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Leo Szilard, Interview: President Truman Did Not Understand

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President Truman Did Not Understand

Dr. Leo Szilard, 62, is a Hungarian-born physicist who helped persuade President Roosevelt to launch the A-bomb project and who had a major share in it. In 1945, however, he was a key figure among the scientists opposing use of the bomb. Later he turned to biophysics, and this year was awarded the Einstein medal for "outstanding achievement in natural sciences."

At NEW YORK

Q Dr. Szilard, what was your attitude in 1945 toward the question of dropping the atomic bomb on Japan?

A I opposed it with all my power, but I'm afraid not as effectively as I should have wished.

Q Did any other scientists feel the same way you did?

A Very many other scientists felt this way. This is particularly true of Oak Ridge and the Metallurgical Laboratory of the University of Chicago. I don't know how the scientists felt at Los Alamos.

Q At the Oak Ridge and Chicago branches of the A-bomb project, was there any division of opinion?

A I'll say this: Almost without exception, all the creative physicists had misgivings about the use of the bomb. I would not say the same about the chemists. The biologists felt very much as the physicists did.

Q When did your misgivings first arise?

A Well, I started to worry about the use of the bomb in the spring of '45. But misgivings about our way of conducting ourselves arose in Chicago when we first learned that we were using incendiary bombs on a large scale against the cities of Japan.

This, of course, was none of our responsibility. There was nothing we could do about it, but I do remember that my colleagues in the project were disturbed about it.

Q Did you have any knowledge of Secretary of War Stimson's concern at this time on the question of using the bomb?

A I knew that Mr. Stimson was a thoughtful man who gave the bomb serious consideration. He was one of the most thoughtful members of the Truman cabinet. However, I certainly have to take exception to the article Stimson wrote after Hiroshima in "Harper's Magazine." He wrote that a "demonstration" of the A-bomb was impossible because we had only two bombs. Had we staged a "demonstration" both bombs might have been duds and then we would have lost face.

Now, this argument is clearly invalid. It is quite true that at the time of Hiroshima we had only two bombs, but it would not have been necessary to wait for very long before we would have had several more.

Q Were you aware then of the attitude of Under Secretary of the Navy Ralph Bard or of the memorandum by Lewis L. Strauss?

A No.

Q So, in effect, there was no concerted opposition to military use of the bomb?

A No, there was none. You see, it would have been impossible for me to go and talk with Lewis Strauss because of the secrecy rules.

Q Do you feel that President Truman and those immediately below him gave full and conscientious study to all the alternatives to use of the atomic bomb?

A I do not think they did. They thought only in terms of our having to end the war by military means.

I don't think Japan would have surrendered unconditionally without the use of force. But there was no need to demand the unconditional surrender of Japan. If we had offered Japan the kind of peace treaty which we actually gave her, we could have had a negotiated peace.

Q In retrospect, do you think your views got a full hearing?

A Let me answer this by describing in detail just what kind of hearing my views got.

In March, 1945, I prepared a memorandum which was meant to be presented to President Roosevelt. This memorandum warned that the use of the bomb against the cities of Japan would start an atomic-arms race with Russia, and it raised the question whether avoiding such an arms race might not be more important than the short-term goal of knocking Japan out of the war. I was not certain that this memorandum would reach the President if I sent it "through channels." Therefore, I asked to see Mrs. Roosevelt, and I intended to transmit my memorandum through her - in a sealed envelope - to the President.

When Mrs. Roosevelt set the date for the interview which I had requested, I went to see Arthur H. Compton, who was in charge of the Chicago project. I rather expected him to object to the contents of my memorandum, and I was therefore much relieved when he told me that he hoped I would get the memorandum into the hands of the President and that it would receive the attention of the President. I then went back to my own office, and I hadn't been there for more than five minutes when there was a knock at the door and there stood Dr. Norman Hilberry. "We have just heard over the radio that President Roosevelt died," he said.

For a while I was at a loss to know how to bring my memorandum to President Truman's attention. I knew many people who knew Roosevelt, but President Truman didn't seem to move in the same circles. Then it occurred to me that we must have several men from Kansas City in the project and that some of these might know how to reach Truman.

When I was asked to go to the White House and see Matt Connelly, Truman's Appointments Secretary, I suggested to Walter Bartky, associate director of our project, that he accompany me. Mr. Connelly read my memorandum with attention. "I can see that this is serious business," he said. "Frankly, at first I was a little suspicious because this appointment came through Kansas City." He told us that the President had an inkling of what our business might be and that he wanted us to go to Spartanburg and see James Byrnes. We didn't know why we were sent to see Byrnes, since at that point Byrnes held no Government position. We were quite willing to go, of course, and we asked for permission to take [atomic scientist] H. C. Urey along. On May 27 we took the night train to Spartanburg.

