

Gyokusai and Ketsu Go: The Delays in the Forcing of the Japanese Surrender in the Summer of 1945

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There are many controversies that surround the ending of World War II in the Pacific. Two of the largest are why the Japanese high command did not surrender early in the summer of 1945 when their situation looked rather bleak, and how the government of Japan could be convinced to abandon its resistance and capitulate to the Allies. This paper discusses the conclusion of the war in the Pacific, what factors prevented an earlier end to the war, the options the Allies considered for forcing a Japanese surrender, and how one of the bloodiest wars in human history was finally brought to an end.

By the beginning of June 1945, the situation for Japan looked fairly dire. The Japanese Empire was a mere shadow of its former glory. Its possessions in the Pacific had been decimated by the aggressive Allied Island Hopping campaign. Its armies in Burma were being steadily pushed back by the advancing British and Indian troops. The Japanese armies in China were spent. The Kwantung Army of Manchukuo, once the crown jewel of Japanese forces overseas, was made up of underequipped and half-trained youths. The Ryukyu Islands, Japanese territories since early in the reign of the Meiji Emperor, were on the verge of being lost. Even the Home Islands themselves were subject to attack in the form of regular air raids that killed tens of thousands of Japanese civilians in the course of a single raid. Their situation was a military nightmare and even the most bombastic of Japanese generals realized that the war would not end in their favor. The question that remained was not whether to accept defeat, but the terms of accepting defeat.

When the Japanese General Staff first wrote plans for war with the United States, none thought that they could actually bring about its surrender.¹ Their plan was to snatch up as much territory as possible in the early stages of the war, then give back some (but not all) of these possessions in order to secure peace. They were betting that high casualties would force a war-weary America to allow them to keep some of their territorial gains. This remained the strategy of the Japanese General Staff throughout almost the entire war. Even as late as 1945, “Japanese Militarists viewed the attainable [peace] terms as at least the preservation of the homeland, with a political order in which their position remained dominant. They also hoped that Japan might still retain important gains on the continent.”² These views held great sway within the so-called “Big Six,” a group of high-ranking military and civilian officials that would be responsible for any negotiated peace. Within the Big Six there existed “a procedural rule [regarding surrender] that required complete unanimity among them to reach a decision.”³ In light of the fact that four of the Big Six were military officers, this meant that all but the most generous terms of surrender would have been discarded. They did not want to go to the Allies and ask for terms, as they felt that that would have displayed weakness, so they waited until they were presented with the terms offered by Potsdam Declaration. What they saw was far less than what they had hoped for.

The Allies made their requirements for the surrender of the Japanese abundantly clear in a document known as the Potsdam Declaration. It called for the elimination of the authority and influence of those who had led the Japanese people into war. Japanese sovereignty would be “limited to the islands of Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku” and minor islands that the West would determine. The Japanese military would disband and return home, while the Japanese homeland would be subject to a temporary occupation.⁴ The Potsdam Declaration also declared that “stern justice shall be meted out to all war criminals.” Though some mollifying terms such as “Japan shall be permitted to maintain such industries as will sustain her economy” and that “We [the Allies] do not intend that the Japanese shall be enslaved as a race or destroyed as a nation,” the heart of the declaration was summed up in the final section. The Allies called upon the Japanese government to “proclaim now the unconditional surrender of all Japanese armed forces... The alternative for Japan is prompt and utter destruction.” In short, the Potsdam Declaration meant that there would be no terms for the Japanese Surrender. They would lay down arms – now, or else. Such terms exacerbated the opposition to surrender that was already strong within the political structure of the Japanese government. The senior statesmen of Japan were “totally committed to the preservation of the Imperial System” and so were willing to risk

¹ Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *The End of the Pacific War: Reappraisals* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2007), 68.

² Hasegawa, *The End of the Pacific War: Reappraisal*, 68.

³ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴ Potsdam Declaration, accessed through Diet National Library.

total destruction to protect it.⁵ Of these highest-ranking Japanese military officials, none were more opposed to surrender than Korechika Anami, the Minister of War during the summer of 1945. When the Big Six began to discuss the prospect of accepting the Potsdam Declaration, they found themselves split on what additional terms needed to be added before they would accept the Potsdam Declaration. Those arguing for a negotiated peace, led by Tōgō, favored the addition of a guarantee that the imperial institution would be allowed to continue unmolested. Anami, the head of the more hawkish contingent of the Japanese Cabinet, wanted four additional terms. The retention of the Imperial System was a must for them, as it was for the dovish contingent. An agreement that there would be no foreign occupation of the Japanese Home Islands was also considered necessary. The Japanese Home Islands had not been occupied by a foreign invader since the dawn of recorded history; to allow this would be a great dishonor. Anami also required that the Japanese military be in charge of its own disarmament and the Japanese to be responsible for their own war crimes trials so that they would not have to hand over many of their highest-ranking officials to what they were afraid would be a merciless “victor’s justice.” While the Allies were unlikely to give ground and agree to the retention of the Imperial System, they would never agree to any of other requirements proposed by Anami, at least not with the military situation turning so soundly in their favor. Thus, members of the Japanese General Staff went about trying to change the situation on the ground in their favor.

