'Unlucky' Nagasaki: Secondary target for the US atomic bomb

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It was almost by default that the Japanese port of Nagasaki became the second target of the devastating US atomic bombings at the end of World War II.

A B-29 Superfortress nicknamed Bockscar dropped its bomb on the port city on August 9, 1945, three days after the first atomic strike on Hiroshima that left 140,000 dead by the end of December.

Nagasaki has stood in Hiroshima's shadow in A-bomb commemorations ever since.

But the city was not even the initial target of the powerful plutonium bomb named "Fat Man" after Sir Winston Churchill.

The US bomber, based on the Pacific island of Tinian, could not drop its nuclear warhead on the first target, the industrial city of Kokura north of Nagasaki that hosted a big arms factory, because of thick clouds.

The 9,000-pound (four-metric-ton) bomb was thus hastily released over Nagasaki, site of naval industries but not a garrison town like Hiroshima, as the plane was running low on fuel, with barely enough to reach US-controlled Okinawa.

Nagasaki, protected by hills and valleys, was not a primary choice due to its geographic layout which included multiple waterways that acted as firebreaks.

It had been bombed several times by conventional US strikes over the previous 12 months and was dotted with shelters that, unfortunately, were not being used by many inhabitants the day the bomb hit.

Nagasaki, one of the largest ports in southern Japan, was added to the shortlist of targets after the historic capital of Kyoto was ruled out, mainly for religious and cultural reasons.

- 'Bad luck' -
US secretary of war Henry Stimson also did not want to bomb Kyoto for a personal reason: it was where he had spent his honeymoon.

"It was Nagasaki's bad luck," wrote historian Louis Allen in France's Historia magazine.

Image
Picture taken on 09 August 1945 shows a US atomic bomb exploding over Nagasaki, Japan. AFP
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The "Fat Man" bomb, similar to one tested a few weeks before in a US desert, killed around 74,000 people, most of whom melted or burned to death.

It flattened 80 percent of the buildings over a surface of five square kilometres after slamming the southern city on a hot summer day at 11:02 am.

The Nagasaki bombing is credited by many US military historians with persuading the Japanese emperor to surrender six days later.

Most Nagasaki residents feel that had not been necessary.

Every year thousands mourn the event at the foot of the Statue of Peace, a bronze figure pointing one arm to the sky from which the bomb fell and another arm forward to a peaceful future.

Nagasaki residents also highlight religious aspects of the nuclear attack.

The city was founded by a Jesuit missionary and had been the cradle of Christianity in Japan since the 16th century. Some 9,000 Christians were killed by the bombing.

One of the buildings reduced to rubble was the Urakami Cathedral, then among the largest churches in Asia.

Inside, Father Saburo Nishida and a dozen Roman Catholics were crushed to death by falling debris as they worshipped on that fateful morning.

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- ‹ 'No regrets' for Hiroshima A-bomb crew
- Up
- The Manhattan Project: How the US built the bomb ›