

APPROACHING HIROSHIMA

Three Ways to Engage with History

By Lynn R. Dole

How can educators today teach about Hiroshima in a manner that is historically accurate and consistent with recent scholarly findings? In this article I suggest three such approaches: examining the historiography of the US decision to use the bomb, evaluating the interaction of popular perceptions and scholarship in museum exhibits in United States and Japan, and exploring what happened “under the mushroom cloud” through a number of perspectives. These are not mutually exclusive alternatives; they can complement existing lessons while also introducing multiple voices and engaging students in thinking about the construction of historical understanding.

Classroom instruction has generally reflected trends in popular understanding of the US decision to use atomic bombs. Mark Selden recently published an analysis of nineteen contemporary high school and college textbooks in *Japan Focus* (2005). His examination revealed that American texts offer a range of treatments of the atomic bombings. Even the way the topic is situated in historical surveys reveals contested interpretations: is this event framed as one of the last actions of World War II or as an initial chapter of the nuclear age and the Cold War? In the early decades after the war, teachers often followed traditional explanations that the bomb was used to shorten the war and reduce American casualties. Sometime in the 1960s teachers began asking their students to consider whether the United States should have dropped the bomb. Many lessons now exist for engaging students in debates about the factors that contributed to US policy decisions about the use of the bomb. A recent example is the article by Thomas Holmes in *Social Education* (May/June 2005: 209–213) outlining a variety of strategies, including a classroom simulation of a hearing in the World Court. Traditional approaches tend to view Hiroshima from a distance, as an event of the past that might have been avoided but is still seen from primarily an American perspective. This article proposes introducing additional voices and viewpoints.

Using the Lens of Historiography to Approach Hiroshima

Studying Hiroshima presents an excellent opportunity to consider the nature of history. Scholars continue to debate the factors that influenced US policymakers in 1945, and students can learn about the process of historical interpretation and analysis through an examination of the literature. The historiography has been influenced by changing political and social considerations, as well as access to new

evidence as once-classified documents become available. As J. Samuel Walker wrote in 1996,

The latest literature on the decision to use the atomic bomb has expanded and enriched our knowledge while at the same time raising new questions. . . . The events that led to Hiroshima are so innately interesting, so vital to understanding subsequent developments, so politically and morally ambiguous, and so much a part of popular mythology that it seems certain that they will perpetually occupy the attention of and stir discord among scholars of World War II and the nuclear age. (37)

Examining disputed interpretations of evidence offers students insight into the dynamic nature of history as a discipline. By investigating some of the primary documents themselves the students can participate in this dialogue.

To understand the nature of historiography, students should be given a summary of how interpretations of the US decision to use atomic bombs have changed over the past sixty years. J. Samuel Walker has written several accessible historiographic reviews.¹ While “traditionalist” views generally prevailed in the 1940s and 1950s, echoing policymakers’ explanations that the bomb was dropped to conclude the war and to save American lives, Paul Boyer’s 1994 book *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Culture and Thought at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* indicates that even in the early years there were divergent opinions. In the 1960s more attention was focused on the question of whether the bomb was dropped primarily to impress the Soviets rather than to defeat the Japanese. Gar Alperovitz is probably the best-known exponent of the “revisionist” view in this literature, and his work has prompted heated debate among scholars. In the 1970s, the scholarship combined the two views, supporting elements of the traditionalist view that the bomb was used primarily for military reasons, while accepting some of the revisionist points that emphasized the value of diplomatic considerations. By the 1990s, the amiable consensus among scholars changed and the debate erupted in public discourse when the proposed exhibit at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum provoked controversy. David McCullough’s popular history *Truman*, published in 1992, strongly argued for the traditionalist views, while Gar Alperovitz, in his 1995 book *The Decision to Use the Bomb*, insisted that political considerations unrelated to Japan were key to explaining Truman’s use of the bomb. Today there remains a wide gap between popular and scholarly views on the subject.

Students can examine the same primary documents, such as Truman’s personal papers, that have prompted scholars to re-evaluate assessments of what motivated US actions. Many of these documents became available to historians only in the 1980s, and since then scholars such as Barton J. Bernstein and Gar Alperovitz have interpreted this evidence to support a variety of conclusions. Tru-

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man's personal papers, including diaries and letters from mid-1945, are available at the Truman Presidential Library Web site, http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/large/index.php, in a section entitled "The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb." Many primary documents relevant to this discussion are available at The National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book (No. 162) entitled *The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II: A Collection of Primary Sources*. This excellent resource is available online at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB162/>.