The terms offered by the Potsdam Declaration were also far from palatable to the highest echelons of Japanese society. As a result, the Japanese generals attempted to invent some way of forcing the Allies to accept a conditional surrender. The idea they came up with was to defend their Home Islands with such fortitude that the Allies would suffer obscenely large numbers of casualties. This “decisive battle” would force the Allies to accept Japan’s conditional surrender rather than to press on with the assault. Based on analysis of American actions over the course of the war, the Japanese High Command were able to correctly identify the island of Kyushu as the target for a potential invasion and even the specific beaches that would be attacked. Thus, the Japanese High Command devoted most of their remaining resources towards Kyushu. They dubbed their defensive plan Operation Ketsu Go. If Ketsu Go were to be enacted against an Allied invasion, the result would have been one of the bloodiest battles in history.⁶

Ketsu Go was a deviation from the traditional Japanese strategy of defense in depth. Instead, the invaders would be met on the beaches with every weapon in the Japanese arsenal in the hope of driving them back into the sea. They mobilized everyone that they could, and put them into “coastal defense divisions” whose duty was to stop the Americans on the beaches or to die trying.⁷ Many of these newly formed divisions lacked even the most basic of military supplies, which compounded with their overall lack of training meant that they would quickly suffer massive casualties if engaged in battle. Along with the coastal and regular divisions, the Japanese High Command had plans for so-called “Special Attack Units” which would be an integral component of the defense of Kyushu. These “Special Attack Units” are better known in the west by the term “kamikaze.”

One term that was often bandied about by higher-ranking officials inside the Japanese military and political establishment was *gyokusai*, which literally translates to “shattered jade.” It is a reference to an old Chinese proverb that stated “a great man should die as a shattered jewel rather than live as an intact tile.” This phrase was used to justify the suicide attacks that were to be carried out against the attacking Allies. These were to form an integral part of any effort to stop the Allies at all costs. At the time of the surrender, the Japanese military had allocated over 5000 aircraft as kamikazes, aircraft meant to be rammed into Allied ships, hopefully sinking them at the cost of the pilot. In addition to these airborne suicide weapons, the Japanese army devised suicide boats that would be used against landing craft, and trained soldiers on how to throw themselves under tanks with explosives strapped to their backs in order to destroy them. They would combat a lack of military material with men willing to sacrifice themselves in order to destroy the enemy.⁸

In addition to direct suicide weapons, the Japanese government had plans to mobilize all “men ages 14-60 and women aged 16-40” to help defeat any Allied invasion. These would be soldiers armed with next to nothing, scrounging what weapons they could, from black powder muskets to bamboo spears. One Japanese schoolgirl was even told to use an awl against the invaders.⁹ These unfortunate men and women would effectively be suicide troops, as send-

⁵ Saburō Ienaga, *The Pacific War: World War II and the Japanese, 1931-1945* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 230.

⁶ Richard B. Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (New York: Random House, 1999).

⁷ D. M. Giangreco, *Hell to Pay: Operation Downfall and the Invasion of Japan, 1945-47* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute, 2009), 70.

⁸ Hasegawa, *The End of the Pacific War: Reappraisal*.

ing a line of boys armed with spears against GIs armed with Thompson submachine guns would result in their rapid demise. The Japanese General Staff was rather callous to the fact that they would be sending civilians to die; one even proudly stated that “20 million Gyokusai and victory will be ours!” They would sacrifice as many people as necessary in order to bring the Allies to more palatable terms.

Military opposition to surrender was not isolated to the upper echelons of the military and political establishment. In fact, many of the most die-hard opponents to any potential surrender talks were lower-ranking officers. These officers – young majors and colonels born at the tail end or after the fall of the Taisho Democracy in the mid-1920s – had been raised on a steady diet of propaganda from a young age. Taught in government-controlled schools, they had been raised to have a fanatical devotion to the emperor and the imperial institution. Elementary school students were taught to believe that anyone unwilling to die for the Emperor was a coward.¹⁰ They lived and breathed the code of bushido, which found everything, even death, superior to surrender. As a result, these officers could not stomach the thought of surrender in any but the direst of circumstances, and while by that time defeat was almost a certainty due to American military superiority, the situation was still perceived as salvageable. To surrender then would be to invite widespread mutiny.

