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## Britain and Hiroshima

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# Britain and Hiroshima

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**ABSTRACT** Most historical accounts of the atomic bombings of Japan show little interest in Britain's explicit authorization for the attacks. Meanwhile, the few historians who have attempted to explain it rely on a unitary, rational actor model of the British state that is misleading. This article demonstrates that high-ranking British officials became anxious early on about the strategic consequences of a peremptory use of the new weapon. Therefore, especially over the course of 1944 they sought to engage Washington on the linked questions of the bomb's wartime use and its postwar control. However, these officials' initiatives were rebuffed by Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who paved the way to the bombings based on a fervent desire for Anglo-American integration, and on a dim understanding of the bomb's revolutionary potential.

**KEY WORDS:** Great Britain, World War II, Atomic Bombings of Japan, International Control of Nuclear Weapons

It is an underappreciated fact that the formal authorization for the atomic bombings of Japan in 1945 was given not just by the United States, but also by the United Kingdom. In the Quebec Agreement of 19 August 1943, the two Allies and atomic partners agreed not to employ the new weapon 'against third parties without each other's consent', and this agreement was respected for the duration of the war.<sup>1</sup> In September 1944, the prospect of using the bomb against Japan was first raised in a joint memorandum signed by UK Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill and US President Franklin D. Roosevelt.<sup>2</sup> Then on 4 July

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<sup>1</sup>[Kew, United Kingdom, The National Archives], PREM [Records of the Prime Minister's Office] 3/139/10, 'Articles of Agreement Governing Collaboration between the Authorities of the United States of America and the United Kingdom in the Matter of Tube Alloys', 19 Aug. 1943.

<sup>2</sup>PREM 3/139/10, 'Tube Alloys: Aide-Memoire of Conversation between the President and Prime Minister at Hyde Park', 18 Sep. 1944. (Also at CAB[inet Papers] 127/201.)

1945, in response to American queries the British formally delivered their consent to using the bomb against Japan.<sup>3</sup> Finally, at the Potsdam Conference later that month, Churchill personally confirmed this position to US President Harry Truman.<sup>4</sup>

The enormous literature on the atomic bombings of Japan has seldom investigated the story behind Britain's consent to them. Indeed, historians often suggest that there is no story at all. A. J. P. Taylor bluntly states, 'The decision to use the atomic bombs... being purely American, is not of direct concern in British history.'<sup>5</sup> But this position is untenable. Whether or not one believes that the Americans would have gone ahead anyway, the fact is that the British leadership of the day chose to explicitly agree to the bombings. Moreover, in order to make clear its full acceptance of a share of the responsibility, Britain even sent a scientist and a military officer to accompany the bombs to their launching point on Tinian Island in the Pacific Ocean, and then to fly in the observation plane right behind the specially modified B-29 bomber that destroyed Nagasaki.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, especially in light of recent efforts to reduce the US-centrism of the historiography of the end of the Pacific War,<sup>7</sup> careful reconsideration of the British decision-making process leading up to Hiroshima and Nagasaki is long overdue.

### State of the Literature

One of the reasons for the general lack of interest in the British decision-making process is that at first glance, it appears to have been short and

<sup>3</sup>CAB 126/146, 'Use of the Weapon against Third Parties' (Extract from Minutes of the Combined Policy Committee Meeting, the Pentagon), 4 July 1945. Note that the UK here was offering blanket consent to the use of atomic weapons against *Japan*, so it covered the attacks on both Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and indeed on further targets if the Americans had so desired.

<sup>4</sup>Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. 6 *Triumph and Tragedy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1953), Ch. 19.

<sup>5</sup>A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914–1945* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1965), 601. Thanks to Gerry Hughes for bringing this quote to my attention.

<sup>6</sup>Ferenc Morton Szasz, *British Scientists and the Manhattan Project: The Los Alamos Years* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan 1992). Cf. Sabine Lee, 'In No Sense Vital and Actually Not Important: Reality and Perception of Britain's Contribution to the Development of Nuclear Weapons', *Contemporary British History* 20/2 (June 2006), 159–85.

<sup>7</sup>Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press at Harvard Univ. 2005); Tsuyoshi Hasegawa (ed.), *The End of the Pacific War: Reappraisals* (Stanford: Stanford UP 2007). See also Ward Wilson, 'The Winning Weapon? Rethinking Nuclear Weapons in Light of Hiroshima', *International Security* 31/4 (Spring 2007), 162–79.

uneventful. On 30 April 1945, Field Marshal Henry Maitland Wilson, the British military representative to the US-UK Combined Policy Committee (CPC) in Washington, informed London of the fast-approaching American need to know British views on the use of bomb. Some minor discussion ensued between Churchill and Sir John Anderson, Chancellor of the Exchequer and administrative chief of the British atomic project, on the proper form for British consent under the terms of the Quebec Agreement. This question having been sorted out, on 1 July Churchill initialed his approval of the text giving British consent to the bombings, and Wilson duly informed the CPC on 4 July. The CPC minutes for that day state, 'THE COMMITTEE: Took note that the Governments of the United Kingdom and the United States had agreed that T. A. [Tube Alloys, the British code name for the bomb project] weapons should be used by the United States against Japan, the agreement of the British Government having been conveyed by Field Marshal Sir Henry Maitland Wilson.'<sup>8</sup> British official historian John Ehrman comments, 'Thus, by 5 July the discussion on the use of the atomic bomb was over.'<sup>9</sup>

The apparent banality of this process might discourage one from looking any more deeply into it. But the inquiring mind asks, how is it possible that this momentous choice could have been treated in such a routine, paper-shuffling manner? Two bodies of literature suggest quite different answers to this question.

First, there is what can be called the 'orthodox' interpretation, which was first offered in the 1950s by John Ehrman, official historian of British grand strategy of the final years of World War II, and then seconded in the 1960s by Margaret Gowing, official historian of the British Atomic Energy Authority.<sup>10</sup> Gowing's work in particular soon became gospel for most subsequent accounts of the British experience with nuclear weapons.<sup>11</sup> The crux of the orthodox interpretation is that, despite their formal rights under the Quebec Agreement, the British understood that their opinion was essentially irrelevant here.

<sup>8</sup>CAB 126/146, 'Use of the Weapon against Third Parties', 4 July 1945.

<sup>9</sup>John Ehrman, *History of the Second World War: Grand Strategy*, Vol. 6 *October 1944–August 1945* (London: HMSO 1956), 299.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid. and CAB 101/45, John Ehrman, *The Atomic Bomb: An Account of British Policy in the Second World War* (London: published in secret for the use of the Cabinet Office 1953); Margaret Gowing, *Britain and Atomic Energy, 1939–1945* (London: Macmillan 1964).

<sup>11</sup>For instance, Andrew J. Pierre, *Nuclear Politics: The British Experience with an Independent Strategic Force, 1939–1970* (London: Oxford UP 1972); John Baylis, *Anglo-American Defence Relations 1939–1984: The Special Relationship* (London: Macmillan 1984); Roger Ruston, *A Say in the End of the World: Morals and British Nuclear Weapons Policy, 1941–1987* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1990).

They were far too weak to do anything more than simply rubber-stamp American desires on whether, how, and when to use the bomb. As Ehrman puts it, 'The decision to use the bomb was primarily a military decision, in which the advice of the Chiefs of Staff on the enemy's position was a potent factor; and the relation of the British to the American Chiefs of Staff in the conduct of the war against Japan was not such as to encourage their intervention.'<sup>12</sup> Gowing concurs: 'The question of whether and where the bombs should be used was, like the other matters of high policy, left largely to the Americans . . . . It seems that at the ministerial level, at least, the British did not recognize the use of the bombs as a problem that must be thrashed out, as one on which British views must be formed.'<sup>13</sup> Ehrman and Gowing also note that the British hoped that if they posed no difficulties for the Americans at this stage, Washington might prove willing to extend the atomic cooperation into the postwar period. This prospect provided an extra incentive for the British simply to follow America's lead on the question of the bomb's wartime use.

