

The Historiography of Hiroshima: The Rise and Fall of Revisionism

Michael Kort

Michael Kort is professor of social science at Boston University's College of General Studies. He received his B.A. in history from Johns Hopkins University and his M.A. and Ph.D. in Russian history from New York University. He is the author of several books on the history of the Soviet Union and the Cold War, including *The Soviet Colossus: History and Aftermath* (sixth edition, 2006); *The Columbia Guide to the Cold War* (1998); *The Columbia Guide to Hiroshima and the Bomb* (2007); and *A Brief History of Russia* (2008).

In preparing this digital copy of “The History of Hiroshima: The Rise and Fall of Revisionism,” the author has taken the opportunity to correct several minor errors that found their way into the original as published in *The New England Journal of History*.

“Every now and then a notion or idea arises that is radically wrong.”¹ In making this statement in *Harry S. Truman and the Cold War Revisionists* (2006), distinguished Truman scholar Robert H. Ferrell was taking to task a large cadre of academic historians who during the past half-century judged the foreign policy of Harry S. Truman as being primarily responsible for causing the Cold War. As the title of Ferrell’s book indicates, these historians are known as “revisionists,” in juxtaposition to the so-called “orthodox” historians who generally have defended Truman’s foreign policy. No aspect of the orthodox/revisionist debate has generated more controversy than Truman’s decision to use the atomic bomb against Japan at the end of World War II. The “radically wrong” idea in this case is the revisionist contention that the use of the bomb was militarily unjustified. That judgment in turn has several component parts, although individual revisionist historians generally have not adhered to them all. The most important are that the atomic bomb was not necessary to force a Japanese surrender in August 1945; that Truman knew it; that he did not use the bomb for military reasons against Japan but rather as a diplomatic tool against the Soviet Union, which in turn played a major role in causing the Cold War; and that after the war he inflated the casualty estimates—from tens of thousands to several hundreds of thousands—for the projected American invasion of Japan to justify the use of the bomb.

Notwithstanding piles of books and reams of journal articles that have made all or part of this case in one way or another, there is no compelling evidence to support any of it and overwhelming documentary evidence demonstrating the opposite. Yet that judgment gained wide acceptance in academia between the mid-1960s and early 1970s and remained the conventional wisdom there—dogma is not too strong a word—well into the 1990s, when a series of path-breaking books and articles, several by historians working outside academia’s cloistered ivory towers and ivied walls, demonstrated beyond a reasonable doubt just how false it was. Still, it is probably the case that the discrediting of the revisionist critique of Truman’s decision to use the atomic bomb against Japan comes as a surprise to many, if not most, of the

readers of this article.

The Early Debate

The debate over the use of the atomic bomb against Japan dates from August 1945. Truman's first critics spoke out after the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, even before Japan formally surrendered on September 2, arguing mainly on the basis of pacifist or religious principles.² A different type of argument emerged in mid-1946 in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, where Norman Cousins and Thomas K. Finletter accused the United States of using atomic weapons against Japan as a diplomatic tool to limit Soviet influence in East Asia, not as a military weapon to end the war. Thus, in a chronological sense, Hiroshima "revisionism" actually debuted before "orthodoxy."³

In 1948, the British physicist and Nobel laureate P. M. S. Blackett, a pro-Soviet Marxist, gave the revisionist case a more comprehensive presentation in *Military and Political Consequences of Atomic Energy*, a volume published in the United States with some revisions as *Fear, War, and the Bomb: Military and Political Consequences of Atomic Energy*. Blackett argued that Japan would have surrendered before the end of 1945 without the atomic bombs or the Soviet entry into the war (which took place on August 8, two days after Hiroshima and one before Nagasaki). He relied on the conclusion of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey's *Summary Report (Pacific War)*, published in July 1946, that in the face of continued American conventional bombing Japan would have surrendered "certainly" before 31 December 1945 and "in all probability" before November 1, "even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated." This categorical statement was destined to achieve talismanic status in the revisionist arsenal in the 1960s and retain it for three decades. As will be discussed below, when in the mid-1990s several historians finally took a close look at evidence the USSBS had collected, in particular its interrogations of Japanese officials, they found that the Survey's conclusion contradicted its own evidence. In any event, Blackett gave Hiroshima revisionism another talismanic slogan when he proclaimed that "the dropping of the atomic bombs was not so much the last military act of the second World War, as the first major operation of the cold diplomatic war with the Russians now in progress."⁴

Blackett's argument found little favor in the United States. During the late 1950s and early 1960s aspects of these early revisionist arguments were incorporated by prominent leftist historians William Appleman Williams and D. F. Fleming in their respective volumes on American foreign policy, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959) and *The Cold War and its Origins* (1961). However, the revisionist case, still lacking a documentary foundation, did not make a significant impact on American public or scholarly opinion.

