AWESOME stories

When Truman was Hoodwinked at Potsdam

When President Truman attended the Potsdam Conference, at the end of WWII in Europe, he stayed at a home located at Number 2, Kaiserstrasse in the town of Babelsburg.

Because the President was living there, the home was called "The Little White House."

There was something about this home which the President did not learn about until many years later. It was a tragic story.

Since the Soviets were the occupying force in and around Berlin—after the fall of Germany—it was the Soviets who arranged for Truman to stay at the Babelsburg house. The President's Soviet hosts told Truman that the owner, who'd been banished to Siberia, was formerly head of the Nazi movie industry.

That was an untrue statement. In fact, the villa—depicted above—was owned by Gustav Müller-Grote, a respected publisher.

Ten years after Potsdam, Truman received a letter from Müller-Grote's son. The letter revealed the actual story about the house on Kaiserstrasse:

> *...In the beginning of May the Russians arrived. Ten weeks before you entered this house, its tenants were living in constant fright and fear. By day and by night plundering Russian soldiers went in and out, raping my sisters before their own parents and children, beating up my old parents.*
>
> *All the furniture, wardrobes, trunks, etc. were smashed with bayonets and rifle butts, their contents spilled and destroyed in an indescribable manner. The wealth of a cultivated house was destroyed within hours.* (Quoted in David McCullough's *Truman*, at page 497.)

The letter also told Truman where the home's owners were actually living while he enjoyed his conference lodgings:

> *When you moved into this house, its proprietor was by no means removed to Russia, as you wrote to your wife. Its proprietor lived, with his wife, no more than 500 yards away in miserable surroundings.*

Then ... the writer of the letter compares the artistic and literary history of his father's home with the decision which Truman made, while staying there (because he finally had "all the facts"), to authorize release of the atomic bomb over a Japanese city (in that instance, Hiroshima):

> *It is ironical that in surroundings where arts, science and literature were sovereign, apparently a decision should have been arrived at concerning the fatal atom bombing of Hiroshima.* (Quoted in *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman*, by Harry Truman, edited by Robert H. Ferrell, at page 51.)

In fact, Truman was staying at the "Berlin White House" when he learned that an atomic bomb had been successfully detonated in New Mexico on July 16, 1945. Called the "Manhattan Project," the test (referred to as "Trinity") was on the President's mind when he wrote these words in his diary two days later:

> *Went to lunch with P.M.* [Prime Minister Winston Churchill] *at 1:30. Walked around to British Hqtrs. Met at the gate by Mr. Churchill ...*
>
> *P.M. & I ate alone. Discussed Manhattan (it is a success). Decided to tell Stalin about it ...*
>
> *Believe Japs will fold up before Russia comes in* [Truman wanted Russia to join the war in the Pacific, against Japan.] *I am sure they will when Manhattan appears over their homeland. I shall inform Stalin about it at an opportune time.* (See *Off the Record* diary entry for July 18, 1945, at pages 53-54.)

Stalin, however, already knew about the Manhattan Project and America's development of the atomic bomb. Not only had Soviet spies penetrated the bomb project, Stalin had his own nuclear team in place, headed by

Professor Igor Kurchatov.

By April of 1946, Stalin's first atomic bomb was being designed at the Kurchatov Institute in Moscow. When the Soviets detonated "First Lightning"—on August 29, 1949—it resembled the implosion-type "Fat Man" bomb which America had detonated over Nagasaki on August 9, 1945.

Even if the President had known how much Soviet hoodwinking was going on at the Potsdam Conference, there wasn't much that he, or anyone else in his entourage, could have done about it. As the President noted in his diary, it was Stalin's opinion that cooperating in war would be much easier than cooperating in peace:

> *Stalin's luncheon was a most satisfactory meeting. I invited him to come to the U.S. Told him I'd send the Battleship Missouri for him if he'd come. He said he wanted to cooperate with U.S. in peace as we had cooperated in War but it would be much harder. Said he was grossly misunderstood in U.S. and I was misunderstood in Russia.*
>
> *I told him that we each could help to remedy that situation in our home countries and that I intended to try with all I had to do my part at home. He gave me a most cordial smile and said he would do as much in Russia.* (See *Off the Record*, at page 54.)

When Stalin 's bomb was detonated, in 1949, Americans had a different code-name for it than "First Lightning." They called it "Joe-1," after Joseph Stalin, the Potsdam hoodwinker.

Credits:

Image of the home at Number 2, Kaiserstrasse, online via U.S. National Archives. Public Domain.

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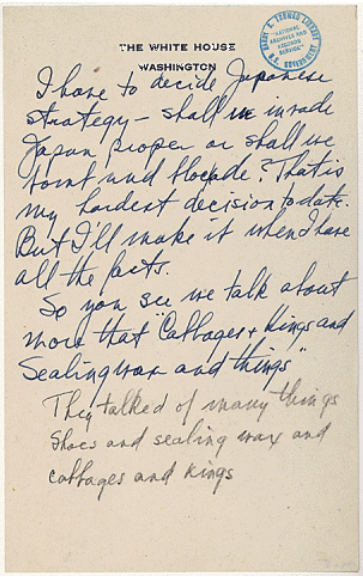

President Truman's Diary - Japan-Attack Strategy
Image depicting original page from President Truman's diary - entry for June 17, 1945 - online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.
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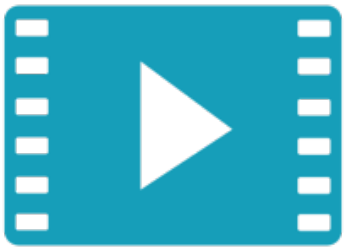

Atomic Bomb - Recreation of the First Test

This vide clip is from a BBC documentary - *Hiroshima* - in which surviving members of the Enola Gay crew talk about their mission to deliver the atomic bomb to that city.

The documentary is part of a significantly broader BBC series on the History of World War II.

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