

## „The Second Bomb Was Clearly a Field Test“

Das Interview mit dem US-amerikanischen Historiker Martin J. Sherwin zu den Atombombenabwürfen über Hiroshima und Nagasaki.

Seine Kernaussagen:

- Die USA rechtfertigten den Abwurf der Atombomben im Nachhinein damit, dass Japan nur auf diesem Wege zur Kapitulation gezwungen werden konnte.
- Sherwin erklärt, warum es Propaganda war zu behaupten, Millionen Leben hätten nur durch die Bombenabwürfe gerettet werden können und warum sich der Mythos, die Bombe sei notwendig gewesen, immer noch hält.
- Den USA sei es darum gegangen, die Sowjetunion am Siegestisch des Pazifik-Krieges zu verhindern.
- Japan wollte kapitulieren, jedoch nicht ohne Erhalt des Kaiserhauses.
- Der Geschichtspräsident beschreibt, warum der Angriff auf Nagasaki fast gescheitert wäre.
- Sherwin begründet seine Auffassung, keine der beiden Bomben sei militärisch notwendig gewesen.
- "Wir müssen die Verantwortung annehmen, Nuklearwaffen in die Welt gebracht zu haben und dafür sorgen, dass die Welt sicherer wird, in dem wir sie wieder loswerden."
- Prof. Sherwin hält eine Geste des Bedauerns für an der Zeit.

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**Klaus Scherer:** I was starting my research with the question - why was there a second bomb? And it came more and more to the question - why were there bombs at all? Of course I know the official version. Let's start with it, why was there a second bomb, what would you answer to that?

**Martin J. Sherwin:** Well, there was a second bomb, because there were two elements that could be used for a bomb - there was uranium 235 and there was plutonium. And the first bomb - uranium 235 was in a sense a no-brainer, that bomb was never tested. It was known as "Thin Man". There was uranium 235 in the front of the bomb, a plug of uranium 235 in the back of the bomb. The plug was shot in the uranium target and the bomb would explode - that was the Hiroshima bomb.

The Nagasaki bomb was much more of a challenge, because plutonium could not be ignited that way. And the implosion device that was developed, was the primary focus of people at Los Alamos. For the last year, or almost a year and a half of the program. And what is interesting about this, is that they had an atomic bomb, they had the Hiroshima bomb. But all this effort was put into the plutonium bomb. So do you think all that effort did not contribute to the use of it in Nagasaki? That's an interesting question ...

**What would your answer be?**

**Martin J. Sherwin:** My answer would be absolutely yes. The effort that went into this was the primary challenge that the scientists faced at Los Alamos. And the implosion device was much more efficient way of exploding either uranium or plutonium. And that was going to be the future. And so the second bomb was clearly a field test for this.

**So, what about the official version that the Japanese were stubborn and hesitant and that there was one bomb needed to shake them up and make them rethink about the final battle. And because this was not enough and they didn't surrender, then there was a second bomb, which was the final blow and made them surrender. That is the official version you get, you know, from those onboard and what you can read and see in the propaganda. What about this version?**

Yeah. Well, the official version that both bombs were necessary in order to bring the Japanese around to surrender, is not born out by the facts and the chronology of the surrender process. The Japanese have been trying to surrender for weeks, if not for months. But (...) they were not going to surrender as long as the emperor's life was at stake. They hoped that they would get the Soviet Union to mediate between the United States and Japan about the surrender terms. They were not able to get that, because the Soviet Union declared war on Japan on August 8th. And that was the end of that idea. And it is quite clear that it is the Soviet entry into the war that led to the surrender of the Japanese.

**Does that mean they were never really given the chance to see the effect of Hiroshima and offer surrender, before Nagasaki occurred?**

**Martin J. Sherwin:** The Hiroshima bomb was dropped on August 6th, the Nagasaki bomb was dropped on August 9th. The full impact of Hiroshima was, you know, not clearly realized. But Hiroshima was simply another city that was destroyed - there were 68 cities destroyed prior to Hiroshima. So that was another one. Well, it happened by one bomb, OK, but the same effect. The real blow to the Japanese was the entry of the Soviet Union. And General Groves [Leslie Groves, Director of the Manhattan Project, Ed.], when he heard that the Soviets have entered the war, was even more convinced that we had to use that second bomb as quickly as possible, because the object was to get the war over before the Soviets could claim that they participated in the victory.

**Was there a desire in Los Alamos and Washington to have these bombs tested?**

**Martin J. Sherwin:** The person who was primarily responsible for not modifying unconditional surrender was James Byrnes, the Secretary of State. He was adamant about the need not to modify or clarify the terms of unconditional surrender with respect to the Emperor. And that was a political decision. He was also a person who probably would have preferred that the bombs be used, because he was thinking about the post-war period and the effect that bombs that actually worked might have on the Soviet Union.

**So, were the bomb's aim more the Russians than actually the Japanese?**

**Martin J. Sherwin:** It was six of one half a dozen of the other. The bomb was used in order to bring the Japanese to their senses and also to have the effect on the Soviet Union of recognizing, what Stimson [Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of War, Ed.] called - the bomb was the great equalizer. That is to say - we have the atomic bomb and you have 12 million troops under arms, but our atomic bomb, sort of, cancels out the advantage of your troops.