In contrast to the orthodox interpretation, some works on wartime allied diplomacy put forth what can be termed a 'revisionist' interpretation of Britain's road to Hiroshima.<sup>14</sup> The essence of that interpretation is that, as Barton J. Bernstein puts it, 'Some months after Pearl Harbor, the Prime Minister recognized the likely importance of the atomic bomb in the postwar world: he wanted it as a deterrent and possibly as a threat, primarily against the Soviet Union.'<sup>15</sup> As the initial perceived atomic threat from Germany receded, these postwar implications came to loom even larger for the British. But Washington did not see its atomic bomb program as a lifeline for maintaining the power of the British Empire. So, since London's 'only "strong card" lay in the argument that wartime exigencies demanded collaboration', writes Martin J. Sherwin, British atomic diplomacy 'concentrated on the criterion of wartime use'.<sup>16</sup> Indeed Churchill became, in even the anglophobic Manhattan Project Chief Leslie Groves' estimation, the Project's 'most effective and enthusiastic supporter' in *either* country.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Ehrman, *Grand Strategy*, 298.

<sup>13</sup>Gowing, *Britain and Atomic Energy*, 370.

<sup>14</sup>Note that authors whom I am labeling 'revisionist' about Churchill may or may not also be 'revisionist' about Truman, and vice versa. The key revisionist text on Churchill and the bomb is Martin J. Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: Hiroshima and its Legacies*, 3rd ed. (Stanford UP 2003). See also Barton J. Bernstein, 'The Uneasy Alliance: Roosevelt, Churchill, and the Atomic Bomb, 1940–1945', *Western Political Quarterly* 29/2 (June 1976), 202–30; Sean L. Malloy, *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 2008).

<sup>15</sup>Bernstein, 'The Uneasy Alliance', 202.

<sup>16</sup>Sherwin, *A World Destroyed*, 83.

<sup>17</sup>Leslie Groves, *Now It Can Be Told* [1962] (New York: Da Capo 1983), 408.

The revisionists further emphasize that Churchill's tactic worked; despite some Americans' desires to cut Britain out, the project remained a fully – and exclusively – binational venture throughout the war. And ultimately, when the Americans moved not merely toward using the bomb against Japan, but doing it in such a way as to maximize the shock to the Soviets as well, the British readily agreed. At Potsdam, Churchill even enthused:

The secret of this explosive, and the power to use it, would completely alter the diplomatic equilibrium which was adrift since the defeat of Germany! Now we had a new value which redressed our position (pushing his chin out and scowling), now we could say, if you insist on doing this or that, well we can just blot out Moscow, then Stalingrad, then Kiev, then Kuibyshev, Kharkhov, Stalingrad [*sic*], Sebastopol etc. etc. And now where are the Russians!<sup>18</sup>

The orthodox and revisionist interpretations are clearly in tension with each other on the key question of whether the bomb was viewed in London primarily as a wartime military instrument or as a strategic quantity for establishing Anglo-American dominance in the postwar world. But at the same time, the orthodox and revisionist interpretations actually share two analytical limitations. The first limitation is their implicit assumption of a rational, unitary actor model of the British state. The second is their failure to link the relatively minor internal discussions on the bomb's use that took place in London in 1945 with the earlier, more contentious, and thus more revealing debates over the bomb's international control *and* use that took place beginning in 1944. The following paragraphs elaborate on each of these limitations in turn.

### *Britain as Rational, Unitary Actor*

The first limitation of both the orthodox and revisionist interpretations is their implicit depiction of British behavior as that of a rational, unitary actor state pursuing a relatively clear conception of the national interest. This tendency is expressed not only in the authors' minimization of internal differences of opinion, but also in their inattentiveness to the power plays by which such differences were muted or precluded.

The revisionists' tendency to depict Britain as a rational, unitary actor, and indeed often even to equate 'Britain' with 'Churchill', is probably due primarily to their unfortunate, if understandable, tendency to focus on Washington as the center of the action.

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<sup>18</sup>Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman, *War Diaries (1939–1945) of Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke* (London: Weidenfeld 2001), 709. This quote was considerably sanitized in earlier published versions of the diaries.

By contrast, British official historians – the standard-bearers of the orthodox view – review the internal British discussion in great detail. But perhaps predictably in light of their institutional affiliation, the official historians' accounts also end up reflecting the rational, unitary actor model of decisionmaking. Indeed, Ehrman's initial decision to write his work as an explicit rebuttal to the argument of Lord Blackett, a prominent early critic of the Allies' 'military necessity' rationale for the bombings, leads one to suspect that Ehrman's interpretation of the British decisionmaking process was politically motivated.<sup>19</sup> To her credit, Gowing tries much harder than Ehrman to discover documents that 'express doubt whether an atomic bomb should be used'.<sup>20</sup> She undertook these efforts after her draft manuscript's contention that 'the British did not, apparently, think that the use of the bomb constituted a problem' received a stinging rebuttal from Royal Society President Sir Henry Dale.<sup>21</sup> But having found few such documents, Gowing also ends up seconding Churchill's claim in his memoirs that 'there never was a moment's discussion as to whether the atomic bomb should be used or not'.<sup>22</sup> We are thus led to believe that junior partner 'Britain' was comfortable with simply accepting America's choice.

Yet Churchill's statement about the absence of discussion is disingenuous, for in fact he ensured that absence of discussion through the tight grip that he held over atomic high policy. The extreme secrecy with which Churchill shrouded the atomic project meant that there were only a handful of men in Britain with enough knowledge to even begin to have concerns about whether, when, and how the bombs were to be used.<sup>23</sup> The Prime Minister consistently rejected proposals to fully inform Cabinet, the Service Ministers or the Chiefs of Staff about the atomic project – even petulantly scrawling 'What can they do about it?' in the margins of one of Anderson's pleas to widen the circle of

<sup>19</sup>The internal discussions that eventually led Ehrman to downplay the Blackett angle can be traced in CAB 103/353.

<sup>20</sup>Gowing, *Britain and Atomic Energy*, 370.

<sup>21</sup>[Oxford, Oxford University Bodleian Library Special Collections], [Rudolf] Peierls Papers, misc b197, Sir Henry Dale, 'Memorandum on Mrs Gowing's Draft', 20 June 1963.

<sup>22</sup>Gowing, *Britain and Atomic Energy*, 371. Gowing more clearly recognizes Churchill's resistance to such discussion in Margaret Gowing and Lorna Arnold, *Independence and Deterrence: Britain and Atomic Energy, 1945–1952*, Vol. 1 [1974] (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan 1988), 5.

<sup>23</sup>Peter Hennessy notes that a single briefing given in February 1945 to King George VI's Private Secretary, Sir Alan Lascelles, resulted in his knowing 'far more about the bomb than any member of the War Cabinet, Churchill and Anderson apart'. Peter Hennessy, *Cabinets and the Bomb*, British Academy Occasional Papers No. 11 (Oxford: Oxford UP 2007), 3.

initiates.<sup>24</sup> Thus, for instance, when Clement Attlee took over the premiership from Churchill in the middle of the Potsdam Conference – ironically just in time to have to take responsibility for the bombings – he knew ‘absolutely nothing’ (his own words) about the weapon.<sup>25</sup> The fact that the atomic project remained essentially a mystery to the Chiefs (and also to Admiral Lord Mountbatten, the Supreme Allied Commander of the South East Asia Command<sup>26</sup>) also undermines Ehrman’s claim, referred to earlier, that their silence on the decision to drop the bombs reflected their acknowledgment of American primacy in the Pacific theater. In fact the military was not sufficiently informed to develop a considered opinion on the matter.