Instead, the so-called orthodox position held sway. Oddly enough, Hiroshima

“orthodoxy” emerged as a reaction to the early revisionist criticism of Truman’s decision. The orthodox argument first appeared in print in December 1946 in an *Atlantic Monthly* article by MIT president Karl T. Compton and then in February 1947, more comprehensively and persuasively, in a *Harper’s Magazine* article by Henry L. Stimson, secretary of war from 1940 until late 1945. Stimson laid out the basic orthodox position that the atomic bomb had been the best way to bring about a Japanese surrender and end the war as quickly as possible with a minimum loss of American lives and was used for those reasons alone. In 1948 he reinforced his original argument in his autobiography, *On Active Service in War and Peace*.⁵

Between the mid-1950s and early 1960s several prominent scholars backed up the orthodox position, notably military historian Louis Morton and retired Harvard University professor Samuel Eliot Morison. Then Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Herbert Feis endorsed Stimson’s case in *Japan Subdued: The Atomic Bomb and the End of the War in the Pacific* (1961). To be sure, Feis accepted the 1946 conclusion of the USSBS that a combination of a blockade and conventional bombing could have ended the war during late 1945. More fundamentally, however, he stressed that the decision to use the bomb was “governed by one reason which was deemed imperative: that by using the bomb, the agony of the war might be ended most quickly and many lives be saved.” Meanwhile, Robert J. C. Butow’s *Japan’s Decision to Surrender* (1954), the early postwar era’s landmark study of Japanese decision making during the last year of the war and an invaluable and highly authoritative resource to this day, stressed the crucial importance of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, along with the Soviet entry into the Pacific War, in breaking the political logjam in Tokyo and bringing about a surrender.⁶

The Rise of Revisionism and “Atomic Diplomacy”

The orthodox consensus came under assault in the mid-1960s against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. The book that did the most to shift the nature of the discussion and, at least in academic circles, tilt the scales against Truman was *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* by Gar Alperovitz. Alperovitz mounted a direct assault on America’s use of the atomic bomb by insisting that it was used not for military but rather diplomatic reasons and that its real target was not Japan, the country that was attacked, but the Soviet Union, at the time presumably an American ally. Specifically, Alperovitz argued that in the summer of 1945 the Japanese were prepared to surrender if granted terms permitting them to keep their emperor, that Truman and his top advisors knew it, and that Washington deliberately withheld those terms, instead demanding unconditional surrender and ignoring Japanese efforts to end the war. Washington’s “two overriding considerations” for bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki were to keep the Soviet Union out of the war in the Far East, thereby limiting its postwar gains in that region, and to pressure

Moscow to moderate its demands and accommodate American concerns regarding postwar Eastern Europe. This “atomic diplomacy” in turn precipitated the Cold War.⁷

Atomic Diplomacy was not an easy read. In formulating what may be called the hard-line revisionist position on the bombing of Hiroshima, Alperovitz laced his 275 page narrative with more than 1400 endnotes. In many paragraphs almost every sentence has a citation; many sentences have two. After a while the clutter of notes seems like a swarm of gnats that must be swatted away so one can get at the text itself. Still, by their sheer number and density the notes gave *Atomic Diplomacy* a scholarly veneer that impressed many readers, and, although it debuted to mixed reviews, the book was enthusiastically welcomed by enough historians on the political left to set in motion a process that eventually put the Hiroshima decision on the defensive. In some vocal circles *Atomic Diplomacy* quickly achieved iconic status.

The enthusiasm was misplaced. Some commentators, including several prominent Cold War revisionists, pointed out that Alperovitz either lacked any evidence to back up his claims or had stretched the meager evidence he cited beyond its breaking point. Eventually a few historians dug deeper—most notably and comprehensively Robert James Maddox, whose critique of *Atomic Diplomacy* appeared in 1973. Maddox found that Alperovitz’s footnotes could not be trusted. For example, Maddox pointed out that Alperovitz misled his readers about the context of important statements. Thus, while Alperovitz tells his readers that in April 1945 Truman said the Soviets could “go to hell” if they did not make concessions regarding the composition of the Polish government, an accurate reading of the relevant primary sources shows Truman was referring to a possible Soviet boycott of the founding conference of the United Nations if Stalin did not get *his* way on Poland, in which case the United States would proceed with the conference while the Soviets could “go” elsewhere. Maddox also convincingly demonstrated how Alperovitz used ellipses to change the meaning of statements, such as when he deleted key words from a Truman reference to a statement by Secretary of State James Byrnes regarding the atomic bomb. Alperovitz implies that Byrnes was discussing the bomb’s use as a diplomatic weapon against the Soviet Union; however, both the words omitted via ellipses and Truman’s next sentence make it clear that Byrnes was referring to the bomb’s use to dictate terms to *Japan* “at the end of the war.” Maddox added that there were similar examples throughout *Atomic Diplomacy*, which is why he understandably found it “disconcerting” that such a work could “be considered a contribution to the historical literature.”⁸