Even after the continued firebombings of Japanese cities, the Soviet Declaration of War, the dropping of two atom bombs, and the belief that the U.S. potentially possessed 100 more atomic bombs, the Japanese government faced an attempted coup d'état.¹¹ During the night of August 14, 1945, a group of young officers seized the Imperial Palace and attempted to destroy recordings of the surrender announcement. They had hopes that their defiance would drive many upper officers to join their coup. Instead, they failed to find the recordings and rather than aiding them, most of the generals in the area mobilized their troops against the coup. Their loyalty to the Emperor ran bone deep; even if he ordered them to do something that they considered unconscionable they would still follow his command. Even Anami, who had fought so bitterly in the Cabinet to stop the surrender from taking place, was quoted as saying “since it is the decision of His Majesty that we accept the Potsdam Proclamation there is nothing that can be done... If there is anyone here who is dissatisfied and who wishes to act contrary to His Majesty's decision, he will have to do so over my dead body.”¹² If a coup were the reaction to surrender in mid-August of 1945, when the situation looked far bleaker than at the beginning of the summer, it is safe to assume that any earlier attempts at surrender would have met with even stiffer resistance.

At the time the Japanese government had high hopes for the Soviets regarding a negotiated peace. After two abortive attempted invasions of the Soviet Union by the Japanese in 1938 and 1939, a neutrality pact was signed between the two powers. This pact allowed both sides to focus more on other fronts. By the time 1945 rolled around, Japan had decided that the Soviet Union would make ideal peace brokers, as they were not at war with Japan and also allied with the West. They proposed sending a request for “Russian good offices for peace talks... [asking] assistance as if Tokyo had some claim on Russian Friendship.”¹³ These Japanese efforts met with no success, as the Western Allies had negotiated a deal at Yalta with Stalin to ensure the Soviets would join the war against the Japanese within 90 days of the surrender of Nazi Germany. In exchange for this, the Soviets would get international recognition of Mongolia, several territorial concessions on the mainland, and the Kuril Islands.¹⁴ While the Soviets were still at peace with Japan, the Japanese government had some hope for them to serve as an intermediary, but when the Soviet Union invaded Manchukuo and soundly trounced the Kwantung Army, they knew that it would no longer be a possible solution. The country that they had perceived as a potential savior ended up delivering one of the final blows to the Japanese Empire.

The question that vexed Allied commanders as the summer of 1945 began was how they were finally going to bring the Japanese Empire to its knees. Throughout the island hopping campaigns of the past several years, they had met fanatical Japanese resistance at every turn, regardless of the fact that many of these islands were little more than useless hunks of rock. The concern of several strategic planners was that if the Japanese Military were willing to fight to the last man over unimportant scraps of land, what would happen if the Home Islands themselves were on the table? Rather than undertake a bloodbath of an invasion, the proposal advanced by the Navy was one of a blockade. This was seen as an option that would result in few Allied casualties, while still hopefully ending the war. This would be a multi-pronged shift in the American engagement of Japan. The Navy would step up existing efforts to stop the

⁹ Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire*, 189.

¹⁰ George M. Wilson, “Transwar Japan.” In-class lectures, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, Fall 2011.

¹¹ Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire*, 292.

¹² *Ibid.*, 297.

¹³ Ienaga, *The Pacific War: World War II and the Japanese, 1931-1945*, 231.

¹⁴ Hasegawa, *The End of the Pacific War: Reappraisal*, 156.

Japanese government from shipping anything back to the home islands. They would drastically expand the highly successful, albeit minor, mining of the seas around Japan. Extensive anti-shipping mines would reduce imports to mainland Japan to almost zero. The Air Force would shift their targets from cities and industrial complexes to railroads. While this would result in fewer direct Japanese civilian casualties, it would exacerbate the already severe starvation problem.

Before the war, the Japanese populace was reliant on shipments from their colonies for food. However, with those shipments almost coming to a standstill, the Japanese populace was forced to rely on domestic food supplies. With Japan being highly urbanized, even in 1945, vast amounts of food had to be brought to the cities primarily by rail. If the Allies had begun targeting railroads almost exclusively, it would have been nigh impossible for what little food the Japanese had to reach its people. Additionally, the harvest of 1945 was one of the worst on record in Japan. After the Japanese surrender, the U.S. brought in 800,000 tons of food to supply the Japanese people and prevent starvation, which would not have happened if the war were still being fought. Even with U.S. food imports, the daily ration of food “stood at only 1042 calories per person in Tokyo.”¹⁵ A contemporary Japanese scholar estimated that immediately after the defeat, without U.S. support “10 million people were likely to starve to death.” Based on the fact that no organized group of Japanese soldiers had ever surrendered, the ability of a blockade to bring the Japanese to their knees was cast into doubt. It lacked the shock value that American strategic planners felt was necessary to end the war. As a result, this particular proposal fell by the wayside in favor of another: invasion.