So if Churchill did not hear any objections to the use of the bombs, it was because he did not want to. In fact, several high-ranking British officials actually did express serious reservations among themselves about proceeding to the atomic bombings without adequate prior diplomatic groundwork. Gowing herself comes up with four, including two key members of Churchill’s inner atomic circle: the administrator Sir John Anderson and Lord Halifax, the British Ambassador in Washington. Anderson, Gowing writes, expressed ‘deep concern about the use of the bomb’; meanwhile Halifax even took the extraordinary step of going on his own initiative directly to US Secretary of War Henry Stimson to raise the possibility of at least giving the Japanese 48 hours warning.<sup>27</sup> In addition, the third key member of the inner circle, Churchill’s science adviser Lord Cherwell, also had concerns. Cherwell wrote to the Prime Minister in March 1945 that although he did not believe Britain could intervene in the American debate about use at that point, thankfully it did not have to: ‘The Americans are quite alive to

<sup>24</sup>PREM 3/139/2, Anderson to Churchill, with Churchill’s annotations, 21 March 1944. See also PREM 3/139/11A, Churchill to Ismay, 19 April 1945. Churchill did permit the Chiefs to be informed of the progress of the German atomic weapons program, notably in a Nov. 1944 briefing which is referred to in Brooke’s diaries (Danchev and Todman, *War Diaries*, 626). On this point see also F.H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its Influence on Strategy and Operations*, Vol. 3, Part 2 (London: HMSO 1988), 583–92 and Appendix 29.

<sup>25</sup>Hennessy, *Cabinets and the Bomb*, 4. See also Kenneth Harris, *Attlee* (London: Weidenfeld 1982), 267–8.

<sup>26</sup>Mountbatten expressed his distress at having been kept in the dark directly to President Truman at Potsdam on 25 July. See Philip Ziegler (ed.), *Personal Diary of Admiral the Lord Louis Mountbatten: Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia, 1943–1946* (London: Collins 1988), 231–2.

<sup>27</sup>Gowing also notes the objections lodged by the scientists Sir Henry Dale and Sir Charles Darwin. Gowing, *Britain and Atomic Energy*, 370–1. See also Len Scott and Stephen Twigge, *Planning Armageddon: Britain, the United States and the Command of Nuclear Forces, 1945–1964* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic 2000).



the world implication of a race in this form of armament and will, I am convinced, themselves come forward with some proposal before the weapon is used.<sup>28</sup> The Americans were to disappoint him.

The historical record thus shows that Anderson, Halifax, and Cherwell – Churchill's three key lieutenants in this area – had objections to the manner in which the bombings were ultimately carried out. Moreover, it is worth mentioning in this context that even after the bombs were dropped, and despite the general atmosphere of self-congratulation at the end of the war, the Foreign Office's Asian experts strongly dissented from the attacks, declaring that they had greatly prejudiced the chances for the success of the postwar occupation.<sup>29</sup> In short, it is critically important to problematize the shared orthodox and revisionist picture of a rational, unitary actor 'Britain' whose objective national interests were congruent (for one reason or another) with unhesitating support for the atomic bombings of Japan.

### *The Question of Use versus the Question of Control*

The second shared limitation of the orthodox and revisionist interpretations is their tendency to treat the question of the bomb's wartime use separately from the question of its postwar international control. There is of course some basis for making this delineation. It is true that by April 1945 – which Gar Alperovitz, for instance, uses as the start date of his mammoth *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* – the question of taking early steps toward the creation of a diplomatic framework for controlling the atom had already been mooted and dismissed.<sup>30</sup> However, the prior, so-called international control issue was actually viewed by the actors of the day as a question of control *and* use. For instance, in Churchill and Roosevelt's memo rejecting the international control idea in September 1944, those were precisely the words they used: 'The suggestion that the world should be informed regarding Tube Alloys, with a view to an international agreement regarding its *control and use*, is not accepted.'<sup>31</sup>

The linkage between control and use in the minds of people such as Sir Henry Dale was as follows.<sup>32</sup> The atomic bomb represented a

<sup>28</sup>PREM 3/139/6, Cherwell to Prime Minister, 27 March 1945.

<sup>29</sup>Christopher Thorne, *Allies of a Kind: The United States, Britain and the War Against Japan, 1941–1945* (London: Hamish Hamilton 1978), 533–4.

<sup>30</sup>Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1995).

<sup>31</sup>PREM 3/139/10, 'Tube Alloys', 18 Sept. 1944. Italics added.

<sup>32</sup>Dale, 'Memorandum on Mrs Gowing's Draft'.

qualitative shift in destructive firepower, so great that it threatened to destabilize postwar great power relations. This danger would be greatly heightened by a peremptory wartime use of the weapon, since such an action would destroy the credibility of the Anglo-Americans' claims that they could be trusted to behave responsibly with their atomic monopoly. Therefore, it was essential for Washington and London to launch a serious effort to develop an international control regime for the atom, *before* the first bomb had been dropped. True, the prioritization of such postwar planning efforts might restrict to some extent the Allies' latitude for using the weapon against Japan as they saw fit; but this was the price to be paid for reducing the longer-term possibility of another, even more devastating war with the Soviet Union.

It is hardly surprising that officials in London should have become aware of the linkage between control and use particularly early on. For the British understood that the key to their continued global influence was to play Athens to America's Rome.<sup>33</sup> In other words, by thinking early and hard about the long-term ramifications of different policy options, and by insinuating that thinking into the *American* policy debate, the British consistently exerted influence far in excess of their material strength on major strategic questions that were addressed during the war, for instance the setup of the postwar international economic order.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the typical British preference was for the creation of durable international institutions, as these would provide the UK with a means of punching above its weight in the dawning era of continental superpowers. Why should they not have followed the same playbook in the atomic area?

This article will demonstrate that Anderson, Cherwell, Halifax, Dale and others tried mightily to do just that, especially over the spring and summer of 1944, when American thinking was still fuzzy and British leverage still considerable. Only Churchill stopped Britain from becoming an early and active advocate of international control, and therefore potentially also of constraints on wartime use. Once again, we return to the theme of the need to problematize the picture of Britain as a unitary, rational state actor.

Why Churchill proved to be immovable on the control and use issue is another critical question that the article will tackle, but it is to be

<sup>33</sup>See, e.g., Peter Boyle, 'Reversion to Isolationism? The British Foreign Office View of American Attitudes to Isolationism and Internationalism during World War II', *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 8/1 (March 1997), 168–83.

<sup>34</sup>John Ikenberry, 'A World Economy Restored: Expert Consensus and the Anglo-American Postwar Settlement', *International Organization* 46/1 (Winter 1992), 289–321.

hoped that the point has been made that the typical equation made between Churchill's thinking and British interests is inadequate to the task of understanding Britain's consent to one of the most controversial decisions in contemporary history. To understand it, we need to focus not just on Churchill but on his entire atomic brain trust, and we need to push the start of the story back to 1944.

### The British and the Control and Use Question in 1944

As argued above, Britain's 1945 decision to approve the bomb's wartime use must be seen as the denouement of its abortive 1944 flirtation with the idea of an international atomic control regime. The literature has long been aware of the failed wartime efforts to bring about an international control regime for the atom in advance of the first use of the bomb.<sup>35</sup> The typical narrative portrays advocates of international control as idealistic outsiders, mostly atomic scientists, who for better or worse were novices in the brutal game of politics. Moreover, it depicts the early phases of this effort, in 1944, as a nearly solitary crusade waged by the Danish physicist Niels Bohr. But the British archives show, contrary to this standard narrative, that Bohr was definitely not alone.<sup>36</sup> Indeed as will be demonstrated below, Bohr's stab at 'personal diplomacy' was in fact carefully stage-managed by British officials who were trying to move their Prime Minister to take seriously the high politics questions raised by the bomb. None of this is to deny that Bohr believed passionately in his cause, but the fact is that no one could have started playing politics on such a high level unless key state officials also saw his cause as *their* cause.