**I spoke to the survivors from the plane or in Los Alamos. They all tell me that they saved a million lives by dropping the bomb. There might have been a hundred thousand dying or more, but all in all, they were happy and proud that they, all in all, reduced the number of victims and casualties. Is that accurate?**

**Martin J. Sherwin:** First of all, the idea that a million lives would have been lost in an invasion of Japan is a figment of imagination and propaganda. There was no prediction of a million lives, except something that was made up after the war. But there would have been a horrible battle and many, many lives - a couple of hundred thousands Americans would have died. Well, that was enough, you know, to end the war. But the point is that it was not a choice between on the one hand using the atomic bomb, on the other hand an invasion on November 1st. The choice was: would the emperor's status be clarified, that he will not be killed. The choice was waiting for the Soviets to come into the war, as they did on August 8th. Once the Soviets came into the war, the war was over, because the Japanese, who wanted to continue the war, had put all of their commitment, all the arguments into the idea that the Soviets would help the Japanese get better surrender terms.

**Why does that myth or explanation or justification is so alive until today that it was more than anything else the bombs that had ended the war?**

**Martin J. Sherwin:** Well, it is perfectly understandable. I mean the United States was the only country that had used atomic bombs. It used them on, what Robert Oppenheimer, the director of Los Alamos, called an essentially defeated enemy. This was our good war - we were fighting fascism in Europe, we were fighting militarism in the Far East. And to end the war with something that has a negative context, something that puts a black mark on this war, is something that the United States can't quite absorb. And so it was justified by the idea that we would have lost a million troops in an invasion. There was not going to be an invasion. The Japanese were going to surrender clearly before November 1st 1945.

**Before the bombs fell you could see in those propaganda videos for the home front that Japan was on its knees and that the ports were destroyed, that the fleet was destroyed and there were no planes. And that it was just a matter of time till they surrender. One year later, when they had the review, they said that they had great armies, artilleries, suicide planes, new tanks. That was when the first bomb was necessary, the "Japs" were stunned, but they still were, you know, not ready to surrender. Then there was the final blow of Nagasaki. So they surrendered. Doesn't that mean, even through the propaganda, which is always not the same as the truth that even those contradictions in the propaganda hint us to what the real version actually was?**

**Martin J. Sherwin:** Well, the answer is yes. I know that before the bombs were dropped, it was quite clear that the Americans were reporting that the Japanese were on their knees, that their navy could not sail, that their planes could not fly, that people were starving and so on and so forth. After the war, the opposite was reported - that the Japanese were still strong, that they had a strong military, that an invasion would have cost a great number of troops. And perhaps parts of both of those things, you know, are true. But it is quite clear when you look at the contrast between - before the bombs and after the war that there is an effort to, sort of, change the environment, in which these atomic bombs we used.

**What about Truman himself - it looked like he was not very close to the decision to drop the number one and number two bomb. Then he said: there is no third or fourth bomb without his permission.**

**Martin J. Sherwin:** Exactly.

**So was there a change when he realized what actually happened?**

**Martin J. Sherwin:** Truman was not so much out of the loop, but just, more or less a rubber stamp on the process of moving from creation to the use of the atomic bombs. After the second bomb, he understood that this was something that was beyond more bombing, merely more bombing of cities. And he said no to a third bomb. But of course there was not time for a third bomb - the Japanese were already trying to surrender - they had sent out the peace feelers on the 10th of August and the 14th of August they surrendered.

**The flight itself to Nagasaki, was a chain of mistakes, things that didn't work out, of bad weather, gasoline problems, they even switched to radar, which was not actually allowed. Are you familiar with those details that you could describe the tragedy also of Nagasaki, which was not actually on the list as the number two targets?**

**Martin J. Sherwin:** Well, General Sweeney had flown the second flight during the Hiroshima raid. [Charles Sweeney served as pilot of one of the accompanying planes, with scientists and photographers on board, in the Hiroshima mission. Ed.] And he was chosen to fly the Nagasaki bomber [named Bocks Car, Ed.]. He was 25 years old, he was committed to flying. He briefed the crew as the perfect mission and in fact, when he was briefing them, he said: "I am going to hit the target, even if I will have to dive the plane into the target, we are going to fly a perfect mission."

The mission started off being imperfect. The first thing that happened was the fuel pump for the 600 gallon alternate tank did not work. But he decided he was going anyway. He took off. They had to fly higher than they expected, because of the weather. They were not able to run their crew with one of the planes that was supposed to run their crew with. [The second accompanying plane didn't start in time because a crew member's parachute was missing. Ed.] At one point the indicators, because of the electrical storm, that the bomb was armed and ready to fire, the red lights, went off. But fortunately the scientist who was in charge of arming the bomb, was able to straighten that out.