Its fatal flaws notwithstanding, *Atomic Diplomacy* had a major impact. While even many revisionist historians shied away from Alperovitz’s essentially conspiratorial thesis about the bombing of Japan, they borrowed some of his ideas to construct their own critiques of American policy during World War II and the early postwar period. Martin Sherwin provided a notable example of that approach in *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand*

Alliance (1975). Sherwin disagreed with Alperovitz in grudgingly granting that the primary motive for dropping the bomb was to end the war quickly with a minimum loss of lives, but he also found anti-Soviet diplomatic motives deeply entwined in the decision. He added that determining with precision the extent to which these “secondary considerations” influenced the Hiroshima decision “defies an unequivocal answer.”⁹

By the mid-1970s the revisionist enterprise, albeit a more moderate version than that presented by Alperovitz, was flourishing. The specific idea of atomic diplomacy had lost some battles, but it appeared to be winning the war. Many academics, while rejecting the Alperovitz thesis as a whole, wove bits and pieces of it into their own critiques of the bombing of Hiroshima or of Truman’s and Stimson’s subsequent defense of it. The revisionist case became an expansive tapestry embroidered with a myriad of shapes and forms. Some of the better-received books that modified or extended the revisionist case in one direction or another included Gregg Herken’s *The Winning Weapon: The Atomic Bomb and the Cold War, 1945-1950* (1981), Robert L. Messer’s *The End of an Alliance: James F. Byrnes, Roosevelt, Truman, and the Origins of the Cold War* (1982), and Leon Sigal’s *Fighting to a Finish: The Politics of War Termination in the United States and Japan* (1988). Meanwhile, in 1985 Alperovitz published an expanded and updated version of *Atomic Diplomacy*, the main change being a sixty-page introduction. Whatever their differences, by the 1980s the revisionists agreed that the atomic bomb had not been necessary to force a Japanese surrender in August 1945 and that there was no evidence to support Truman’s claims for wartime casualty estimates in the hundreds of thousands had the United States been forced to invade Japan. Beyond that, their scenarios varied. In *Dubious Victory: The United States and the End of World War II* (1973), Lisle A. Rose vigorously rejected the atomic diplomacy thesis but maintained that Japan would have surrendered without an invasion. Barton J. Bernstein argued in a series of journal articles that Truman had used the bomb primarily to force a Japanese surrender, thereby accepting a key point of the orthodox analysis. He agreed with the revisionists, however, that Japan could have been compelled to surrender during 1945 without an invasion or the bomb and, that after the war, Truman and Stimson exaggerated the number of casualties they had expected from an invasion of Japan in order to justify the bomb’s use. Over the next two decades, Bernstein established himself as the most prominent proponent of the moderate revisionist position in general and what may be called the low casualty estimates argument in particular.¹

The Revival of Orthodoxy

Revisionism’s heyday lasted through the 1980s and into the early 1990s. Then the historiographical ground began to shift. During the 1990s a new body of scholarly work

emerged, often based on hitherto unavailable documents, that countered many of the revisionist arguments, among them the characterization of the atomic bomb as a diplomatic weapon in 1945, the claim that Japan would have surrendered before the planned U.S. invasion had the bomb not been used, and allegations that projected casualty figures for the expected invasion and ultimate defeat of Japan were lower than those cited by supporters of the decision to use the bomb. The historians who produced these new books and journal articles provided powerful validation for America's use of atomic bombs against Japan. In the process, they destroyed the pillars that had supported the various versions of the revisionist case.

The first of these works was *MacArthur's ULTRA: Codebreaking and the War Against Japan, 1942-1945* (1992) by military historian Edward J. Drea, a scholar fluent in Japanese. Drea's focus was not on the Hiroshima decision per se but on the U.S. Army's codebreaking operation in the Pacific, called ULTRA, that beginning in 1944 provided General Douglas MacArthur invaluable information in his campaign against Japanese forces in the southwest Pacific theater. ULTRA reports—which were not declassified until the mid-1970s—were forwarded on a daily basis to top U.S. policy makers in Washington, including White House officials, along with diplomatic, or MAGIC, intercepts. What ULTRA showed during late June and throughout July was a massive Japanese buildup of unanticipated scale on the southernmost home island of Kyushu, precisely where the first stage of the two-stage invasion of Japan, called Olympic, was scheduled to take place on November 1. (The second stage, Coronet, was aimed at the Tokyo plain and scheduled for March 1946. The overall plan to invade Japan was designated Downfall.) Not only did the buildup testify to Japan's determination to fight to the bitter end, but it invalidated any previous military estimates of the casualties such an invasion would cost. ULTRA showed that by early August the number of Japanese defenders on Kyushu was almost double what the U.S. had expected (ULTRA actually underestimated the number of Japanese troops by a third) and that Olympic would be “very costly indeed.”¹¹ Drea's evidence thus undermined two key parts of the revisionist case: that Japan was seriously considering surrender in the summer of 1945 and that the lower casualty estimates cited by revisionists, all of which dated from *before* American military planners learned of the Japanese buildup on Kyushu, were the ones accepted by the top American decision makers in Washington.