Q What happened then?

A Having read the memorandum, the first thing that Byrnes told us was that General Groves [head of the Manhattan District, which developed the A-bomb] had informed him that Russia had no uranium. Of course, if Russia did not have any uranium then she would not be able to participate in an atomic-arms race, but to me this seemed to be an exceedingly unlikely assumption. It was conceivable that Russia might have no high-grade uranium-ore deposits - deposits of pitchblende. The only known pitchblende deposit within the control of Russia was the deposit in Czechoslovakia, and this was not believed to be very extensive. But I found it difficult to believe that within the vast expanse of Russia there should be no low-grade uranium-ore deposits which could be used to obtain uranium for the production of bombs.

When I saw Mr. Byrnes I was very much concerned about the fact that no governmental policy had been developed on the issue of how to cope with the problem that the bomb would pose to the world. I raised the question of whether it might be wise to gain time for developing such a governmental policy by postponing the testing of the bomb. It seemed to me that once the bomb had been tested its existence could not be kept secret for long. Byrnes did not think that postponing the test was a good idea, and, in retrospect, I am inclined to agree with him. In retrospect, I don't think that postponing the test would have solved our problem.

Byrnes was concerned about Russia's having taken over Poland, Rumania and Hungary, and so was I. Byrnes thought that the possession of the bomb by America would render the Russians more manageable in Europe. I failed to see how sitting on a stockpile of bombs, which in the circumstances we could not possibly use, would have this effect, and I thought it even conceivable that it would have just the opposite effect.

When I returned to Chicago and learned that Byrnes had been appointed Secretary of State, I concluded that the arguments that I regarded as important would receive no consideration. I didn't realize at that time that Secretary Stimson would play a major role in the final decision and that he might be able to understand my point of view better than Mr. Byrnes had done.

In Chicago I collaborated in the writing of the so-called Franck Report. This report was addressed to Secretary Stimson, but none of those who participated in the writing of the report, including Prof. James Franck, had an opportunity to see Mr. Stimson.

In the meantime I drafted a petition to the President which did not go into any considerations of expediency but opposed, on purely moral grounds, the use of atomic bombs against the cities of Japan. This petition was signed by about 60 members of the Chicago project. Some of those who signed insisted that the petition be transmitted to the President through "official channels." To this I reluctantly agreed. I was, at this point, mainly concerned that the members of the project had an opportunity to go on record on this issue, and I didn't think that the petition would be likely to have an effect on the course of events. The petition was sent to the President through official channels, and I should not be too surprised if it were discovered one of these days that it hadn't ever reached him.

Q Did you think then that the Russians probably were working on the bomb?

A I had no idea of this. The question before us was: Should we think in terms of America's having a long-term monopoly of the bomb after the war, or will Russia have the bomb before long also? I had no doubt that we would start an atomic-arms race if we used the bomb.

Q Would a demonstration have been feasible?

A It is easy to see, at least in retrospect, how an effective demonstration could have been staged. We could have communicated with Japan through regular diplomatic channels - say, through Switzerland - and explained to the Japanese that we didn't want to kill anybody, and therefore proposed that one city - say, Hiroshima - be evacuated. Then one single bomber would come and drop one single bomb.

But again, I don't believe this staging a demonstration was the real issue, and in a sense it is just as immoral to force a sudden ending of a war by threatening violence as by using violence. My point is that violence would not have been necessary if we had been willing to negotiate. After all, Japan was suing for peace.

Q Did you know that fully at the time?

A No. All I knew at that time was that we had won the war, that Japan had not the ghost of a chance of winning it and that she must know this. It did not matter just how far gone the Japanese were; if they knew they would not win the war, if they knew they would lose it in the end, that is all that matters.

THE MAJOR MISTAKE

Q Have your views on this subject changed at all since 1945?

A No, except that I can say much more clearly today what I was thinking at that time than I was able to say it at that time. Today I would put the whole emphasis on the mistake of insisting on unconditional surrender. Today I would say that the confusion arose from considering the fake alternatives of either having to invade Japan or of having to use the bomb against her cities.

Q Would most other nations, including Russia, have done the same thing we did, confronted with the same opportunity to use the bomb?

A Look, answering this question would be pure speculation. I can say this, however: By and large, governments are guided by considerations of expediency rather than by moral considerations. And this, I think, is a universal law of how governments act.