Statements made by British and American officials during the first two, rocky years of atomic cooperation between them show that they were not ignorant of the bomb's potential impact on the international

<sup>35</sup>See especially Barton J. Bernstein, 'The Quest for Security: American Foreign Policy and International Control of Atomic Energy, 1942–1946', *Journal of American History* 60/4 (March 1974), 1003–44. Other accounts include Joseph I. Lieberman, *The Scorpion and the Tarantula: The Struggle to Control Atomic Weapons 1945–1949* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1970); Joseph Manzione, "'Amusing and Amazing and Practical and Military": The Legacy of Scientific Internationalism in American Foreign Policy, 1945–1963', *Diplomatic History* 24/1 (Winter 2000), 21–56.

<sup>36</sup>Gowing clearly recognizes that Bohr had company and devotes a good deal of attention to the close interactions between Bohr and British officials. But even she maintains the 'solitary crusade' trope by insisting that the international control debate 'had been instigated by, and centred round' the scientist (Gowing, *Britain and Atomic Energy*, 346).

balance of power.<sup>37</sup> But at least on the British side, serious consideration of the diplomatic implications of the new weapon only began after the Quebec Agreement of August 1943, which seemingly bound the US and UK atomic efforts permanently to each other – including requiring both states' consent before using the bomb against a third party. With this agreement in hand, it was natural that British officials would begin to think systematically about the related problems of the bomb's potential use and control. Heightened British interest in the international dimension of the atom also stemmed from the UK's military alliance relationship with Russia, which included a very liberal technology transfer agreement (the US was not similarly bound).<sup>38</sup>

Among British statesmen the idea of international control was first taken up by Sir John Anderson, who among his many important wartime assignments served as head administrator of the British atomic program from its inception – and not coincidentally also as the main British negotiator for the Quebec Agreement. Anderson had a scientific background and had actually done postgraduate work on the chemistry of uranium, so he quickly recognized the qualitative shift in firepower represented by atomic weaponry. Anderson was also a giant presence in the British state, a man whom even Churchill treated 'not only with respect but as a friendly power of equal status rather than a satellite', as the civil servant Norman Brook would later comment.<sup>39</sup> In part due to Anderson's urging, the value of an early push for international control was soon perceived by most of the small circle of officials with inside knowledge and potential political influence in the atomic area, including Dale, Halifax, Cherwell, and Field Marshal Jan Smuts, South African dean of the British Dominions and a close Churchill confidant. Over the course of 1944 these men were to come together to try to move Churchill to allow serious consideration of the control idea.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup>The diplomatic wrangling of the 1941–43 period has been well covered in the literature. In addition to the previously cited works on Anglo-American atomic diplomacy, see also Richard G. Hewlett and Oscar E. Anderson, Jr, *The New World: A History of the United States Atomic Energy Commission*, Vol. 1 1939–1946 [1962] (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press 1990); James G. Hershberg, *James B. Conant: Harvard to Hiroshima and the Making of the Nuclear Age* (Stanford: Stanford UP 1993).

<sup>38</sup>CAB 126/150, 'Tube Alloys: Note on Existing Obligations Regarding Exchange of Information Etc', 8 March 1944.

<sup>39</sup>Oxford, Oxford University Bodleian Library Special Collections, Anderson Papers, ms Eng 7218, Norman Brook interview notes by Sir John Wheeler-Bennett, 11–12 July 1959.

<sup>40</sup>Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King could also be named here, though he played a less active role in Anderson's lobbying effort. On King's stance see PREM 3/139/11A, Cherwell to Churchill, 10 May 1944.

Anderson first met Bohr not long after British intelligence had smuggled the scientist off the Continent in October 1943. In a series of conversations in Anderson's office the two men quickly developed a close bond, which Anderson's biographer attributes to their common interest in science and their 'mutual concept of what an atomic age should be and their common fear of what it might become'.<sup>41</sup> These conversations must have involved a good deal of give-and-take, but it is notable that in Bohr's famous letter of 16 February 1944, the first to sketch out the idea of a wartime effort to create an international control regime for the atom – and which, notably, was addressed to Anderson – Bohr writes that 'ever since our last conversation in London during which you showed me the confidence of indicating to me your concern about this aspect of the matter, such problems have continually been in my mind'.<sup>42</sup> Thus it would appear that it was Anderson who had stimulated Bohr to think 'continually' about the problem of international control, not vice versa.

In January 1944, British officials brought Bohr over to the US for his first tour of the Manhattan Project facilities. During that time, on Anderson's instructions, they helped the scientist develop the international control idea – while also making sure that he did not float it prematurely. For instance, a note from the British embassy in Washington assured London that Bohr, though already eager to speak directly to President Roosevelt about the matter, had indicated that he would allow himself to 'be guided in all his actions by Lord Halifax'.<sup>43</sup> And at that point Halifax clearly felt that the idea still needed work. But the next month Halifax wrote to Anderson that 'Ronnie Campbell [Minister in Washington under Halifax] and I have had to do a lot of work with B to get any clear idea of how his thought worked. But I think we succeeded in doing it fairly well in the end... I do believe that Bohr's ideas call for very urgent and deep consideration by the Prime Minister and yourself'.<sup>44</sup>

The control idea having taken a clearer shape thanks to Halifax and Sir Ronald Campbell, Anderson now called Churchill's attention to it.<sup>45</sup> Anderson's memo of 21 March put the matter very starkly: in the long run the world had only two choices: international control of the atom or, in very short order, a nuclear arms race between

<sup>41</sup>Sir John Wheeler-Bennett, *John Anderson, Viscount Waverley* (London: Macmillan 1962), 296–7.

<sup>42</sup>CAB 126/39, Bohr to Anderson, 16 Feb. 1944.

<sup>43</sup>CAB 126/332, Akers to Perrin, 27 Jan. 1944.

<sup>44</sup>CAB 126/39, Halifax to Anderson, 18 Feb. 1944.

<sup>45</sup>PREM 3/139/2, Anderson to Churchill, with Churchill's annotations, 21 March 1944.

Anglo-America and the Soviets. He declared himself 'convinced' that international control was the more desirable outcome. Based on this conclusion, Anderson recommended that the War Cabinet, the three Service Ministers and the Chiefs of Staff be fully briefed on the ongoing atomic work very soon, and that a study of the prospects for international control be undertaken by a committee organized by the Foreign Secretary. He also gingerly broached the idea of an Anglo-American invitation to the Russians 'in the near future' to help shape the international control scheme. Finally, Anderson noted that his proposal had the full backing of Churchill's trusted scientific adviser, Lord Cherwell.

Churchill flatly rejected Anderson's proposal, without offering much elaboration on his reasons. A second, more urgent request from Anderson in April also met with the same fate.<sup>46</sup> In response, apparently guessing that Bohr's scientific prestige might make an impression on the Prime Minister, beginning in April 1944 Anderson and his team marshaled all their forces to pry open the door to 10 Downing Street for the scientist. Smuts and Dale wrote personal letters to Churchill on Bohr's behalf; Dale's was hand-delivered by Cherwell.<sup>47</sup> The Bohr-Churchill meeting was set for 16 May.

In this crucial period Bohr's coaching intensified. For instance, on the same day that he sent his letter to Churchill on Bohr's behalf, Dale also sent a separate missive to Cherwell noting that 'Bohr's mild, philosophical vagueness of expression, and his inarticulate whisper' constituted a significant problem for getting his message across; therefore, 'I shall insist on his making a short, clear précis of what he wants to transmit; and it might be best for you, if you would be so good, to offer to transmit this in advance'.<sup>48</sup> In fact, Cherwell ended up deciding that he and Bohr would *go together* into the meeting with Churchill – a powerful signal to the Prime Minister that Bohr was not merely speaking for himself.

