History of the Atomic Bomb

In this course, we will examine the development of nuclear weapons from the discovery of fission in 1938 to the Oppenheimer security hearings of 1954, with a brief look at later events. This is a Writing Flag course, and we will emphasize the form as well as the content of your written work.

Course grades will be +/− and will be based on two quizzes (5% each), a 12–14 page paper on the decision to drop atomic bombs on Japanese cities (50%), a 3 page paper on Robert Oppenheimer (10%), a final exam (20%), and class participation (10%). You will be expected to attend all class meetings, and your attendance will figure in your participation score.

Supplementary course materials and information on course policies will be posted on Blackboard.


Jan. 19 Atomic physics in Europe and America, 1920–1938; the discovery of fission.
Jan. 24 How to make an atomic bomb: U-235 and Pu-239.
Jan. 26 Getting the government interested; the British MAUD Report. (Rhodes, 13–356; packet readings 1 and 2)
Jan. 31 Organizing military research: Bush and Conant; radar and rockets.
Feb. 2 Aerial bombing in WWII; the question of chemical weapons. (Rhodes, 357–83)
Feb. 7 The German Uranium Project; atomic choices in different countries.
Feb. 9 The Met Lab and Fermi’s pile; quiz (5%). (Rhodes, 383–442; Stoff, 16–28)
Feb. 16 Los Alamos: Oppenheimer’s secret bomb lab; the state of the project in early 1944. (Rhodes, 443–521; Polenberg, 10–23; Stoff, 33–59)
Feb. 21 Building the bomb: implosion.
Feb. 23 The military situation, spring–summer 1945; getting started on your main papers. (Rhodes, 522–614; Stoff, 92–104)
Feb. 28  Truman, Stimson, and Byrnes.
Mar. 2  The Interim Committee.
        (Rhodes, 617–51; Stoff, 105–33)
Mar. 7  The Franck Report: scientists raise concerns.
Mar. 9  Potsdam; quiz (5%).
        (Rhodes, 682–99; Stoff, 138–77, 194–217; packet readings 3 and 4)
Mar. 21 The Trinity test.
Mar. 22 The raids on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the situation in Japan, July–August 1945.
        (Rhodes, 651–82, 699–711; Stoff, 182–93; packet readings 5–7)
Mar. 28 —Discussion: the decision to drop the bombs; main papers due (50%).
Mar. 30 On the ground in Hiroshima and Nagasaki; public reactions to the atomic bombings.
        (Rhodes, 712–747; Stoff, 222–70; Hersey, all; Hogan, 11–115)
Apr. 4  Shaping atomic history; short film: “Atomic Power”; attempts at international control.
Apr. 6  Atomic spies and the Soviet bomb.
        (Rhodes, 749–64; Stoff, 64–87; packet readings 8–11)
Apr. 11 The “Superbomb”; the GAC Report.
Apr. 13 The Teller–Ulam design: how to make an H-bomb.
        (Rhodes 764–88; York, all)
Apr. 18 Oppenheimer accused: the Oppenheimer security hearings.
Apr. 20 —film: “The Day After Trinity.”
        (Polenberg, xv–xxxii, 3–10, 23–397)
Apr. 25 —Discussion: In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer; short papers due (10%).
Apr. 27 Nuclear weapons in the Cold War.
        (reading to be posted on Blackboard)
May 3  Nuclear weapons in the contemporary world; course evaluation.
        (Hogan, 116–67, 187–232)
May 13 Final exam (20%) — 7–10 pm — room to be announced

Academic integrity: All students will be expected to live up to the highest standards of academic integrity, and in particular to observe the policies on plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and related matters laid out in the section on “Scholastic Dishonesty” found under the “UT Policies” link on the course Blackboard page.

Students with disabilities: Students with disabilities may request appropriate academic accomodations from Services for Students with Disabilities at 471-6259 or 232–2937 (video phone), or at http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd