Hi

gh school history teacher Brent
Dyck is one of our Canadian readers.
He has offered this item to The
Historian as a contribution to our
commitment to explore the historical
approaches and values that we are
seeking to convey to young people
and the wider public. We hope that
you may find what he has to say
resonates with where we wish to lead
British opinion.

One of the rewards of being a high
school history teacher is not so
much teaching your students about
what happened in the past but, rather,
why things happened in the past. This
is exciting for students as well as they
begin to realize that history is not just
about names and dates but that it is
also about how different events can be
interpreted by historians. One of the
events that I explore and analyze with
my Grade 10 students is the dropping
of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and
Nagasaki.

At 8:16 am on 6 August 1945, a US
Air Force B-29 bomber dropped an
atomic bomb over the city of Hiroshima.
The ensuing explosion killed more
than 80,000 men, women and children
instantly. Three days later, on 9 August,
the US Air Force dropped another
nuclear bomb which destroyed the city
of Nagasaki. Less than a week later, the
Japanese surrendered and World War II
was brought to an end.

The facts above are well known and
can be found in any reliable history
textbook. What is not as well known is
why the American government decided
to drop the atomic bombs on Japan in
the summer of 1945. For twenty years
following the war, the standard reason
given for dropping the bombs was
because it saved thousands of American
lives by ending the war. If the war had
not ended when it did, the American
army planned to invade the Japanese
island of Kyushu in November 1945.
Another invasion force was scheduled
to invade the main island of Honshu in
March 1946. Fighting to defend their
own soil, the Japanese would have fought
to the death and would have inflicted
massive casualties on the American
troops. Writing after the war, President
Harry Truman believed that he had
saved a quarter-million Americans (and
an equal amount of Japanese troops)
from being killed by giving the go-ahead
to drop the bombs and he wrote that he
"would do it again" if he had to.

A second interpretation of the
dropping of the atomic bombs was first
presented by Harvard historian, Gar
Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam,
Alperovitz argued that the real reason
that the bombs were dropped was not
necessarily to save American lives but
to intimidate America’s ally, the Soviet
Union. At the Potsdam Conference
held in July 1945, Stalin told Truman
that the Soviet Union was ready to help
the United States and invade Japan on
August 15. According to Alperovitz,
the United States did not want Japan to
fall, like Eastern Europe had, under the
Soviet sphere of influence after the war.

Therefore, dropping the atomic bombs
would satisfy two objectives – it would
force the Japanese to surrender and it
would keep the Soviets out of Japan. To
support his argument, Alperovitz quotes
two high-ranking American statesmen
in his book. Henry L. Stimson, the
Secretary of War, wrote in May 1945 that
"the time now and the method now to
deal with Russia was to keep our mouths
shut and let our actions speak for
words… it is a case where we have got to
regain the lead… we have coming into
action a weapon which will be unique…
let our actions speak for themselves.”
Also, James F. Byrnes, the Secretary
of State, told physicist Leo Szilard in
the same month that the atomic bomb
would help make the Soviet Union more
"manageable" in Europe. Viewed in this
light, Alperovitz argues that dropping the
atomic bomb on Japan was not the last
act of the Second World War but, rather,
it was the first act of the Cold War.

A new twist on the dropping
of the atomic bombs was added in
historian, asked not why the bombs were
dropped but rather, what would have
happened if they were not dropped?
Frank believes that if the atomic bombs
were not dropped, then millions of
Japanese people would have died from
mass starvation. Frank points out that
the U.S. Air Force planned to change
its bombing targets beginning in
mid-August 1945. Up until that time,
the Air Force had been systematically
firebombing Japanese cities. One
such raid over Tokyo in March 1945
killed over 100,000 civilians in one

Focus

Hiroshima
and Nagasaki

Introducing students
to historical interpretation

Brent Dyck
A dense column of smoke rises more than 60,000 feet into the air over the Japanese port of Nagasaki, the result of an atomic bomb, the second ever used in warfare, dropped on 9 August 1945, from the US B-29 Superfortress. National Archives and Records Administration.
pointed out to me that the Japanese government would probably have surrendered once the massive famine began to occur, then the American blockade would have ended, and more foodstuffs would be imported into Japan, thereby reducing the number of deaths by starvation. However, I am not so sure about this. Frank points out that the Japanese people barely made it through the winter of 1945-46. The annual rice harvest in the fall of 1945 was one of the worst in recent years and the official night alone. However, under the new directive, the American Air Force was to begin bombing Japan’s infrastructure, including 56 railway yards and 13 bridges.

With the American naval blockade limiting imports, the Japanese depended on their own food production to survive. Frank believes that bombing the railways and bridges would have crippled the transportation system. A post-war study concluded that it would only take a half-dozen cuts along the supply line in order to shut down the whole system. The U.S. Air Force, with its fleet of B-29 bombers, would have inflicted this damage a hundredfold in a matter of days. According to Frank, with its transportation system destroyed, there would have been no way to get food into the cities from the countryside. Cities like Tokyo, which depended on 97% of its food supply from outside growers, would become ghost towns, populated only with the dead or the dying. Millions of starving Japanese would have fled into the countryside searching for food. Frank estimates that the death toll would have exceeded over five million deaths. 

Some perceptive students have

References
4. Ibid., p. 5.
5. Ibid., p. 213.

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Boeing B-29 Superfortress “Enola Gay” landing after the atomic bombing mission on Hiroshima, Japan

National Archives and Records Administration