

Rise and fall of
revisionist and
traditionalist history in
the context of the
bom...



The Rise and Fall of Revisionist and Traditionalist History in the Context of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945

The sensitivity surrounding detonation of the nuclear bombs, even today, is understandable. The sheer volume of death and destruction caused by what was, arguably, the most defining military decision of the modern era, makes it an uncomfortable topic for discussion. To question the necessity for the detonation, at least in the United States, is tantamount to treason. One only has to look to the 1995 Smithsonian exhibition posing this very question and the subsequent vitriol it received to understand that even now, the best part of 75 years later, historians in the United States and indeed the world still have difficulty coming to terms with detonation of the nuclear bombs.

The traditional, and most widely accepted rationale, is that the United States was left with no choice but to drop the nuclear bombs. The Japanese would not surrender. A full-scale military invasion, which may have led to the deaths of tens of thousands of American soldiers, would have been unacceptable to a population that had just been through the most devastating war in human history. The validity of this rationale has been widely questioned, and in some cases outright denied. Generally speaking, the view of the international historical community has shifted from the detonation of the nuclear bombs being a military necessity to a view that that, given the other options available, regardless of their political and military ramifications, it was the wrong decision. Consequently, it would be foolish to consider that the act of killing innocent civilians in two major Japanese cities would be exempt from the historical judgment to which all other major events have been subject.

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The decision by the historical community to condemn the rationale for detonation of the nuclear bombs is one that has, admittedly, been made through the prism of time. The emergence of new evidence such as accounts from historical survivors, the decline in xenophobic behaviour throughout the West and perhaps the most important aspect, the changing nature of the context of historian's has meant that views on the dropping of the nuclear bombs have dramatically changed. These factors, combined with more contemporary ways of thinking since the 1960s has resulted in the historical community today, for the most part, condemning the detonation of the nuclear bombs.

Introduction

The vitriolic battle between traditionalist and revisionist historians is one that has been long-occurring. However, no aspect of the traditionalist versus revisionist debate has generated more controversy and argument than the fateful decision of Harry S. Truman on August 6th, 1945 to drop the nuclear bomb over Japan. Revisionists hold the notion that the bombing of Japan was unnecessary, as that its primary use was to intimidate the Soviet Union by demonstrating that it had a new and terrible weapon, whilst traditionalists maintain that Japan had no intention of surrendering and defend Truman's decision use nuclear weapons as a way to end the war.

However, in spite of this, there is no compelling, clear cut evidence to credit or discredit either side. Yet throughout the 1960s, 70s and 80s, it remained the commonly accepted view that the decision to drop the nuclear bomb on Japan was the wrong one. It was not until the mid-nineties, fifty years after

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the bombings, that any real form of modern-day opposition to the revisionist theory began to appear. These works were published from outside of history's ivory tower, and demonstrated to readers just how wrong, in their eyes, that the revisionist theory was false. However, they were unable to provide any compelling evidence to suggest that their case had any more legitimacy than the others, leaving the debate in no different to a position than it had previously been.

The 1940s and 50s: Early Debate

Debate over the atomic bomb began immediately after Truman revealed to the U. S public that he had used nuclear weapons in order to solicit Japan's surrender. Various critics spoke out, although these were not usually on a historical basis. The first case of revisionist argument in the context of the nuclear bomb was seen in 1946, in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, where Norman Cousins accused the US of using the atomic bomb as a diplomatic tool to demonstrate the United States' power.[1]

In 1948, the first scholarly work of revisionist history in regard to the atomic bomb was released. Patrick Blackett argued in his work that Japan was ready to surrender, and that the use of the atomic bomb was unnecessary.[2]He referenced the United States Strategic Bombing Survey's (USSBS) *Summary Report*, published in 1946, that suggested that the continuation of conventional air attacks, i. e. what the United States were already doing, would result in Japanese surrender before the 31st of December 1945 and “in all probability before November 1”.[3]This statement would send shockwaves not only around the historical world, but also the public realm,

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as it was the first acknowledgement by an official source that the nuclear bombing of Japan was unnecessary. Blackett concluded his study by finding 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”[4]