In 1993 the Hiroshima debate took an unusual turn when it became a heated public issue in which academics and scholars had to share the podium with a wide range of interested non-specialists. The cause of the furor was a proposed exhibit by the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum (NASM) in Washington, D.C. on the bombing of Hiroshima, planned to mark the fiftieth anniversary of that event. The NASM curators drew heavily on

revisionist scholarship, but to their apparent surprise their narrative of the event did not go unchallenged. When the exhibit's script became public knowledge, NASM was accused of presenting both the decision to use the atomic bomb and its consequences in an unfair light. The core of the dispute was the context in which the bombing took place. Two points in particular were lightning rods for critics. First, the original NASM script called the American fight against Japan a "war of vengeance" while opining that the Japanese were fighting a "war to defend their unique culture against Western imperialism." Second, critics complained, the exhibit stressed Japanese suffering from the atomic bombs without adequately highlighting the brutality and destruction of Japan's war of aggression in East Asia. The Air Force Association, a veterans group, played a prominent role in criticizing the NASM script, but it was only one of many critics.

Academic historians plunged into the fray on both sides. Revisionist scholars defending the exhibit insisted that the issue was scholarly research (their own) based on primary source documents versus the emotional reactions of their detractors, many of whom were elderly veterans. They complained that critics of NASM wanted to censor legitimate scholarship, a charge that ignored the existence of scholarship that contradicted what was in the NASM's script. One academic who had served on NASM's advisory group of scholars suggested the disagreement was between "memory and history," the former flawed and faded as it emerged from the hearts and minds of aging, emotional veterans, and the latter reliable and reputable as it emerged from the research of unbiased, up-to-date scholars. Whatever its self-serving pretentiousness, the phrase caught on in revisionist circles. But the exhibit was mortally wounded. The Senate unanimously adopted a resolution critical of the exhibit and in January 1995 it was cancelled.¹² Then, as if on cue, came a series of books and scholarly articles that demonstrated convincingly that those who had relied on "memory" during the NASM debate had not shown faulty recall after all.

The books included biographies of Truman by two leading scholars in the field, Robert H. Ferrell, whose *Harry S. Truman: A Life* appeared in 1994, and Alonzo L. Hamby, whose *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* was published in 1995. Each included a detailed chapter on the Hiroshima decision that refuted the revisionist claims, from Japan's presumed readiness to surrender prior to August 6 to Truman's alleged use of the atomic bomb as a diplomatic weapon against the Soviet Union. Stanley Weintraub's *The Last Great Victory: The End of World War II, July/August 1945* (1995), a day-by-day chronicle of the last month of the Pacific War, provided the grim context that ultimately dictated the use of the bomb.¹³

These wide-ranging works were accompanied by works that focused exclusively on the Hiroshima decision, or more narrowly on certain aspects of it, which collectively shattered the

revisionist case. In *Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later* (1995), Robert James Maddox convincingly dismantled the atomic diplomacy thesis, demonstrating how that thesis rested not on the documentary record but on unsupported allegations and distortions of the historical record. Maddox documented how Truman, far from using the atomic bomb as a diplomatic weapon against the Soviet Union, attempted to maintain good relations with the Soviet Union before and during the Potsdam Conference. Maddox further showed how MAGIC intercepts—in particular the cables between Japan’s foreign minister in Tokyo and its ambassador in Moscow—and the ULTRA intercepts made it clear to American leaders that Japan was unwilling to surrender on terms remotely consistent with minimum Allied war aims and was instead preparing vigorously for the expected American invasion. Maddox also cited solid documentary evidence that Truman and his advisors saw casualty estimates for the anticipated American invasion of Japan of 500,000 or more and that the president feared staggering losses should the invasion take place.

Robert P. Newman’s *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult* approached the Hiroshima decision topic by topic, with individual chapters defending policies such as demanding unconditional surrender and not providing Japan with a demonstration of a nuclear explosion. Most devastating to the revisionist case was Newman’s demolition of the USSBS assertion that Japan would have surrendered “certainly prior to December 31, 1945, and in all probability prior to November 1, 1945” absent the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Soviet entry into the war. By reviewing the testimony of the Japanese officials the USSBS had interrogated in 1945, he demonstrated that it is impossible to read that testimony objectively and not deduce that the USSBS reached its conclusion of a Japanese surrender during 1945 by ignoring its own evidence.¹⁴