But the Prime Minister once again dashed his aides' hopes. At the 16 May meeting he was downright impolite, constantly interrupting Bohr to talk to Cherwell on unrelated matters and ostentatiously refusing to listen to the Dane's ideas. When Bohr finally asked at the end of the half-hour meeting if the Prime Minister might at least be willing to read a letter explaining his point of view, Churchill retorted, 'It will be an honour for me to receive a letter from you . . . but not about politics'. As Bohr later described the meeting, 'It was terrible. He scolded us like two schoolboys.'<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup>PREM 3/139/2, Anderson to Churchill, with Churchill's annotations, 27 April 1944.

<sup>47</sup>Gowing, *Britain and Atomic Energy*, 352.

<sup>48</sup>London, Royal Society, Henry Dale Papers, 93 HD 54.5.6, Dale to Cherwell, 11 May 1944.

<sup>49</sup>Szasz, *British Scientists and the Manhattan Project*, 78.

Despite this reversal, Anderson still refused to give up. He had a small victory with a June memo asking if Churchill would at least be willing to discuss ‘the post-war problem’ in upcoming one-on-one talks with Roosevelt at Hyde Park, New York State.<sup>50</sup> But although Churchill might be willing to talk, the key was to make him listen. How could Prime Minister be moved to recognize the importance of a serious, organized study of the control and use issue? Clearly, Churchill would not resist if such an entreaty came from Roosevelt. To that end, in a bold move that directly challenged the Prime Minister’s will to monopolize British atomic diplomacy, Churchill’s men decided to release Bohr to go ahead and seek his long-desired appointment with the President.

Receiving British advice every step of the way, Bohr approached an old acquaintance, the Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, for help in arranging a meeting with Roosevelt.<sup>51</sup> Frankfurter succeeded in placing the scientist on the President’s calendar for 26 August. Campbell at the embassy excitedly cabled this news back to Anderson, adding – in a clear reference to Anderson’s boomerang stratagem – ‘It seems to me that a slightly less delicate stage has been reached now that the friend’s friend [i.e., Roosevelt] is thoroughly au courant. May this not facilitate progress at your end?’<sup>52</sup> In preparation for his meeting with Roosevelt, Bohr once again relied on Halifax for coaching.<sup>53</sup> And right afterward, he proudly reported back to London that in his view the President had reacted sympathetically to the international control idea.<sup>54</sup> For a brief moment, it appeared as though Anderson’s bet had paid off. But when the US and UK leaders met at Hyde Park in September 1944, they dashed the hopes nurtured by Anderson, Bohr and their allies.<sup>55</sup>

The Hyde Park memorandum drawn up in secret by Roosevelt and Churchill represented an extraordinary series of decisions.<sup>56</sup> First, the leaders came out strongly against an international agreement for the

<sup>50</sup>PREM 3/139/11A, Anderson to Churchill, 15 June 1944, and Churchill to Anderson, 16 June 1944.

<sup>51</sup>See e.g. CAB 126/39, Bohr to Gorell Barnes, 6 July 1944.

<sup>52</sup>CAB 126/39, Campbell to Anderson, 15 July 1944.

<sup>53</sup>CAB 126/39, Campbell to Anderson, 25 Aug. 1944.

<sup>54</sup>CAB 126/40, Frankfurter to Halifax, 18 April 1945 (passed along to Anderson on 20 April 1945).

<sup>55</sup>Hershberg, *James B. Conant*, 205–207 contends that Bohr’s initiative might have received a much warmer hearing if he had first briefed Conant on the matter. Hershberg’s judgment is probably right, but as this article demonstrates, Churchill was adamant about keeping the matter between him and Roosevelt. Therefore Bohr’s British handlers needed to go straight for the head.

<sup>56</sup>PREM 3/139/10, ‘Tube Alloys’, 18 Sept. 1944.

bomb's 'control and use'. Second, for the first time they explicitly embraced consideration of dropping the bomb on Japan (and only Japan). And third, they made clear their intention to support long-term, wide-ranging Anglo-American atomic cooperation. But in addition, quite incongruously, this document of gravest significance for the future of the world also contained a personal slur against Niels Bohr: 'Enquiries should be made regarding the activities of Professor Bohr and steps taken to ensure that he is responsible for no leakage of information, particularly to the Russians.'

Was the mild-mannered Dane really such a threat that he deserved to be singled out for abuse in the basic blueprint for the world's nuclear future? The historian Septimus H. Paul suggests that the Bohr reference reflects 'the cavalier and impulsive manner in which this document was drawn up'.<sup>57</sup> This may be so, but the present article's focus on the internal British politics of the bomb suggests a different explanation. Churchill and Roosevelt were very familiar with bureaucratic scheming. They surely guessed who was promoting Bohr's efforts at 'personal diplomacy'. Churchill must have been particularly annoyed. Certainly the note that he sent to Cherwell about Bohr on 20 September could not have been angrier.<sup>58</sup> But the Prime Minister was wise enough not to start an overt fight with his entire top atomic brass. Instead, singling out Bohr for criticism would certainly suffice to get Anderson and his colleagues to stand down.

As long as Anderson and his colleagues had perceived Bohr's efforts as potentially useful to their political objectives, they had lifted the scientist up; but now that his efforts became counterproductive, they lowered him down. True, in the days that followed Churchill's Hyde Park meeting Anderson, Cherwell, Halifax, Campbell, and Frankfurter all pitched in to convince the Prime Minister that Bohr himself was no threat, thus saving him from any personal misfortune.<sup>59</sup> But that was all they were now prepared to do for the scientist.

Thus although Bohr continued to fight for international control, he no longer enjoyed the tailwind previously provided by Anderson and the others.<sup>60</sup> Indeed he found his path increasingly strewn with obstacles, with Roger Makins of the embassy in Washington even

<sup>57</sup>Septimus H. Paul, *Nuclear Rivals: Anglo-American Atomic Relations, 1941-1952* (Columbus: Ohio State UP 2000), 66.

<sup>58</sup>CAB 127/201, Churchill to Cherwell via Halifax, 20 Sept. 1944.

<sup>59</sup>CAB 126/39, Cherwell to Churchill, 23 Sept. 1944. Halifax and Campbell participated in the drafting of Cherwell's note, with Anderson overseeing the effort.

<sup>60</sup>Though Halifax did lend a hand in April 1945; Gowing, *Britain and Atomic Energy*, 362.



telling London in June 1945 that Bohr 'has really shot his bolt and can, in the opinion of Chadwick [head of the British scientists working in the Manhattan Project] and myself, do no more good at the moment over here either on the political or the scientific side'.<sup>61</sup> (The last point was quite a low blow.) In a second memo sent on the same day, Makins added that Bohr would soon be returning to England but had 'said that he hoped to come back again within a week or ten days. I rather hope that you may be able to arrange to prolong his visit to England beyond this period of time.'<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Anderson did resolve to keep Bohr in London 'until after the weapon has been used'.<sup>63</sup> When Bohr wanted to return to the States in early July, the British suddenly discovered technical difficulties to arrange a flight back, and on 25 July Anderson wrote to Halifax that 'in view of the difficulties which have arisen in providing early passage to Washington for Bohr, it seems best that he should remain here for the time being... I presume that this will be agreeable to Americans'.<sup>64</sup>

It is important to stress that Anderson's sidelining of Bohr was purely tactical and did not reflect a change of heart about the value of laying the diplomatic groundwork for the atomic age. Notably, in January 1945 Anderson began to promote the idea of at least giving newly liberated France some reason to believe that it would get a 'fair deal' in the atomic field.<sup>65</sup> (French scientists held some crucial atomic patents and had been integrated into the 'British' team present in North America.<sup>66</sup>) Churchill rejected Anderson's initial suggestion out of hand. So in March Anderson reached out to Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, who then himself tried to impress the Prime Minister of the importance of keeping the French onside.<sup>67</sup> But Churchill again rejected any sort of internationalization in the strongest terms. In his view, the bomb project had to remain an exclusively Anglo-American affair, and the French and the Russians should fend for themselves.<sup>68</sup> Because of Churchill's strong opposition, full consideration of the

<sup>61</sup>CAB 126/45, Makins to Rickett, 23 June 1945 (first memo).