Prior to the war I had the illusion that up to a point the American Government was different. This illusion was gone after Hiroshima.

Perhaps you remember that in 1939 President Roosevelt warned the belligerents against using bombs against the inhabited cities, and this I thought was perfectly fitting and natural.

Then, during the war, without any explanation, we began to use incendiary bombs against the cities of Japan. This was disturbing to me and it was disturbing many of my friends.

Q Was that the end of the illusion?

A Yes, this was the end of the illusion. But, you see, there was still a difference between using incendiary bombs and using the new force of nature for purposes of destruction. There was still a further step taken here - atomic energy was something new.

I thought it would be very bad to set a precedent for using atomic energy for purposes of destruction. And I think that having done so we have greatly affected the postwar history.

HOW BOMBING BOOMERANGED

Q In what way?

A I think it made it very difficult for us to take the position after the war that we wanted to get rid of atomic bombs because it would be immoral to use them against the civilian population. We lost the moral argument with which, right after the war, we might have perhaps gotten rid of the bomb.

Let me say only this much to the moral issue involved: Suppose Germany had developed two bombs before we had any bombs. And suppose Germany had dropped one bomb, say, on Rochester and the other on Buffalo, and then having run out of bombs she would have lost the war. Can anyone doubt that we would then have defined the dropping of atomic bombs on cities as a war crime, and that we would have sentenced the Germans who were guilty of this crime to death at Nuremberg and hanged them?

But, again, don't misunderstand me. The only conclusion we can draw is that governments acting in a crisis are guided by questions of expediency, and moral considerations are given very little weight, and that America is no different from any other nation in this respect.

Q How would the world of today have been different if we had not dropped the atomic bomb on Japan?

A I think, if we had not dropped the bomb on Hiroshima and instead demonstrated the bomb after the war, then, if we had really wanted to rid the world of atomic bombs, I think we could probably have done it.

Now, whether this would have led to a better world or not, I don't know. But it certainly would have been a world very different from the one we have now.

Q Do you think it would have avoided a nuclear-arms race?

A I think we could have avoided a nuclear-arms race, yes, but we might still have gotten into conflict with Russia - over other issues.

Q Would the Russians have developed the atomic and hydrogen bombs as quickly if we had not dropped the bomb? Do you think they hurried up their espionage and research after Hiroshima?

A They had no choice but to hurry up with developing their own bomb, since they would not want us to have the monopoly of the bomb.

Q Were the Russians aware of the work we were doing?

A Yes. This I did not know at the time. I would say, in retrospect, that not testing the bomb probably would not have gained us very much time.

Q Do you think that the "missile age" would have come as quickly without the atomic bomb?

A No, the long-range missile would be completely useless without a nuclear warhead, because they are too expensive as vehicles for carrying TNT.

Q What about the space age in general? Would that also have been put off into the indefinite future?

A I should think so.

Q Then was space exploration - missile, hydrogen bombs, all the rest of it - a natural outgrowth of the atomic bomb?

A I think so. But, you see, I'm in no hurry to get to Mars or Venus. I don't value the exploration of the solar system as much as maybe others do.

Q Do Americans have a guilt complex over the bomb?

A I wouldn't call it exactly a "guilt complex." But you remember perhaps John Hersey's "Hiroshima." It made a very great impression on America, but it did not in England. Why?

It was we who used the bomb and not the English. Somewhere, below the level of consciousness, we have a stake in the bomb, which the English don't have. Still, I wouldn't call it a "guilt complex."

Q Has this feeling, whatever it is, affected us in any material way?

A Great power imposes the obligation of exercising restraint, and we did not live up to this obligation. I think this affected many of the scientists in

a subtle sense, and it diminished their desire to continue to work on the bomb.

Q Did Hiroshima affect our development of the hydrogen bomb?

A I should say it delayed it five years. I think, if we'd exercised restraint, many physicists would have continued to work on atomic energy after the war who did not.

Q Would a United States Government today, confronted with the same set of choices and approximately the same degree of military intelligence, reach a different decision as to using the first A-bomb?

A I think it depends on the person of the President. Truman did not understand what was involved. You can see that from the language he used. Truman announced the bombing of Hiroshima while he was at sea coming back from Potsdam, and his announcement contained the phrase - I quote from the New York "Times" of August 7, 1945: "We have spent 2 billion dollars on the greatest scientific gamble in history - and won."

To put the atomic bomb in terms of having gambled 2 billion dollars and having "won" offended my sense of proportions, and I concluded at that time that Truman did not understand at all what was involved.

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