

Leo Szilard

1898–1964



WHY HE MADE HISTORY Leo Szilard was a key figure in the building of the atomic bomb. Once a bomb existed, he tried to convince others that it not be dropped.



As you read the biography below, think about Szilard's change of heart about dropping the bomb. What was the reason for this?



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In 1942, in a laboratory under the bleachers at Stagg Field, the football stadium at the University of Chicago, the world's first nuclear reaction took place. It was created by Leo Szilard and other scientists and was the first step toward the atomic bomb.

Szilard was a Hungarian Jew who became a U.S. citizen. He was among a number of brilliant scientists who fled Europe when Hitler and the Nazis came to power.

Szilard had worked for a time in Germany, and he knew the Germans were trying to make an atomic bomb. In 1939 he asked his colleague Albert Einstein, another refugee, to approach President Franklin Roosevelt and urge him to authorize research leading to an atomic bomb. It was Szilard who wrote the letter that, signed by Einstein, went to the president. The result was the Manhattan Project, a super-secret effort to create an atomic warhead. By 1945, the bomb was ready.

The Germans surrendered to Allied forces in early May that year. Since there was no longer any threat of a German atomic bomb, Szilard felt there was no reason to actually use the bomb he had helped develop. He was also afraid that if the bomb was actually used, it would lead to a nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union. Together with other scientists, Szilard produced a report on the dangers of a nuclear arms race.

The war in the Pacific, however, was still raging. Japan refused to surrender, and Allied forces were planning their assault on the Japanese mainland. In July 1945 Szilard circulated a petition signed by 68 scientists that urged President Truman not to drop the bomb on Japan. He suggested instead a demonstration of its power for Japanese officials. He thought they would certainly surrender once they saw its effects. The petition was strongly opposed by the head of the Manhattan Project, General Byrnes, who never discussed the scientists' concerns and suggestions with the president. In August 1945, atomic bombs were dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The United States in World War II**Biography**

After the war, Szilard continued to argue for the peaceful use of nuclear energy and international control of nuclear weapons. His knowledge of the potential for destruction led him to ridicule some efforts to survive a future nuclear attack. One of those that met with particular scorn was the fallout shelter craze of the 1950s. At that time, a great many people outfitted cellars or dug caves in hillsides, where they planned to live until the air cleared after a nuclear attack.

As the possibility of nuclear war with the Soviet Union increased, Szilard joined forces with Albert Einstein and writer and philosopher Bertrand Russell, who spoke of the necessity to "ban the bomb." They created an international conference of concerned scientists.

Szilard corresponded and eventually met with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev to urge peaceful resolution of conflict between the two countries. While Szilard was unable to actually ban the bomb, he did try to reduce the possibility of it ever being used. In 1960 he convinced the American and Soviet heads of state to establish a "hot line," a phone line between the U.S. and Soviet heads of state to be used in a nuclear crisis.

Szilard died in 1964.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Describe** Where was Szilard from? Why did he come to the United States and what did he do here?
2. **Analyze** Account for the change in Szilard's attitudes between 1941 and 1945. What changed?
3. **Evaluate** Szilard was a brilliant scientist. Do you think he made good use of his gifts and knowledge? Explain your opinion clearly.

ACTIVITY

Research present day issues involving nuclear weapons. Did Szilard have reason to be concerned about the future?