Another way for students to examine how evidence is interpreted and used is through a study of the appearance and reiteration of the claim that dropping the bomb saved more than half a million American lives. Henry L. Stimson's 1947 article in *Harper's* argued that the use of the bombs prevented one million American casualties.² While policymakers used this figure to justify the decision to use the bomb, scholars such as Barton J. Bernstein in his 1986 article "A Postwar Myth: 500,000 Lives Saved" (*Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* 42: 38–40) have followed the life of this claim in the historical record and found little or no evidence to support these postwar claims. Students can trace this claim in textbooks and popular sources.

By reading how scholars have interpreted the significance of these primary documents, students can better understand the dynamic nature of historiography. This analysis can lead to discussion about factors that might account for changes in the interpretation over time. Here is an opportunity to help students understand why the writers of history differ in their accounts of past events. The historiography of Hiroshima provides insight into the influence of time and place, including political considerations in the immediate postwar years and in the context of the Cold War. Students can also learn how available evidence, or lack thereof, shapes historical understanding; as previously classified information became available in the 1980s, for instance, new evidence became available for interpretation. As students read how successive generations of scholars have offered divergent explanations for why the United States used the atomic bombs in 1945, they gain more understanding of how history is constructed and reinterpreted.

Examining Contested Interpretations Through Museum Exhibits

Another approach that engages students in thinking about the nature of memory and history is to consider the controversy that erupted in the mid-1990s with the proposed Smithsonian exhibit at the National Air and Space Museum. As Laura Hein and Mark Selden note, "Remembrance and commemoration of the atomic bomb have been extraordinarily politicized subjects since its use in World War II." Hein and Selden examine the way historical narratives are created and suppressed in their edited 1997 volume *Living with the Bomb: American and Japanese Cultural Conflicts in the Nuclear Age*. "Historical

silences take many forms," they write. "Outright censorship, insistence on lies, misrepresentation of others, refusal to listen, and defining a single representative national experience while disparaging other experiences as marginal and deviant are all acts of silencing." Several authors in this volume examine how the proposed exhibit at the Smithsonian revealed the ongoing contest for control over the narrative of Hiroshima in American public memory. In a chapter entitled "Triumphal and Tragic Narratives of the War in Asia," John W. Dower examines how one artifact, a schoolgirl's lunchbox, was evaluated and consequently excluded from the exhibition. Dower notes how the proposed exhibit exposed the conflicting narratives of triumph and tragedy, and that "nothing brought this to life more succinctly than the juxtaposition of the Superfortress [Enola Gay bomber] and the lunch box." In the same volume, George H. Roeder, Jr. discusses the selection and exclusion of images from Hiroshima. In the chapter entitled "Making Things Visible: Learning from the Censors," Roeder discussed how images that personalized the destruction were excluded from the exhibit, but aerial views of the vast wasteland produced by the bombings were admitted. Roeder's analysis indicates that the view from "above the mushroom cloud" has been accepted in the United States, while the view from "under the mushroom cloud" continues to be controversial.

MUSEUM QUALITY EXHIBITS



"MY LIFE IS MY MESSAGE"—40 panels (2' x 4') of photographs with captions on the life of Mahatma Gandhi.

"INDIA—THE PEOPLE AND THEIR LAND"—more than 100 color photographs taken over 40 years by Beatrice Pitney Lamb.

"BEAUTY IN STONE"—Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic architecture of India, color photographs by Beatrice Pitney Lamb.

Also—smaller portable exhibits (mailed via postal service), video cassettes (including biographical documentaries of Gandhi), and other resources available for loan.

Undergraduate-level CORRESPONDENCE COURSE on Gandhi (study materials from the Gujarat Vidyapith University in India founded in 1920).

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By examining Japanese museum exhibits like the Peace Memorial Museum's Virtual Museum in Hiroshima, they (students) can see how a Japanese presentation of this material contrasts with American exhibitions.

