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# "The Scientists' Petition:" A Forgotten Wartime Protest

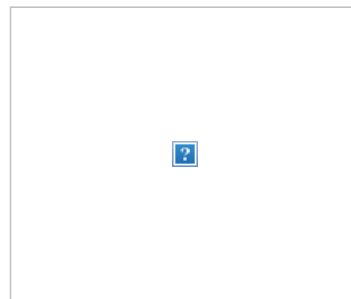


An Op-Ed Piece by William Lanouette

Sixty years ago this summer, 155 scientists working on the Manhattan Project to design and build the world's first A-bombs signed a petition to President Truman raising grave moral doubts about what they had created.

Led by physicist Leo Szilard, the signers at the Project's secret uranium plant in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and at the Metallurgical Lab in Chicago, urged their Commander-in-Chief to weigh his "moral responsibilities" when deciding whether to drop A-bombs on inhabited Japanese cities. They also urged Truman to warn the Japanese about the apocalyptic ruin they faced, and to state clearly the surrender terms that Washington now expected from Tokyo.

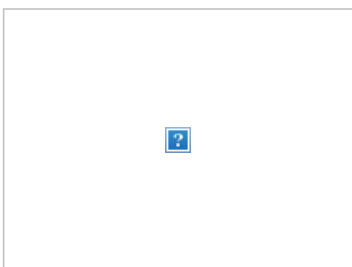
The petition's signers had all worked doggedly to create nuclear weapons before Nazi scientists could. But they saw this as a desperate, defensive effort to keep Hitler from world domination. Once Germany surrendered in May 1945, they considered offensive use of their new weapons against Japan as both morally wrong and potentially catastrophic. Instead, many signers urged the A-bomb be demonstrated to force Japan's surrender, and then be locked under new international controls to forestall a post-war nuclear arms race.



Szilard in Congress, October 1945

More Manhattan Project scientists would have signed at Los Alamos, the secret lab in New Mexico where the bomb was designed and assembled, but there director J. Robert Oppenheimer forbade the petition's circulation. Oppenheimer had advised a top-level government committee that recommended Truman use the bomb without warning on civilians, and he dismissed Szilard's petition as naive meddling. Going further, Oppenheimer alerted Gen. Leslie Groves, the Manhattan Project's military head, about the petition. Only after learning how Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been destroyed did Oppenheimer regret his creation, urge international control for all atomic work, and oppose racing to build even more powerful H-bombs.

On July 17th, 1945, the day after the first A-bomb was tested, Szilard bundled his signed petition sheets into a manila envelope, addressed it to the President, and passed it up the Army's chain-of-command. But, alerted by Oppenheimer, General Groves had his subordinates delay the petition until he received word from Tinian Island in the Pacific that the bombs were ready to be dropped.



General Leslie R. Groves.

Ever since taking command of the Project in 1942, Groves had mistrusted Szilard; he had even tried to have him jailed that year as a suspicious and disruptive force among the scientists. And Szilard was disruptive, in tirelessly creative ways. He had first conceived the nuclear chain reaction in 1933, had urged Albert Einstein to sign the 1939 letter to President Franklin Roosevelt that warned about a Nazi bomb and led to the Manhattan Project, and had co-designed with Enrico Fermi the first nuclear reactor. But with Germany's defeat, Szilard used another Einstein letter to reach the White House, argued for international control of the bomb with Truman's atomic adviser James F. Byrnes, helped draft a Manhattan Project scientists' report urging the bomb be demonstrated, and finally circulated his petition.

To counter Szilard's petition, Groves ordered a poll among his scientists, but was chagrined when 83 percent of them favored a demonstration before using A-bombs against Japan. Groves squelched that poll too. And once A-bombs were used, and Japan had surrendered, Groves kept Szilard from publishing the petition in Science magazine by having it declared "Secret". The petition wasn't fully declassified until 1961, and wasn't published until 1963, a year before Szilard's death.

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Few people today even know that so many men and women who had worked to beat Hitler to the bomb had then tried to stop it once that race was won. Their petition highlights a cruel duality shared by all scientists: eager to reveal nature's secrets, they are then often powerless to influence how their discoveries are used. Yet, as Szilard and his colleagues showed, scientists should never stop trying to remind policymakers of their "moral responsibilities."

[William Lanouette](#) is the author of *Genius in the Shadows: A Biography of Leo Szilard, The Man Behind the Bomb*. As a public policy analyst and a journalist, he has written about nuclear weapons and nuclear power for more than three decades.

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