Blackett’s argument found little traction in the United States. In a *Gallup* poll taken in 1945, 85% of American citizens supported the use of atomic bombs as a tool to end the war, and were unwilling to accept that the United States may have committed some wrongdoing through the use of nuclear weapons, meaning that traditionalist opinion was the popular opinion amongst historians from the 1940’s to the 1960s.[5]The traditionalist argument was bolstered in 1947, when Henry Lewis Stimson, the United States minister for war from 1940 to 1945, defended the use of the atomic bomb claiming that *There was yet no indication of any weakening in the Japanese determination to fight rather than accept unconditional surrender. If she should persist in her fight to the end, she still had a great military force”* .[6]Statements like the latter were beneficial in reassuring the historical community of their opinions, as well as reassuring the population that the United States was morally correct in dropping the bomb

Between the mid 1950’s and early 1960, several prominent historians reinforced the traditionalist argument, in a period that was undoubtedly the heyday of the traditionalist argument, and something that would not be seen again until the 1990s. Historian Herbert Feis endorsed it in his work, *Japan Subdued: The Atomic Bomb and the End of the War in the Pacific* . Although Feis did accept the USSBS’ findings that a combination of a blockade and the <https://assignbuster.com/rise-and-fall-of-revisionist-and-traditionalist-history-in-the-context-of-the-bombing-of-hiroshima-and-nagasaki-in-1945/>

continuation of conventional air attacks would bring an eventual end to the war, he stressed that the use of the atomic bomb, saved American soldiers lives and brought a quicker end to the war.[7]It was this reason, that he argued, that Truman's decision to drop the bomb was correct, and it was not until the mid-1960s that this traditionalist view would come under heavy speculation

The 1960s, 70s and 80s: The Age of Revisionism

The traditionalist was majorly challenged in the mid-1960s, and the emergence of events such as the emergence of the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, all of which had an influence on the historical opinion surrounding the use of atomic bombs. The impact that this had cannot be underestimated, as the world was now the closest it had been to all out nuclear war, and revisionist historians at the time believed that the world had begun to wonder down the proverbial rabbit hole in unleashing the power of nuclear weapons on the world.[8]The work that did the most to drive the revisionist movement, at least in an academic context was Gar Alperovitz's *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* , published in 1965. In his book, Alperovitz completely discredited the traditionalist argument, insisting that the primary use of the atomic bomb was to intimidate the Soviet Union, and that their primary target was not Japan and that they were merely a means to an end.[9]More specifically, Alperovitz argued that the Japanese were ready to surrender in the summer of 1945, provided that they were permitted to keep their emperor if they were to do so, that Truman and the White House staff involved in the decision knew it, and that they purposefully withheld those terms, instead <https://assignbuster.com/rise-and-fall-of-revisionist-and-traditionalist-history-in-the-context-of-the-bombing-of-hiroshima-and-nagasaki-in-1945/>

demanding total and unconditional surrender, something that they knew would not happen and ignoring the Japanese attempts to end the war. The work was met with great enthusiasm by the historical 'left', but it should be noted that more moderate historians regarded it as very radical view.

Of course, *Atomic Diplomacy* had its critics, something that was to be expected of a work that had attracted so much attention. Historians on the traditionalist side pointed out the various flaws in its arguments, such as "circumstantial evidence", or evidence that had been distorted to the point where it was no longer usable. The most notable of these works was Robert Maddox's *Atomic Diplomacy: A Study in Creative Writing*. [10] Even the title itself, alluding to creative writing, insinuates that Alperovitz's work resides in the world of fiction, and that it should not be considered a legitimate historical article. Maddox points out in his work "One of the more common flaws in the book is Alperovitz's practice of citing statements in support of his arguments which, in context, refer to other subjects all together".

[11] Maddox then goes on to refer to a quote that Alperovitz has used out of context to reinforce his argument.

Despite these flaws, the impact of the work is undeniable. Whilst most moderate revisionists rejected Alperovitz's radical view, they at least cannibalised some of his ideas and used it in their own work. Most of these historians disagreed with Alperovitz, with the community generally accepting that the primary use of the bomb was to end the war quickly, with minimum loss of American lives, but revisionists did accept that the effect that the bomb would have on the Soviet Union would at least be considered.

By the mid-70s, the revisionist opinion was the one held by majority of the historical community, albeit in a more watered-down sense than what was originally presented by Alperovitz. Many academics rejected Alperovitz's thesis in its entirety, but accepted more diluted versions of it. Despite the scope of the revisionist community, in that the community was spread amongst the spectrum of radicality, the revisionist community as a whole accepted that the atomic bomb was not necessary to force Japan's surrender in 1945. This era of revisionism, however, would soon come to an end, coinciding with the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

1990s: A Revival of Traditionalism

As the world continued to move away from the date of the bombing, the overall historical opinion began to shift in the 1990s. New works began to emerge, with evidence that had previously been unseen, most of which had been declassified by the United States government on the fiftieth anniversary of the bombings, which provided evidence against many previously held revisionist arguments, such as the use of the atomic bomb as a diplomatic weapon and the claim that Japan would have surrendered before the planned United States invasion had the bomb not been used, amongst others, in the process destroying the pillars that had held up revisionist arguments for over three decades.

