sausages", to borrow the phrase of Soviet president Nikita Khrushchev.

Despite Japan bearing the brunt of two atomic attacks in August 1945, it was in the direction of the Soviet Union that America's nuclear focus was truly pointed. The atomic assaults on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, eventually killing over 200,000 people, were further meant as a warning signal to the USSR.

US General Leslie Groves, in charge of the nuclear program known as the "Manhattan Project", had in 1944 confirmed that the Soviets were identified as America's real long-term enemy. At Los Alamos, New Mexico, General Groves had revealed this bombshell to Joseph Rotblat, a Polish-born nuclear physicist. Rotblat said many years later,

"I believed that we had to develop the bomb as a deterrent to the Germans who, we believed - wrongly - were also developing the bomb. It was at this time [1944] that Groves mentioned that the real purpose in making the bomb was to subdue the Soviets. I was terribly shocked".

Image on the right: Joseph Rotblat



Unknown to Rotblat was that Hitler had, as early as June 1942, decided against the development of an atomic bomb – on both racial and pragmatic grounds – as repeatedly outlined by Nazi war minister Albert Speer, one of the most powerful figures in the Third Reich. By the summer of 1944, Allied intelligence accounts were flowing in that a Nazi atomic bomb was non-existent. Even earlier than this, in late 1943, the British spy Paul Rosbaud operating in Germany had reported to his superiors that the Nazi nuclear program was idle. This crucial information was subsequently relayed to Manhattan Project intelligent services, and on to General Groves.

Meanwhile at the end of 1944 Rotblat had endured enough, resigning from the Manhattan Project on moral grounds, the only such scientist to do so. If the Nazis had no nuclear plans, as neither did the Russians seriously at that time, was it really worth pursuing the development of atomic weapons? It would inevitably lead to nuclear proliferation, thereby placing the human species, including Americans, under increasing peril.

In the following decades, Rotblat himself became a noted anti-nuclear proponent and activist. Just months before his death in August 2005, aged 96, Rotblat penned an open letter to US president George W. Bush, writing that:

“The only way to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and to remove the fear of their inevitable use remains, as it has always been, the global elimination of all nuclear weapons by all states”.

As the Second World War ended in mid-August 1945, just days following Japan’s surrender American strategists were highlighting which Soviet cities to attack with atomic bombs. Major General Lauris Norstad, a great advocate of nuclear weapons, sent General Groves a list marking out 15 “key Soviet cities” headed by the capital Moscow, and 25 other “leading Soviet cities”, including Leningrad – which in particular was still reeling from the horrors of the Nazi siege of that city. Norstad also compiled an estimate of how many atomic bombs it would require to destroy each city, with Moscow and Leningrad needing six each.

Dwight D. Eisenhower, as Commanding General, had first met Norstad in Algiers in October 1942. Eisenhower described the then Lieutenant-Colonel Norstad as “a young air officer who so impressed me by his alertness, grasp of problems, and personality that I never thereafter lost sight of him. He was, and is, one of those rare men whose capacity knows no limits”. Indeed, reaching all the way to the earth-altering subject of nuclear weapons. This was also the case under Eisenhower when he became president in 1953. By the time “General Ike” departed office after two terms in 1961, the US arsenal had grown to 18,000 nuclear bombs.



In the early postwar years, the US military’s demand for weapons was not in line with supply. As euphoria of victory in the war dissipated, in late 1945 the US had only two atomic bombs in its arsenal. By the time America’s first official postwar plan against the USSR was formulated, in November 1947, it called for hitting 24 Soviet cities with 34 atomic bombs. However, in late 1947, the US had only 13 such weapons, which were of the Nagasaki type. The small number of atomic bombs was a closely-guarded secret. When president Harry Truman was informed of the true figures in April 1947, he was shocked by the news, presuming the stockpile to be in the dozens.

Following the Berlin Blockade (June 1948-May 1949), one of the first Cold War crises, Truman initiated three separate budgetary increases for nuclear bomb production. The desire to create more weapons was increased by the realization that the Soviets had, in late August 1949, tested their first atomic device – which was a replica of the Nagasaki bomb. News of the Soviets' successful nuclear detonation astonished not only the American public, but many up the chain of US command; it had been thought the USSR would not attain such a goal until the mid-1950s.

Meanwhile, in October 1948 General Curtis LeMay, an especially hawkish US commander, became head of Strategic Air Command when he succeeded General George Kenney. LeMay quickly formulated the Emergency War Plan, which laid down demands for Strategic Air Command to “increase its capability to such an extent that it would be possible to deliver the entire stockpile of atomic bombs, if made available, in a single massive attack” against the USSR. LeMay's strategy outlined that 133 atomic bombs would be dropped on 70 Soviet urban areas, killing perhaps 2.7 million people, almost all of them civilians. However, the final death toll would likely be far higher than that.

Such a strategy was being devised against a USSR which, in late 1948, had no atomic weapons. Furthermore, the socialist state was still recovering from the Nazi invasion of a few years before, and represented no threat to the American mainland. Nor would it do so for many years. By the following year, October 1949, LeMay's Emergency War Plan had expanded to call for attacks on 104 Soviet urban centers with 220 atomic bombs, plus a few dozen weapons held back in reserve. In the summer of 1950, the Americans had possession of almost 300 nuclear weapons – they were all of the Nagasaki variety, plutonium implosion bombs, now being churned out on a production line. In 1950, the Soviets had comfortably less than 10 such weapons.

Just a decade later, 1960, the US nuclear arsenal not only further multiplied, but the nature of the bombs had also radically altered. They were almost entirely comprised of the “thermonuclear” variety: That is, hydrogen bombs, also known as H-bombs. These weapons are a thousand times more powerful than the atomic bombs dropped on Japan. Come the latter stages of the Eisenhower presidency, the nuclear age had reached a point by which it became a grave threat to the human species, as it has done through to today.

The first hydrogen bomb was successfully tested in November 1952 by the Americans (with the Soviets following suit the next year). It had long been in the pipeline. A decade previously, in July 1942, the Hungarian-American physicist Edward Teller had a revealing discussion with his colleague Hans Bethe. Teller, an early member of the Manhattan Project, said

“the fission bomb [atomic bomb] was all well and good and, essentially, was now a sure thing”.

He felt that “what we should really think about was the possibility of igniting deuterium by a fission weapon – the hydrogen bomb”. Teller was later known as “the father of the hydrogen bomb”.

By the mid-to-late 1950s, increasing numbers of hydrogen bombs were entering the US arsenal, replacing the “obsolete” atomic bombs. In 1955, the estimated death toll from atomic weapon assaults on the USSR was 13 million dead. By the following year, 1956, there

was a more than tenfold increase in the expected death toll with the new hydrogen bombs. It was thought that 150 million Soviets would be killed.

Come the early 1960s – with Kennedy now in office – the calculated death toll in the entire Soviet bloc, from expanding US nuclear attacks, had risen to over 200 million. Many millions would also die in America’s NATO ally countries, and neutral nations, by the resulting spread of radioactive fallout, which US planners were aware of. Simultaneous American bombings of Communist China were forecast to eventually kill about 300 million Chinese. From late 1949, China was added to the nuclear hit list following the Mao Zedong-led revolution. These enormous killing estimates were kept so secret that very few people, even within the American government, were intimate with the numbers.

By 1983, environmental scientists learnt that any such attacks would have killed almost all humans on earth, with the resulting nuclear winter quickly leading to a global famine.

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Shane Quinn obtained an honors journalism degree. He is interested in writing primarily on foreign affairs, having been inspired by authors like Noam Chomsky. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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