<sup>62</sup>CAB 126/45, Makins to Rickett, 23 June 1945 (second memo).

<sup>63</sup>CAB 126/40, Rickett to Anderson, 9 July 1945.

<sup>64</sup>CAB 126/45, Anderson to Halifax, 25 July 1945.

<sup>65</sup>PREM 3/139/5, Anderson to Churchill, with Churchill's annotations, 26 Jan. 1945.

<sup>66</sup>Bertrand Goldschmidt, *Atomic Rivals*, trans. Georges M. Temmer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP 1990).

<sup>67</sup>PREM 3/139/6, Eden to Churchill, 20 March 1945. It is hard to know how comprehending Eden was about the bomb as of mid-1945. But at least as of mid-1944, it is clear that he knew little and understood less. See PREM 3/139/2, Gorell Barnes to J. M. Martin, 20 June 1944.

<sup>68</sup>PREM 3/139/6, Churchill to Eden, 8 Apr. 1945.

international control idea would have to wait until after the end of the war.<sup>69</sup>

Despite all of these setbacks, the best-informed members of Churchill's atomic brains trust never warmed to the idea of dropping the bomb on Japan without warning or a genuine prior diplomatic outreach to the French or the Soviets. As was documented in the previous section of this article, in the spring and summer of 1945 Anderson, Cherwell, and Halifax – the key trio of atomic advisers to the Prime Minister – independently expressed great skepticism about the wisdom of simply springing the new reality of the atomic bomb on an unprepared world. They were very anxious about the long-term strategic implications of such an action, particularly for relations with Russia. But Churchill was the Prime Minister; and in the atomic area especially, British policy reflected his personal preferences. The article now turns to a consideration of Churchill's position on the issue of whether and how to use the bombs.

### **Churchill's Position**

The previous section of this article showed that neither the orthodox nor the revisionist interpretation fits the statements and actions of the bulk of the UK atomic brains trust on the control and use issue. Contrary to the orthodox interpretation, Anderson and his colleagues were above all focused on the long-run diplomatic implications of the bomb, and moreover they believed that Britain could have influence on American thinking on these high politics questions if it made an early push. But contrary to the revisionist interpretation, Anderson and his colleagues perceived Britain's primary interest not as parlaying the use of the weapon into a postwar Anglo-American advantage over the Soviets, but rather as limiting the damage that an unwise wartime use could do to the Big Three alliance and to the chances for a solid, institutionalized postwar international security arrangement.

Despite the wishes of Churchill's men, however, the UK ultimately did not try to push the US toward international control – and thus also away from a diplomatically dangerous use of the weapon. This was because the Prime Minister repeatedly and adamantly vetoed their ideas. What explains his unique stance on the high politics issues raised by the bomb?

In Churchill's case we can quickly dismiss the orthodox interpretation that British weakness led to British meekness. If anyone was

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<sup>69</sup>Though note that in May 1945 Churchill did at long last agree to let Anderson form a long-term atomic planning committee. The committee's draft report of 11 June 1945, with self-admitted 'sketchy and vague' recommendations, is at CAB 126/218.

incurably optimistic about the British Empire's capacity to retain its power and influence, it was Winston Churchill.

By contrast, the revisionist interpretation that Churchill saw the bomb's value primarily as a means of deterring or even threatening the Soviets seems a better fit – at first glance. But on closer inspection, problems with this interpretation become evident as well. It must first be noted that the documentary record provides very little solid proof for *any* interpretation of Churchill's motivations on this matter prior to Potsdam. To make their case, the revisionists choose to read a great deal into a handful of rather vague Churchillian references to the bomb's importance. But there is a serious risk of overinterpretation here, particularly given Churchill's tendency toward grandiloquence.<sup>70</sup> And in fact, the British war leader's statements and actions on atomic policy in the spring and summer of 1945 actually reveal numerous puzzling anomalies for the revisionists' interpretation.

For instance, if Churchill had long been convinced of the value of possessing the bomb as a diplomatic counter against Stalin, then why was he evidently baffled by Truman's April–May decision to delay the Potsdam Conference until after the first atomic test in July? After all, why Truman delayed the Potsdam meeting is so important for the debate on the American decision to drop the bomb that nearly half of the foundational text of Hiroshima revisionism, Gar Alperovitz's *Atomic Diplomacy*, is dedicated to exploring that choice.<sup>71</sup> According to Alperovitz, Truman's determination to postpone the meeting until July was driven by his realization that the awesome power of the bomb was nearly in his grasp. He wanted to have secured that 'ace in the hole' before meeting with Stalin. Alperovitz further contends that Truman's decision was supported by those few advisers who were in on the atomic secret, such as Secretary of State James Byrnes and Secretary of War Henry Stimson, while it was opposed by 'virtually all the President's top advisers *who were not involved with the atomic*

<sup>70</sup>The key document for the revisionists' case is a draft March 1945 memo (PREM 3/139/6, Churchill to Eden, 20 March 1945) flatly rejecting the idea of including France in the circle of atomic cooperation: 'There is nothing that de Gaulle would like better than to have plenty of T. A. [Tube Alloys] to punish Britain.... I shall certainly continue to urge the President not to make or permit the slightest disclosure to France or Russia. Even six months will make a difference should it come to a show-down with Russia, or indeed with de Gaulle.' But this is only a single statement whose passionate language can be ascribed to Churchill's loathing for his nemesis de Gaulle. And what is more, the final version of the memo that Churchill actually ended up sending to Eden no longer included the draft version's most important claims about the value of the bomb.

<sup>71</sup>Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam*, revised ed. (London: Pluto Press 1994).

*bomb*'.<sup>72</sup> 'From their standpoint', Alperovitz continues, 'delay seemed incomprehensible: US bargaining strength seemed to be weakening every day as the American Army was slowly withdrawn from Europe – a point men like [Averell] Harriman, on the one hand, and Churchill, on the other, pressed repeatedly and intensely'.<sup>73</sup>

Is it not odd to find Churchill, who had known of the atomic secret from the beginning, here ranged alongside those who were still in the dark about it? Alperovitz admits as much in a footnote: 'It appears that Churchill, like the American advisers, pressed for an early meeting despite his awareness of the strategy. It is probable that he was simply unwilling to gamble such important European diplomatic stakes on the outcome of the atomic test.'<sup>74</sup> Alperovitz is surely right: Churchill did not want to take this gamble. But the question is, why not? And why did he not merely disagree with Truman's calculation, but actually found it preposterous and was 'enraged' and 'furious' by Truman's persistence?<sup>75</sup>

The puzzle deepens yet further when one realizes how lackadaisical was Churchill's treatment of the American request for British consent to the forthcoming atomic strikes on Japan, which was made during the very same time frame. As noted at the outset of this article, on 30 April Field Marshal Wilson had informed London of a need for decision; Anderson sent an initial reply and asked Churchill for comment on 2 May; but then Churchill did not send his short reply until 21 May, nearly three weeks later. Having finally heard from the Prime Minister, on that very same day Anderson drew up orders for Wilson and submitted them to Churchill for his approval; but the Prime Minister only got around to sending them back with minor revisions on 18 June, nearly a month later. Wilson's 28 June request for final confirmation of his orders in light of the upcoming 4 July Combined Policy Committee meeting in Washington did get Churchill's attention quickly, on 1 July; but in this case all he did was to affix his initials to Wilson's note. These actions are not consistent with the revisionists' picture of a man whose imagination has been fired by the prospect of obtaining a weapon of unlimited power.

One might try to explain away Churchill's behavior in the April–July time frame as simply reflecting a properly skeptical attitude toward hypotheticals: much as he may have desired the bomb, the British

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 297. Italics in original.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 297.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 115. Note that apart from a few references to Churchill Alperovitz devotes essentially no attention to the British side of the story in this work; and in his *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, the focus on Washington is even more pronounced.

