

Mokusatsu:
The Deadliest Mistake

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When we were first looking for topics we decided we wanted to choose a seemingly miniscule event that created great effects. The idea that small things can have great consequences has always been intriguing, so when we learned about the mistranslation of the Japanese phrase ‘mokusatsu’ during WWII it immediately drew our attention. One small misinterpretation led to the American response of dropping the atomic bomb. The dropping of the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima was, and remains, the use of the deadliest weapon known to mankind. It was a turning point that changed the course of history with casualties in the hundreds of thousands from the equivalent of 15,000 tons of TNT – measures unknown to humanity at the time.

The first thing we did was gather background information to establish the status quo of WWII. We conducted research through hours of online digging through newspaper archives, ebooks, interviews, and more to form an accurate timeline of events from as many perspectives as we could, pulling impactful quotes and media from numerous sources along the way.

In creating our website, the task of condensing all our research into something more compact was daunting and we had to exclude many details. The limited actions of the website builder made things difficult as well. Navigation grew easier with time, but formatting everything remained time-consuming. We had to meet regularly to bounce off ideas so that the website could flow well, and it took a lot of trial and error to get the finished product.

Our historical argument is that the mistranslation of mokusatsu led to the bombing of Hiroshima, making it one of the most devastating turning points in history. When the Japanese were discussing the conditions of the Potsdam Declaration, they were uncertain how to proceed amidst internal conflicts but decided to wait for a Soviet response to their previous delegations. When interviewed, Prime Minister Suzuki used the phrase ‘mokusatsu’ to describe the government’s response of taking no notice. However, the American government received this response as ‘ignore’, and took it as rejection. This would lead to the first dropping of the atomic bomb. On August 6, 1945, the Japanese city of Hiroshima was devastated by the detonation of the atomic bomb. Less than ten days later, the unconditional surrender of Japan was announced. The surrender of the Japanese marked the end of World War II, the deadliest conflict in human history.

The significance of this single phrase mokusatsu, and the impact of its misinterpretation, is hard to emphasize enough. The vague and ambiguous speech of politicians is a consistent threshold of any state, and minor mistranslations are to be expected of news agencies, but this one in particular led to the catastrophic deaths of hundreds of thousands. More than that though, the impact of this word goes far past its physical brute. After the first explosive example of atomic diplomacy, it was followed by the nuclear arms race that extends to today. Nowadays, countries have hotlines for direct communication.