Robert Maddox once again weighed in with another of his works, *Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later*, where he reinforces his traditionalist opinion that Japan had not decided to surrender before

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Hiroshima, that the United States did not believe that Soviet invasion would force Japan into surrendering, and challenged a popular revisionist theory in the previous decades that traditionalist historians greatly exaggerated the number of casualties in the event of a United States land invasion of Japan.

[12]

The *Enola Gay* exhibition controversy in 1995 highlights the rapid change in historical opinion.[13]After proposing an exhibition of the plane that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima in 1945, the director of the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum was forced to resign after massive protest from traditionalist historians that the exhibit was too focused on presenting the Japanese as victims, and drew too heavily from revisionist work and not enough from traditionalist work.[14]It was also claimed that the exhibit focused too heavily on war crimes of the United States and not enough on those of the Japanese, such as the Rape of Nanking. The fiftieth anniversary of the bombing also prompted a flurry of writing on the behalf of historians looking to profit off of the increased public exposure to the event.

Works such as Robert Newman's *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult*, further proved the illegitimacy of the revisionist argument, approaching the Hiroshima decision in a chronological order, with individual chapters defending traditionalist arguments such as the demand of unconditional surrender.[15]Most devastating however, was his referral to the USSBS assertion made by revisionists in the 1960s that Japan would have surrendered before the end of the year. By reviewing interrogation of high-ranking Japanese officials conducted by the USSBS in 1945, Newman

concluded that “ *it is impossible to read that testimony objectively and not* <https://assignbuster.com/rise-and-fall-of-revisionist-and-traditionalist-history-in-the-context-of-the-bombing-of-hiroshima-and-nagasaki-in-1945/>

deduce that the USSBS reached its conclusion of a Japanese surrender during 1945 by ignoring its own evidence” .[16]

The importance of the 1990s in bringing the traditionalist argument into the light cannot be underestimated. The release and/or discovery of new evidence was exactly what the movement needed in order to revive its arguments, and the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing as well as the *Enola Gay* controversy provided them with the perfect platform to do so.

Since the turn of the millennia, writing on the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has slowed significantly, with only a handful of significant scholarly works being produced. The split is rather even, with one revisionist and one traditionalist pieces being released.

Sean Malloy's *Henry L Stimson and the Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb Against Japan* , argues that the Minister for War betrayed his own core values by submitting to the use of the atomic bomb in Japan.[17]Malloy criticises Truman for the use of the atomic bomb, but offers nothing fresh or new on to suggest alternatives to the bomb, regurgitating what many revisionists before him have stated

Traditionalist works have been much more measured, and some would argue have been of a higher quality than those presented by the revisionist side.

Works such as Dennis Giangreco's *Hell to Pay: Operation Downfall and the Invasion of Japan, 1945-1947* , was a study on how the United States planned to invade the islands of Japan in the spring of 1945. Giangreco reinforces the traditionalist idea once again that Japan was not ready to surrender, and

estimates that the casualties for the proposed invasion would have numbered in their hundreds of thousands

The historical view surrounding the atomic bomb is even today, divisive and complex. Over the decades there has been swings to either side of the debate as to whether the bomb was necessary, with both revisionists and traditionalists experiencing their time in the sun. It is important to understand that the popularity of these arguments is dependent on the various social and political attitudes at the time, as well as the availability of evidence or the release of new evidence that would have an impact on either side's argument.

Even now, despite the number of arguments made and the 'evidence' supplied by either side, there is no clear dominant argument, with approximately 50% of Americans believing that the bombing was justified.

[18]The judgements made on what is ultimately the most controversial decision in United States history ultimately comes down to the position of the historian

It is not clear how this debate will pan out in the future. What is clear however, is that the debate, in the words of Samuel Walker "in terms of longevity and in terms of bitterness, the most controversial event in American history" will continue for years to come.

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[18]As per a 2015 Pew Research Centre Survey “ 56 percent of Americans believe that the bombings were justified”