Alperovitz meanwhile returned to the fray with *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth*. This massive tome—two “books” totaling more than 800 pages and written with the aid of seven collaborators—debuted to decidedly mixed and often critical reviews. Even a relatively sympathetic reviewer like moderate revisionist J. Samuel Walker wrote: “The fact that the book is thoughtful, original, and engaging does not, in my estimation, make it convincing.”¹⁵ Indeed, the book’s flaws constitute one of the few subjects related to Hiroshima on which Robert James Maddox and Barton J. Bernstein some years later found a small patch of common ground—the former commenting that Alperovitz’s handling of his sources in *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* “is, if anything, even more outlandish than that found in *Atomic Diplomacy*,” and the latter noting Alperovitz’s “selective use” of the MAGIC cables and that the volume “had vulnerabilities very similar to those of his 1985 revision.”¹⁶

Casualty Projections, Unconditional Surrender and Japan's Surrender, and Operation Downfall

The claim that after the war Truman and some of his advisors exaggerated casualty projections of an invasion and final defeat of Japan—specifically that those projections reached 500,000 or more—for decades was one of the main pillars of the revisionist case.¹⁷ That pillar collapsed with the first thorough examination of the issue, “Casualty Projections for the U.S. Invasions of Japan, 1945-1946: Planning and Policy Implications” by military historian D. M. Giangreco. Writing in *The Journal of Military History*, Giangreco explained that in military hands these projections took three forms: medical estimates, manpower estimates, and strategic estimates. He then demonstrated that there was substantial documentation for high-end casualty projections—which, to be sure, varied widely—from both military and civilian sources that reached upward of 500,000. Equally important, one estimate that reached Truman—from former president Herbert Hoover, who had high-level government contacts—led the president to convene an important meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and top civilian advisors on June 18, 1945, to discuss the projected invasion of Japan. In short, as Giangreco stressed in a later article in the *Pacific Historical Review*, Truman both saw and was concerned about high-end casualty estimates prior to the scheduled invasion. His claims to that effect were not postwar concoctions.¹⁸

Nor did the thesis that unconditional surrender was responsible for extending the war fare well in the light of new scholarship. In “Japan's Delayed Surrender” (1995), Herbert Bix concluded that “it was not so much the Allied policy of unconditional surrender that prolonged the Pacific war, as it was the unrealistic and incompetent actions of Japan's leaders.”¹⁹ The intransigence of Japan's leaders prior to Hiroshima was further documented by Lawrence Freedman and Saki Dockrill in “Hiroshima: A Strategy of Shock” (1994) and, most thoroughly and convincingly, by Japanese historian Sadao Asada in “The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan's Decision to Surrender—A Reconsideration” (1998). Asada's extensive use of Japanese-language sources convinced him the United States did not miss an opportunity to end the war before Hiroshima when it refused to modify its demand for unconditional surrender. Rather, if “any opportunity were missed, it may have been Japan's failure to accept the Potsdam Declaration on July 26.”²⁰

Of course, revisionists were not silent during the 1990s. For example, Barton J. Bernstein published several journal articles reaffirming various aspects of the moderate revisionist case. J. Samuel Walker provided a concise summary of that point of view in *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of the Atomic Bomb Against Japan* (1997). In *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb* (1994), John Ray Skates argued for low-end casualty

estimates in the projected invasion of Japan and added that the unconditional surrender policy prolonged the war. John D. Chappell, who chronicled growing American war weariness and concern about rising casualties during 1945 in *Before the Bomb: How America Approached the End of the Pacific War* (1997), agreed that the unconditional surrender prolonged the war. Still, the weight of the evidence overwhelmingly and increasingly favored orthodox arguments.²¹

The 1990s wave of new orthodox scholarship culminated in Richard B. Frank's *Downfall: The End of the Japanese Imperial Empire* (1999), a meticulous and cogently argued volume that soon gained widespread recognition as the definitive work on the end of the Pacific War. Frank brought together evidence from other scholars and added a great deal of his own to produce a book that left virtually every aspect of the revisionist case in tatters. His comprehensive overview of casualty estimates prior to the planned invasion of Japan supported historians who had argued for high-end figures. He pointedly rejected the thesis that modifying the demand for unconditional surrender to include the preservation of the imperial institution would have shortened the war. As J. Samuel Walker put it in a review of *Downfall*, Frank's analysis of the diplomatic and military evidence "drives a stake into the heart of the most cherished revisionist contention—that Japan was seeking peace and the United States prolonged the war by refusing to soften its demand for unconditional surrender." Frank himself concluded that "alternatives to the atomic bombs carried no guarantee that they would end the war" and added that the "hard choices" American leaders made in 1945 "had been vindicated."²²