<sup>75</sup>Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy*, 149.

leader could have been unwilling to let it affect his calculations until he knew that it was a reality. But we can puncture this idea by comparing Truman and Churchill's behavior when they actually did hear of the successful test just before the start of the Potsdam Conference. Truman had certainly understood that his strategy of delay was a gamble, so upon hearing even the first, sketchy news of success, he rejoiced. 'It has taken a great load off my mind', he told US diplomat Joseph Davies on 16 July.<sup>76</sup> Truman then led off his first meeting with Churchill, on 18 July, with the results of the test. In fact the Prime Minister had already received the news by telegram on 16 July and also from a brief conversation with Stimson on 17 July. But even though Truman's report was now the third time he had been told of the test's success, Churchill appeared unmoved and proceeded to try to convince Truman that in the interest of shortening the war, the time had come to *lighten* the terms being demanded of Japan.<sup>77</sup>

Indeed, Churchill's 18 July call for stepping back from the Allies' 'unconditional surrender' demand is his great alibi against the charge that he positively wanted to see the bomb dropped on Japan. Gowing, the official historian, certainly sees things this way: here the Prime Minister has just been told by the President that the bomb is a reality, and yet he replies with a call for a negotiated peace.<sup>78</sup> Gowing is right: this behavior is very much out of step with the revisionist view of a Churchill who supposedly 'recognized and savored the wartime possibilities of the bomb' at least as early as 1942.<sup>79</sup> But Churchill's call in this meeting for scaling back the 'unconditional surrender' demand is also out of step with the Ehrman-Gowing orthodox interpretation, according to which the British believed they could have no say over the core strategic questions of the Pacific War.<sup>80</sup>

In fact the most plausible explanation for Churchill's behavior up until the second week at Potsdam is that in contrast to Truman and Secretary of State Byrnes, who had for some time perceived the bomb as

<sup>76</sup>Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, 249.

<sup>77</sup>'Summarized Note of the Prime Minister's Conversation with President Truman at Luncheon on 18 July 1945 [PREM 3/430/8]', *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, Series 1, Vol. 1 (London: HMSO 1984), 367–71.

<sup>78</sup>Gowing, *Britain and Atomic Energy*, 377.

<sup>79</sup>Bernstein, 'The Uneasy Alliance', 207.

<sup>80</sup>The British Chiefs of Staff also did not believe that Britain was fated to be irrelevant in the Pacific, and indeed at Potsdam they pushed to extend the US-UK Combined Chiefs of Staff structure over the region. See Thomas Hall, "'Mere Drops in the Ocean": The Politics and Planning of the Contribution of the British Commonwealth to the Final Defeat of Japan, 1944–45', *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 16/1 (2005), esp. 101–3.

a unique 'winning weapon',<sup>81</sup> the British leader's thinking had not evolved much from his original 1941 perception of the bomb as merely a quantitative improvement over existing explosives.<sup>82</sup> Only on 22 July 1945, after receiving the *full* report of the Alamogordo atomic test, did Churchill change his mind.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, it is not always recognized that almost all of Churchill's oft-quoted comments about the vast potential of the bomb come from that moment and after.<sup>84</sup> Churchill's new awareness produced an immediate, stunning policy shift, the abandonment of his prior position against even informing the Russians. He was now 'inclined to use it as an argument in our favour in the negotiations'.<sup>85</sup> Sherwin notes that Churchill was the only person who changed his mind at that moment on this crucial question.<sup>86</sup>

Thus Churchill appears only to have perceived the revolutionary impact of the bomb on international power relations nearly three weeks *after* he had granted Britain's formal consent to the atomic strikes on Japan. The revisionist explanation for Churchill's consent to the atomic bombings misfires, for the perception of the bomb as the 'winning weapon' that Churchill developed after 22 July cannot explain the consent that he had offered for the bombings some weeks earlier, much less his prior policy choices that set the stage for that fateful decision. Of course, the British Prime Minister was not alone in being slow to perceive the potential of this scientific project to become a political fact of the highest importance.<sup>87</sup> The point here is not to abuse him for being ignorant or unimaginative, but simply to understand why and how he made his decisions on the matter.

To this line of argument it may be objected that if Churchill truly did not comprehend the bomb's potential to restructure the international power game, he would not have been so intent to establish and maintain Anglo-American atomic collaboration. Indeed, revisionists lean heavily on Churchill's great efforts to secure that collaboration – and to prevent any other states from joining in – in making their case

<sup>81</sup>Gregg Herken, *The Winning Weapon: The Atomic Bomb in the Cold War* (New York: Knopf 1980).

<sup>82</sup>In 1941 Churchill approved Britain's original bomb project with the words, 'Although personally I am quite content with the existing explosives, I feel we must not stand in the path of improvement.' PREM 3/139/8A, Churchill to Ismay, 30 Aug. 1941.

<sup>83</sup>Herbert Feis, *The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1966), 87–8.

<sup>84</sup>The only partial exception is the previously mentioned PREM 3/139/6, Churchill to Eden, 20 March 1945.

<sup>85</sup>Cited in Sherwin, *A World Destroyed*, 227.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup>See Michael Gordin, *Five Days in August: How World War II Became a Nuclear War* (Princeton: Princeton UP 2007).

that the Prime Minister was determined that Britain should enter the postwar era armed with the bomb. But in fact the revisionists' argument contains an unnecessary logical leap. For, even without expecting the physical *product* of the two nations' atomic collaboration to be a 'winning weapon', Churchill could nevertheless have been extremely interested in promoting the bomb project as a fully and exclusively binational affair because of the institutional *process and precedent* of deep, national sovereignty-busting integration between the two states that it represented.<sup>88</sup> After all, the integration of the two great English-speaking peoples – all the way up to the establishment of a common citizenship – was his overriding long-term ambition.<sup>89</sup>

Thus, in contrast to the standard view that Churchill's determined promotion of close Anglo-American collaboration was a means of pursuing the bomb, in fact Churchill may have seen collaboration as an end in itself. In line with this interpretation, note that Churchill apparently offered complete atomic integration to Roosevelt already in June 1942, at a time when the British had not yet decided they were behind in the atomic race.<sup>90</sup>

This alternative hypothesis for explaining Churchill's eagerness for a joint bomb program is also compatible with his insistence on personally monopolizing the atomic dossier, despite the highly technical nature of the work which far surpassed his more humanistic intellectual talents. Since Churchill's vision of Anglo-American integration went far beyond typical levels of international cooperation, he naturally could not entrust the relationship to subordinates. He trusted only himself – and Roosevelt – to look beyond the question of which side might benefit more or less from cooperation in the atomic field in particular, to the benefits that both sides would accrue if they established a pattern of unstinting and permanent cooperation across all fields.<sup>91</sup> As he put it to Cherwell in May 1944:

It may be that in after years this may be judged to have been too confiding on our part. Only those who know the circumstances and

<sup>88</sup>My argument here draws on neo-functionalist theories of supranational integration. See Ernst Haas, *The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces 1950–57*, new ed. (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame UP 2004).

<sup>89</sup>See, e.g., Martin Gilbert, *Churchill and America* (New York: The Free Press 2005); Henry Butterfield Ryan, *The Vision of Anglo-America: The US-UK Alliance and the Emerging Cold War, 1943–1946* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1987). See also David Reynolds, 'Rethinking Anglo-American Relations', *International Affairs* 65/1 (Winter 1988–89), 89–111.

<sup>90</sup>See Gowing, *Britain and Atomic Energy*, 145 n.1.