Everything went wrong - Kokora was the target, the weather was bad over Kokora, they went to Nagasaki, there was cloud cover. They said they had to break through the clouds and they dropped it visually, which they were supposed to do and that is probably questionable. But you know, nobody knows except the radar operator. So it was a "touch and go-mission." But as far as they were concerned, they did drop the bomb and they believed they did what they had to do and what they wanted to do.

Would you make a distinction between bomb number one and bomb number two morally? Would you consider one of them to be a war crime? Or maybe both? Or none?

It is quite clear to me, having researched Hiroshima and Nagasaki for almost fifty years now that there was no need for either bomb. But in the early book that I wrote, when I was very young, I said, perhaps there is an argument for the first bomb, but the second one was clearly unnecessary.

But the more I learned with the evidence that has come out both in the United States and in Japan and in the Soviet Union, it is quite clear that neither bomb was necessary. But you know, all murdering, all air raids of civilians are immoral. So, you know, war is awful and we had to do some awful things during the war.

**So would war crime be a stamp that you would put on it?**

**Martin J. Sherwin:** I don't think I am going to position to really make ... There were war crimes. I mean bombings of Dresden, you know, of Tokyo, of ...

**Martin J. Sherwin: There was no one to judge them as war crimes...**

No, I mean, absolutely. (...) During the Japanese war crimes trials in 1948, just as [Radhabinod] Pal of India [Richter am Internationalen Gerichtshof für den Fernen Osten nach dem Zweiten. Weltkrieg, Red.] had a descending opinion, in which he said that nothing that the Japanese did measured up to the criminality of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There are arguments, you know, on both sides.

I mean, The United States is responsible for the nuclear world, as we know it, the nuclear armed world, as we know it. And that responsibility weighs very heavily. And that responsibility was recognized very early. And that responsibility is the reason for the saving a million lives, you know, idea. And we have to absorb that responsibility. And move forward and try to make the world a safer place, by getting rid of those nuclear weapons that threaten humanity.

→ [Artikel zu Rdhabinod Pal in der New York Times](#)

**I was told that in Los Alamos there were scientists some of whom said, maybe we would not need to drop the bomb, but take it to the city and keep it as a demonstration somewhere in the Pacific, so that the Japanese know what we have and think about surrendering. But Oppenheimer stopped that petition from gathering signatures. So was there opposition, in Los Alamos even. And what was Oppenheimer's role and reaction to that?**

**Martin J. Sherwin:** Yeah, well the scientists were in the best position before nuclear weapons were used, to understand their implications. And there is a whole range of scientific opinions, running from Leo Szilard [American-Hungarian physicist, Ed.], who was at the Met Lab [[Metallurgy Laboratory](#), University of Chicago, Ed.] in Chicago and who argued that we should not drop the atomic bomb. And then petition was sent around to Los Alamos. And Oppenheimer really squashed it. There is something called the Franck Report which is a document that the scientists at the laboratory of Chicago wrote, that argued that if we believe that the possibility exists after the war to cooperate with the Soviet Union, we should not drop the atomic bomb, because if we do, it is going to participate in the nuclear arms race. [Franck-Report: "Report of the Committee on Political and Social Problems Manhattan Project (Metallurgical Laboratory)", June 1945. Namend after his chariman James Franck. Ed.]

And Japan was defeated. And the scientists believed that Japan was defeated. And so did everybody else who paid, a lot of, you know, attention to it. They also believed that if it was expected that we would not be able to cooperate with the Soviet Union after the war we should not use the atomic bomb, because that would simply motivate them to build one as quickly as possible, which is, of course, exactly what happened.

→ **Franck-Report:**

Bericht vom Juni 1945, der sich gegen die Verwendung atomarer Waffen aussprach. "Report of the Committee on Political and Social Problems Manhattan Project "Metallurgical Laboratory". Benannt nach dem Vorsitzenden James Franck.

• [http://blog.nuclearsecrecy.com/2012/01/11/weekly-document-9-the-uncensored-franck-report-1945-1946/#footnote\\_0\\_686](http://blog.nuclearsecrecy.com/2012/01/11/weekly-document-9-the-uncensored-franck-report-1945-1946/#footnote_0_686)

• <http://www.atomicarchive.com/Docs/ManhattanProject/FranckReport.shtml>

**Should there be an apology to Japan?**

**Martin J. Sherwin:** That is a political, you know, sort of question. And I think, if there is an apology, it needs to be to the world and to the future. You know, not just to Japanese. I do think that there should be a recognition that this was a moment in history, that has to be taken into American history in a way that is more than, you know, prideful. It is a sad moment that should be recognized. And someday, I hope, an American president goes to the Hiroshima memorial and lays flowers there, as a sign, you know, that we have overcome this really awful effort to, sort of, propaganda ourselves. ...

**And he also should'n forget Nagasaki.**

**Martin J. Sherwin:** And should not forget Nagasaki for sure.

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**Informationen zu Martin J. Sherwin**

[Martin J. Sherwin ist Professor für Geschichte an der George Mason University in Fairfax \(Virginia\).](#)

[Porträt des Historikers Martin J. Sherwin auf der Seite der Universität, an der er zuvor gelehrt hat.](#)