The Debate Since the Year 2000

As the new century began, Gian P. Gentile expanded his critique of the USSBS and its conclusions in *How Effective is Strategic Bombing? Lessons Learned From World War II to Kosovo* (2001). Robert P. Newman, while focusing on the ill-fated NASM exhibit, updated his critique of revisionist accounts of Hiroshima in *The Enola Gay and the Court of History* (2004). The book that received the most attention was Tsuyoshi Hasegawa's *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (2005), which supported parts of the revisionist narrative while discarding others. Hasegawa wrote that Japan was not prepared to surrender before the events of August 6-9. At the same time, he backed Alperovitz by arguing that the United States was "racing" to deploy the bomb before Soviet military preparations in the Far East were complete in order to force an early Japanese surrender and keep the Soviet Union out of the Pacific War. Hasegawa added that during the Potsdam Conference, having realized the United States had the atomic bomb, Stalin began "racing" to get the Soviet Union into the war before the bomb forced Tokyo to surrender. He also maintained that Tokyo surrendered not because of the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki but because of the Soviet declaration of war.²³

Although *Racing the Enemy* received several enthusiastic reviews, critics soon pointed out that key parts of Hasegawa's case were not sustained by his sources. For example, the documentary evidence is overwhelming that Truman wanted the Soviets to enter the war and that on August 8 he was very pleased to learn that they had done so. David Holloway, a leading authority on Soviet military and nuclear policy, has argued convincingly that Soviet documents contradict Hasegawa's contention that at Potsdam Stalin began his own "race" to enter the war. And, as Sadao Asada has stressed, Japanese documents clearly support the primacy of the atomic bombs in finally compelling Japan's surrender.²⁴ Meanwhile, if "atomic diplomacy" needed a coup de grâce, it was delivered in 2007 by Wilson D. Miscamble's *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima, and the Cold War*. After a meticulous examination of what Truman and Secretary of State James F. Byrnes actually *did*, as opposed to what Byrnes in a few instances may have *said*, Miscamble justifiably concluded, "Fanciful notions of 'atomic diplomacy' must be consigned to the historical dustbin."²⁵

The year 2007 also saw the publication of three volumes that provide overviews of the Hiroshima debate. Two are anthologies. *The End of the Pacific War: Reappraisals*, edited by Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, contains original entries with diverging positions on the orthodox/revisionist divide. *Hiroshima in History: Myths of Revisionism*, edited by Robert James Maddox, as its title implies, contains entries critical of revisionism; all are reprints of previously published articles with the exception of Maddox's update on the scholarship of Alperovitz. Finally, this reviewer published *The Columbia Guide to Hiroshima and the Bomb*.²⁶ Aside from an overview of the Hiroshima debate, it contains almost 200 documents that enable the reader to evaluate the competing claims surrounding the Hiroshima decision. The author is confident that a careful examination of those documents will convince objective investigators that the revisionist critique of the atomic bomb decision truly was "radically wrong."

EPILOGUE – February 2013

Since 2007 the pace of publication of Hiroshima volumes has slowed, with only four works of any significance, two moderate revisionist and two orthodox, appearing between 2007 and 2011. The moderate revisionist works are very different in terms of structure and focus but share two common features: both are authored by former students of Barton Bernstein and, pretensions aside, neither does anything to resuscitate the revisionist case.

Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb Against Japan, by Sean Malloy, is a short monograph which argues that Secretary of War Henry Stimson

betrayed his core values and his belief in moral statesmanship by acquiescing to the use of the atomic bomb against Japan. Malloy also snipes at Truman for using the bomb but offers nothing substantial or new to suggest practical alternatives to the bomb's use. *Hiroshima: The World's Bomb* (2008), by Andrew J. Rotter, is based almost exclusively on secondary sources and does little more than repeat, without any additional supporting evidence, arguments already made more competently by Bernstein and J. Samuel Walker. The last quarter of the book is a superficial survey of post-World War II nuclear weapons proliferation. It concludes with a cliché-ridden "epilogue" about the wrongs of attacking civilians that, along with other disturbing juxtapositions, comes perilously close to equating Nazi genocide with the British and American military measures, in particular the bombing of German cities, that were vital to winning the war and destroying the Nazi regime.²⁷

Meanwhile, orthodox defense of the Hiroshima decision has been significantly reinforced. *Hell to Pay: Operation DOWNFALL and the Invasion of Japan, 1945-1947*, by D. M. Giangreco, is a groundbreaking study of how the United States and Japan were preparing for the American invasion of the home islands scheduled to begin in the fall of 1945. Giangreco demonstrates, once again, that Japan was not prepared to surrender prior to bombing of Hiroshima and that American casualty estimates for the upcoming invasion were in the many hundreds of thousands. He then makes use of heretofore unexamined American and Japanese operational and planning documents to demolish the notion that Japan's military lacked the means to mount an effective resistance to the upcoming invasion. That invasion, had it taken place, would have resulted in a "disastrous confrontation" involving weapons of mass destruction and resulting in enormous loss of life on both sides.