<sup>91</sup>Roosevelt seems to have felt likewise. See Bernstein, 'The Uneasy Alliance'.

moods prevailing beneath the Presidential level will be able to understand why I have made this Agreement [at Quebec]. There is nothing more to do now but to carry on with it and give the utmost possible aid. Our associations with the United States must be permanent, and I have no fear that they will maltreat us or cheat us.<sup>92</sup>

Churchill's belief in the spillover effects of wartime integration proved prescient. For instance, the 1943 Quebec Agreement led directly to the establishment of the Combined Development Trust, a joint US-UK economic combine that aimed to buy up the world's supply of uranium and thorium.<sup>93</sup> And after the war it was the two states' joint control of the Trust that ensured the survival of the Anglo-American 'special relationship' after the blow of the 1946 McMahon Act.<sup>94</sup>

In sum, the most convincing explanation for Churchill's easy consent to the atomic bombings of Japan in 1945 is neither the orthodox view that he accepted the UK's junior partner status, nor the revisionist view that he thought they would be useful for cowing the Soviets. Rather, he appears simply not to have grasped that the atomic bombings would be of world-changing importance. It was only some weeks after authorizing the attacks that Churchill began to see the bomb as a qualitative change in the means of warfare, and indeed in the international balance of power.

In later years Churchill appears to have had some doubts about his handling of the use question at the end of the war. For instance, at a private luncheon with Mountbatten and Anderson in 1946, he remarked that the atomic bombings of Japan were perhaps the only decision for which he would be questioned in the court of history. 'I may even be asked by my Maker why I used it but I shall defend myself vigorously and shall say – "Why did you release this knowledge to us when mankind was raging in furious battles?"' Anderson could not accept Churchill's excuse. He snapped, 'You cannot accuse your judges'. And for once, the great debater had no riposte.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>92</sup>PREM 3/139/11A, Churchill to Cherwell, 27 May 1944.

<sup>93</sup>Cited in Saul Kelly, 'No Ordinary Foreign Office Official: Sir Roger Makins and Anglo-American Atomic Relations, 1945–55', *Contemporary British History* 14/4 (Winter 2000), 108. The documents establishing the trust are at PREM 3/139/10.

<sup>94</sup>Jonathan E. Helmreich, *Gathering Rare Ores: The Diplomacy of Uranium Acquisition, 1943–54* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1986).

<sup>95</sup>Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, Vol. 8, *Never Despair, 1945–1965* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1988), 249.



## Summary and Conclusions

The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are often referred to as 'the American decision' or 'Truman's decision'. They were of course an American decision. But Great Britain gave its explicit consent for the bombings on 4 July 1945, and that decision also demands our attention. The process of British decisionmaking on this matter bore little resemblance to the unitary, rational actor model that both the orthodox and revisionist interpretations rely on to explain its wartime atomic diplomacy. In fact, the historical record shows that already in early 1944 high-ranking British officials wanted to engage the Americans in serious discussions on the 'control and use' issue. Their hopes were dashed by Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Churchill's own treatment of the question neither reflected doubts about Britain's capacity to influence the US, nor a desire to use the bomb to put Russia in its place. Rather, his actions reflected his dim understanding of the bomb's potential to revolutionize international politics. By the time he did come to that realization, during the second week at Potsdam, the key decisions had already been made.

The story of the British road to Hiroshima and Nagasaki inevitably raises the counterfactual question of whether a more systematic policymaking and diplomatic effort by the British could have altered the ultimate American decision to drop the atomic bomb without prior warning to the Japanese and with minimal warning to the Soviets. Certainly, it is hard to imagine that Britain could have simply vetoed a strong American determination to use the bombs against Japan. But such a blunt confrontation was never Anderson and his colleagues' intention. Rather, they believed that if they developed the strategic case for the international control of the atom starting already in 1944, and then built a transnational Anglo-American coalition around it, they could have a positive influence on Washington's thinking about the inextricably linked questions of control and use. Perhaps they were wrong; but to simply dismiss the possibility of any British influence on these matters, is to dismiss the considered opinion of statesmen who were deeply knowledgeable about both the atomic project and the subtle dynamics of the Anglo-American relationship.

Even if one concludes that the British could not have had any substantial influence on Washington's ultimate decision, however, the analysis of the road to the British consent to the atomic strikes on Japan offers significant new insights into this period of history.

First, the article shows that what the Americans perceived as British passivity on the important high politics questions surrounding the bomb in 1944 and 1945 in fact reflected the stifling of high-ranking

British officials by the Prime Minister. Important British officials wanted to press Washington to consider seriously and without delay the construction of an international control regime, notably in cooperation with the Soviet Union. They fully understood that the pursuit of such a regime could to some extent restrict the Allies' latitude for using the bomb during the war, but this did not deter them from raising the issue insistently with Churchill and even, indirectly, with Roosevelt. Churchill quashed their efforts, not because he was more resigned than they were to Britain's decline, but rather because he saw the international control idea as a deviation from his own, pre-nuclear revolution vision of a postwar order supported by broad and deep Anglo-American integration.

This article's contention that Britain's apparent passivity was actually the unintended byproduct of internal political wrangling finds a parallel in recent reconsiderations of the British contribution to the war in the Pacific. These works show that the British contribution ended up being as tardy and small as it was not because they were uninterested or exhausted as previously believed, but rather because concrete action was held up by an internal battle between Churchill and his Chiefs over which of their respective *ambitious* plans to implement in the theater.<sup>96</sup> The outward appearance of passivity was the product of inconclusive internal state struggles, not of a new humility about Britain's claim to great power status.

Second, the article establishes a middle ground position between the clashing orthodox and revisionist interpretations of Churchill's wartime atomic diplomacy. On the one hand, Churchill's behavior up until the second week at Potsdam contradicts the revisionist interpretation that he saw the bomb as the 'winning weapon' against not only Japan, but also Russia. But on the other hand, Churchill's early insistence on full, exclusive, and permanent Anglo-American collaboration in the atomic area contradicts the orthodox interpretation that his major concern was with the bomb project's narrow wartime implications. The interpretation put forth in this article navigates that dispute by distinguishing between Churchill's attitudes toward the bomb itself and toward the bi-national project that built it. On the one hand, the article accepts the orthodox view that

<sup>96</sup>See Hall, 'Mere Drops in the Ocean'; Mark Jacobsen, 'Winston Churchill and the Third Front', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 14/3 (Sept. 1991), 337-62; Christopher Baxter, 'In Pursuit of a Pacific Strategy: British Planning for the Defeat of Japan, 1943-45', *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 15/2 (June 2004), 253-77; Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, 'One Last Crusade: The British Pacific Fleet and its Impact on the Anglo-American Alliance', *English Historical Review* 121/491 (April 2006), 429-66.

Churchill viewed the *use* of the bomb against Japan in narrow, military terms – and therefore showed little interest in that decision when he was confronted with it in the spring of 1945. But on the other hand the article accepts the revisionist view that Churchill saw the bomb *project* as an important precedent and spur for his cherished goal of broad Anglo-American integration that would endure into the postwar period. This explains why Churchill was simultaneously so intent on establishing a high level of Anglo-American atomic cooperation – and on cutting other nations out of the club – while being so casual about the employment of the physical product of that cooperation.

Third, the article corrects the literature's tendency to portray the early effort to establish an international control regime as merely the brainchild of Niels Bohr. There is of course no doubt that Bohr played a significant part in the wartime push for international control. But this article demonstrates that senior British statesmen were also deeply convinced early on of the value of the international control idea – and indeed, that Bohr's diplomatic foray was in no small measure an extension of British officials' political maneuvering.

The previous literature's focus on scientists as the protagonists of the international control drama implicitly suggests that the ideas they were promoting were basically unrealistic – perhaps tragically so, but unrealistic nonetheless. However, this article has shown that those ideas made eminent sense not only to political naïfs like Bohr, but also to battle-hardened policymakers like Anderson and Halifax. Thus the failure to pursue the international control idea and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki cannot be written off as merely yet more tragic results of the age-old condition of international anarchy. Rather, they must be seen as choices made by individual statesmen, who are therefore responsible for the consequences.

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