The prevailing opinion within the upper echelons of the Allied military was that an invasion would prove necessary to bring about the surrender of the Japanese government. They designed an invasion of Japan, codenamed Operation Downfall, which would have made D-Day look small in comparison. For Operation Olympic, the invasion of Kyushu, twelve divisions would land on several beaches, supported by over 1,900 carrier-based aircraft and a fleet of 1,315 ships.

Their orders would have been to secure Kyushu as a base of operations for Operation Coronet, the planned invasion of the main home island of Honshu. Due to the Japanese fixation on Kyushu through Ketsu Go, any invasion would be met with stiff resistance. Operation Coronet would have dwarfed even Olympic, with the involvement of 25 divisions and over 2.5 million tons of material. The potential casualties that could result from Downfall cannot be understated. A U.S. government estimate conducted in July of 1945 pegged American casualties at over 400,000 dead, with the Japanese body count being over 5 million.¹⁶ To put that in perspective, fewer than 300,000 Americans had been killed in action by that point in the war.¹⁷ In preparation for the invasion, the U.S. ordered 500,000 Purple Hearts. (To date, over 100,000 of those remain unrewarded and undistributed.) This one battle would have resulted in more casualties than in every single engagement since the conclusion of WWII. The Japanese government had an even larger estimate for Japanese casualties. A bloodbath would have been guaranteed.

Fortunately, for both the U.S. and Japan, another option presented itself: the atom bomb. Developed in secret throughout the course of the war, the atom bomb was a weapon that its designers hoped would shock Japan into surrendering. The plan was straightforward: if the Potsdam Declaration were refused, then the finished atomic bombs would be dropped on Japanese cities that had yet to be targeted by strategic bombers. If that failed to elicit surrender “the next bomb would have most likely targeted Tokyo.” If this still proved ineffective, then the U.S. would fall back upon the strategy of invasion. This plan was more sophisticated in that it focused on more of the psychological factors of war than the material ones. The destructive value of a single atom bomb was not noticeably more than a conventional air raid. More people died in the March firebombings of Tokyo than died in either atomic blast. The difference was in the shock value. To see a city devastated by a bombing raid made up of hundreds of bombers is one thing, but to see it destroyed by a single bomb has a much greater psychological effect. There is much controversy regarding the relative merits of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, whether they were necessary to force surrender or if they were an unnecessary murder of tens of thousands of civilians. The loss of over a hundred thousand Japanese citizens is a tragedy, but next to the casualties that would have resulted had the U.S. gone forward with Operation Downfall or blockaded the Japanese mainland, the bombs seem more like mercy blows. Kido Koichi, the Lord Keeper of the

¹⁵ Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire*, 351.

¹⁶ Giangreco, *Hell to Pay: Operation Downfall and the Invasion of Japan, 1945-47*, 92.

¹⁷ Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire*, 134.

Privy Seal at the time of the surrender even went so far as to call the bombings “a gift from Heaven” that allowed the Japanese government to surrender.¹⁸

The Japanese General Staff resisted surrendering over the course of the summer of 1945, as they held hopes of negotiating better terms from the Allies. Their battle doctrine was based on the principal that if the Allies suffered enough casualties in one massive decisive battle, then they would allow the Japanese government to surrender under better terms. They planned out Ketsu Go, a massive defense of Kyushu that they hoped would prove to be their decisive battle, through the Gyokusai of millions of their own citizens. The upper echelons also were wary of surrender as many of the young officers were fanatical in their opposition to surrender, and there was a risk of a coup if Japan surrendered under the terms laid out by the Allies in the Potsdam Declaration. Faced with Japanese resistance to surrender, the Allies considered blockading Japan, before eventually deciding to invade. Fortunately, a third option presented itself in the form of the atom bomb and Soviet involvement. While the destruction of two cities in the blink of an eye should not be considered a good thing per se, the fact that it prevented other, more destructive, choices made it the best of a set of bad options. The shock of those two bombs combined to overwhelm the Japanese resistance to surrender, making sure the Gyokusai and Ketsu Go were not enacted, and bringing about a far less bloody end to World War Two than otherwise could have been possible.

¹⁸ Sadao Asada, “The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan’s Decision to Surrender: A Reconsideration,” *The Pacific Historical Review* 67, no. 4 (1998): 496.

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