Wilson Miscamble's *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan* is a superb scholarly overview of the events that culminated in the bombing of Hiroshima and the best short (150 pages) introduction to the subject in print. It is ideal for college and university classroom use and is available in paperback. In addition, along with clearly outlining how and why the United States arrived at its decision to use atomic weapons against Japan and refuting the main revisionist claims in the process, Miscamble in his chapter "Necessary, But Was it Right?" offers the best discussion of the morality of the Hiroshima decision this reviewer has encountered.²⁸

Endnotes

Portions of this essay have been adapted from *The Columbia Guide to Hiroshima and the Bomb* by Michael Kort <http://cup.columbia.edu/book/978-0-231-13016-5/the-columbia-guide-to-hiroshima-and-the-bomb>. Copyright ©

2007 Columbia University Press. Used by arrangement with Columbia University Press.

¹ Robert H. Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman and the Cold War Revisionists* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2006), vii.

² For example, see *The Christian Century* LXII (August 29, 1945), 974-976.

³ Norman Cousins and Thomas K. Finletter, "A Beginning for Sanity," *Saturday Review of Literature* (June 15, 1946), 5-9.

⁴ P. M. S. Blackett, *Fear, War and the Bomb: Military and Political Consequences of Atomic Energy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1949), 134-139; U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, *Summary Report (Pacific War)* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1946), 22-26.

⁵ Karl T. Compton, "If the Atomic Bomb Had Not Been Used," *Atlantic Monthly* (December 1946), 54-56; Henry L. Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," *Harper's* (February 1947), 97-107; Henry L. Stimson and McGeorge Bundy, *On Active Service in War and Peace* (New York: Harper and Brothers), 1948. For the views of Williams and Fleming see William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland: World, 1959) and D. F. Fleming, *The Cold War and Its Origins* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961).

⁶ Herbert Feis, *Japan Subdued: The Atomic Bomb and the End of the War in the Pacific* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 179-181. See also Feis, *The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966); Robert J. C. Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1954), 228-233.

⁷ Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (New York: Vintage, 1965), 179-185, 239-240.

⁸ Robert James Maddox, *The New Left and the Origins of the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 63-78. See also Maddox, "Atomic Diplomacy: A Study in Creative Writing," *Journal of American History* 59 (March 1973): 925-934.

⁹ Martin Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 198.

¹⁰ Lisle A. Rose, *Dubious Victory: The Atomic Bomb and the End of the War in the Pacific* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1973), 158-160, 185-187, 215-217, 365-367. Barton J. Bernstein, "Roosevelt, Truman, and the Atomic Bomb: A Reinterpretation," *Political Science Quarterly* 90 (Spring 1975), 23-69; "A Postwar Myth: 500,000 Lives Saved," *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* (June-July 1986), 38-40; and "Compelling Japan's Surrender Without the A-Bomb, Soviet Entry, or Invasions: Reconsidering the US Bombing Survey's Early-Surrender Counterfactual," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 18, 2 (June 1995), 138.

¹¹ Edward Drea, *MacArthur's ULTRA: Codebreaking and the War Against Japan, 1942-1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 202-225.

¹² The best overview of the NASM script and scholarship is Robert P. Newman, *The Enola Gay and the Court of History* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004). For a different viewpoint see Michael Hogan, "The Enola Gay Controversy: History, Memory, and the Politics of Presentation," in *Hiroshima in History and Memory*, ed. Michael Hogan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For the "war of vengeance" quotation see "The Crossroads: The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb, and the Origins of the Cold War," in *Judgment at the Smithsonian*, ed. Philip Nobile (New York: Marlow and Company, 1995), 3.

¹³ Robert H. Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman: A Life* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 198-217; Alonzo L. Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 312-337; Stanley Weintraub, *The Last Great Victory: The End of the Pacific War, July/August 1945* (New York: Dutton, 1995).

¹⁴ Robert James Maddox, *Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995); Robert P. Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995), especially pages 33-56. See also Newman, "Ending the Pacific War with Japan: Paul Nitze's 'Early Surrender' Counterfactual," *Pacific Historical Review* 64 (May 1995), 167-194. Later that year

Barton J. Bernstein wrote that the USSBS's pre-November 1945 surrender case "was not substantiated by the survey in its own work." In 1997 Gian Gentile subjected the USSBS to further damaging scrutiny. See Bernstein, "Compelling Japan's Surrender," 127-28; Gian Peri Gentile, "Advocacy or Assessment: The United States Strategic Bombing Survey of Germany and Japan," *Pacific Historical Review* 66, 1. (February 1997), 53-79. Another important volume published in 1995 supportive of Truman's atomic bomb decision, by military historians Thomas B. Allen and Norman Polmar, is *Code-Name Downfall: The Secret Plan to Invade Japan—and Why Truman Dropped the Bomb* (New York and London: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

¹⁵ Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York: Knopf, 1995); J. Samuel Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of the Atomic Bombs Against Japan* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 132.