The "Hiroshima: Perspectives on the Atomic Bombing" curriculum unit produced by SPICE (Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education, 2000) offers a structured extension activity on the Smithsonian controversy. Students can read a brief overview of the content of the initial script for the exhibit, compare it with exhibits that exist at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, and then design a museum exhibit about the atomic bombing and its role in World War II. As the SPICE guide suggests, it is informative to engage students in comparing and contrasting how this event is memorialized in museum exhibits in the United States and Japan. Other resources for examining Japanese perspectives include the Peace Memorial Museum's Virtual Museum exhibits at the Web site http://www.pcf.city.hiroshima.jp/virtual/VirtualMuseum_e/exhibit_e/exhi_fra_e.html.

An extensive collection of documents relating to the Smithsonian exhibition is available through Lehigh University's Web site *The Enola Gay Controversy*, developed for a "History on Trial" course and maintained by Professor Edward J. Gallagher at <http://www.lehigh.edu/~ineng/enola/>. Kai Bird and Lawrence Lifschultz have edited a volume entitled *Hiroshima's Shadow: Writings on the Denial of History and the Smithsonian Controversy* (Stony Creek, Connecticut: The Pamphleteers Press, 1998) that contains critical essays on the museum exhibit. Exploring the controversy surrounding the proposed Smithsonian exhibition gives students an opportunity to see how public memory is contested and how the selection and presentation of evidence shapes popular understanding of events. By reading about the public outcry inspired by the original plans for the exhibit, students can appreciate how people are actively engaged in shaping historical perceptions. By examining Japanese museum exhibits like the Peace Memorial Museum's Virtual Museum in Hiroshima, they can see how a Japanese presentation of this material contrasts with American exhibitions.

The View from "Under the Mushroom Cloud"

Poetry, prose, and pictures by survivors of the atomic bomb blast provide a glimpse of what happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. The Peace Memorial Museum's Virtual Museum also includes accounts and sketches by people who were in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. Readers can learn about John Dower's *Ground Zero 1945* Web materials in the interview with John Dower that appears in this issue. Additional visual resources include *Hellfire: A Journey from Hiroshima*, a prize-winning film that examines the art and lives of artists Iri and Toshi Maruki (Junkerman, 1987). Their work is also available as a series of slides, *Hiroshima: Testimony through Paintings*, which is accompanied by a text and audio cassette (1985). *Unforgettable Fire: Pictures Drawn by Atomic Bomb Survivors*, a collection of 49 slides, includes drawings of scenes recalled before, during, and after the explosion (1976).

Firsthand accounts written by atomic bomb survivors (*hibakusha*) are available in a number of forms. Richard H. Minear has translated the work of several Japanese authors. In *Hiroshima:*

Three Witnesses, Hara Tamiki, Ota Yoko, and Toge Sankichi bear witness to the devastation in first person accounts. In *When We Say Hiroshima: Selected Poems*, Kurihara Sadako makes the word "Hiroshima" resonate in the title poem. *Barefoot Gen* is a popular resource; in video and comic book form, the story, based on Keiji Nakazawa's actual experience, recounts a family's struggle to survive in the aftermath of the bombing. These are the voices of people who were literally "under the mushroom cloud" and survived to tell their stories.

The three approaches to teaching about Hiroshima suggested here all engage students in thinking about the nature of history. These approaches challenge students to explore questions about changes in interpretation of the past. In an April 2005 article in *Diplomatic History*, J. Samuel Walker observed that,

In light of the importance of questions that cannot be definitively resolved because they require speculation and extrapolation from incomplete evidence, the controversy over the use of the bomb seems certain to continue. Recognition of the ambiguities, uncertainties, and complexities involved in the issue is essential for an informed debate. (334)

By engaging students in examining Hiroshima through primary sources, historiography, and works by survivors, educators can help students recognize the nature of some of these ambiguities and complexities. ■

NOTES

1. Walker's 1990 article entitled "The Decision to Use the Bomb: A Historiographical Update," published in *Diplomatic History* (14: 97-114), is frequently cited. An updated account appears in several sources including *Hiroshima in History and Memory*, edited by Michael J. Hogan (1996: 11-37). Walker's historiographic essay "Recent Literature on Truman's Atomic Bomb Decision: A Search for Middle Ground" appeared in the April 2005 issue of *Diplomatic History* (311-334).
2. McGeorge Bundy is now generally regarded as a principal author of this work, which has been attributed to Stimson.

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