¹⁶ Maddox, "Gar Alperovitz: Godfather of Hiroshima Revisionism," in *Hiroshima in History: The Myths of Revisionism*, ed. Robert James Maddox (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 14; Bernstein, "The Interpretive Problems of Japan's 1945 Surrender," in *The End of the Pacific War: Reappraisals*, ed. Tsuyoshi Hasegawa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 25.

¹⁷ For example, see Bernstein, "A Postwar Myth: 500,000 Lives Saved."

¹⁸ D. M. Giangreco, "Casualty Projections for the U.S. Invasions of Japan, 1945-1946: Planning and Policy Implications," *The Journal of Military History* 61, 3 (July 1997), 521-581. On what Truman knew and how he reacted, see Giangreco, "'A Score of Bloody Okinawas and Iwo Jimas': President Truman and Casualty Estimates for the Invasion of Japan," *Pacific Historical Review* 72, 1 (February 2003), 93-132.

¹⁹ Herbert Bix, "Japan's Delayed Surrender: A Reinterpretation," *Diplomatic History* 19, 2 (Spring 1995), 223. See also Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 533-579, esp. 560-572.

²⁰ Lawrence Freedman and Saki Dockrill, "Hiroshima: A Strategy of Shock," in *The Second World War in Asia and the Pacific, 1941-1945*, ed. Saki Dockrill (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 191-212; Sadao Asada, "The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender," *Pacific Historical Review* 67, 4 (November 1998), 478-511.

²¹ Bernstein's articles include "The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered," *Foreign Affairs* 74, 1 (January-February 1995), 135-152 and "Understanding the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender: Missed Opportunities, Little Known Near Disasters, and Modern Memory," *Diplomatic History* 19, 2 (Spring 1995), 227-273. See also John Ray Skates, *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994) and John D. Chappell, *Before the Bomb: How America Approached the End of the Pacific War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997).

²² J. Samuel Walker, "Bomb! Unbomb!," *New York Times Book Review*, December 12, 1999, 35; Richard B. Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Japanese Imperial Empire* (New York: Random House, 1999), 360.

²³ Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

²⁴ Michael Kort, "Racing the Enemy: A Critical Look," *Historically Speaking*, January/February 2006, 2224; David Holloway, "Jockeying for Position in the Postwar World: Soviet Entry into the War with Japan in August 1945," in *The End of the Pacific War*, 145-188; Sadao Asada, review of *Racing the Enemy* in *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, 1. (February 2006), 169-171.

²⁵ Wilson D. Miscamble, C.S.C., *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima, and the Cold War* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 325. See also Maddox, "Give Me That Old Time Revisionism," *Continuity*, Spring 2003, 121-145.

²⁶ Tsutoshi Hasegawa, ed., *The End of the Pacific War: Reappraisals* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); Robert James Maddox, ed., *Hiroshima in History: The Myths of Revisionism* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2007); Michael Kort, *The Columbia Guide to Hiroshima and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). For a volume that examines some niche aspects of the Hiroshima debate, see Michael D. Gordin, *Five Days in August: How World War II Became a Nuclear War* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton

University Press, 2007).

²⁷ Sean L. Malloy, *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb Against Japan* (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 2008); Andrew J. Rotter, *Hiroshima: The World's Bomb* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). See especially page 307. About half of a third volume, Campbell Craig and Sergey Radchenko's *The Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), is devoted to the events that led to the bombing of Hiroshima, but the authors rely heavily and uncritically on bits and pieces of Sherwin, Bernstein, and Hasegawa, adding to that mix little more than unsubstantiated assertions and speculation to produce a discussion that is uninformed and often incoherent.

²⁸ D. M. Giangreco, *Hell to Pay: Operation DOWNFALL and the Invasion of Japan, 1945-1947* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2009), 204; Wilson Miscamble, C.S.C., *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bomb, and the Defeat of Japan* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Michael Kort is professor of social science at Boston University's College of General Studies. He received his B.A. in history from Johns Hopkins University and his M.A. and Ph.D. in Russian history from New York University. He is the author of several books on the history of the Soviet Union and the Cold War, including *The Soviet Colossus: History and Aftermath* (sixth edition, 2006); *The Columbia Guide to the Cold War* (1998); *The Columbia Guide to Hiroshima and the Bomb* (2007); and *A Brief History of Russia* (2008).

This preview shows page 1 - 3 out of 14 pages. The Historiography of Hiroshima: The Rise and Fall of Revisionism Michael Kort Michael Kort is professor of social science at Boston University's College of General Studies. He received his B.A. in history from Johns Hopkins University and his M.A. and Ph.D. in Russian history from New York University. He is the author of several books on the history of the Soviet Union and the Cold War, including *The Soviet Colossus: History and Aftermath* (sixth edition, 2006); *The Columbia Guide to the Cold War* (1998); *The Columbia Guide to Hiroshima and th*