

Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Introducing students to historical interpretation

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High 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.

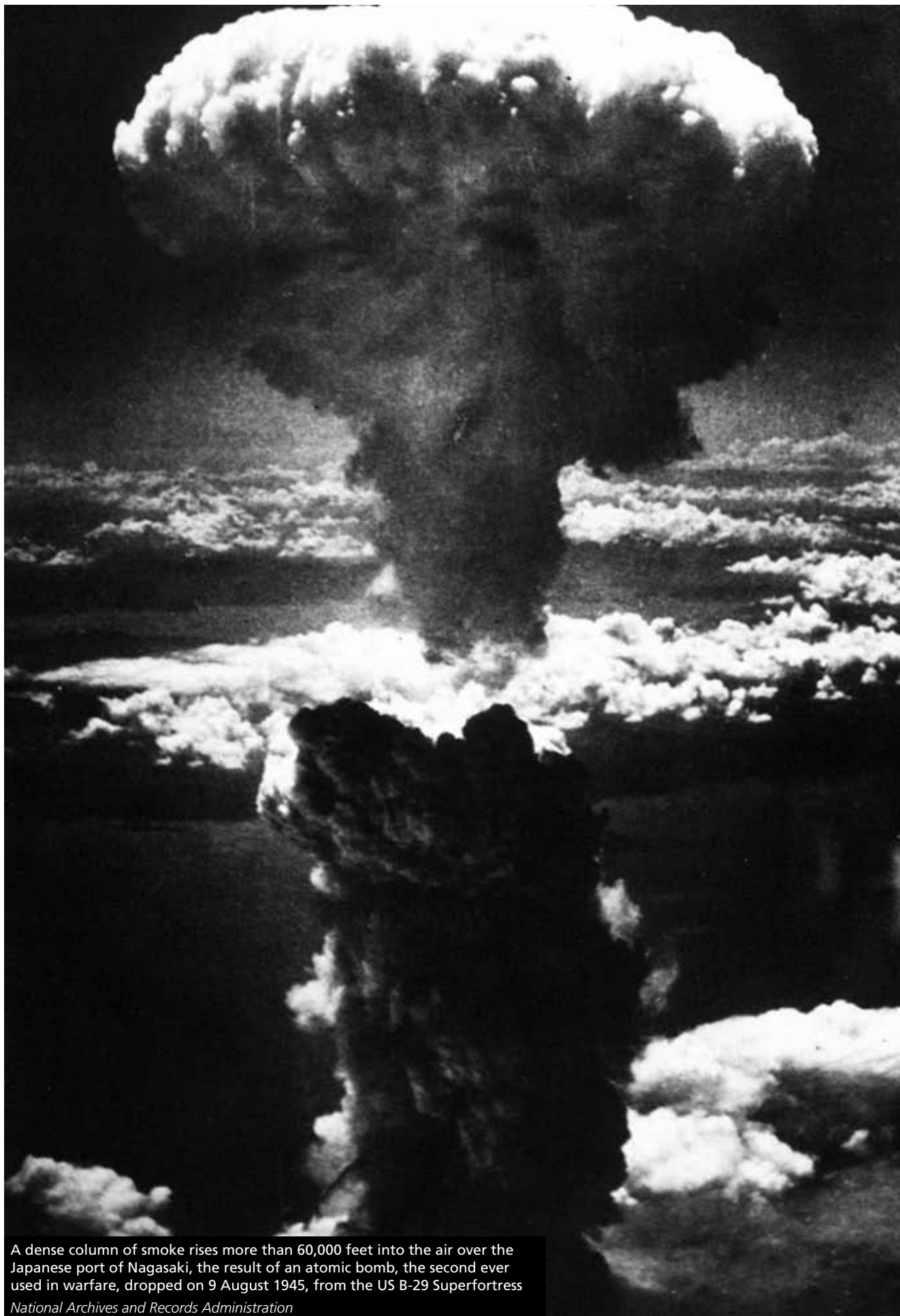
The facts above are well known and can be found in any reliable history

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.¹ 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.²

A second interpretation of the dropping of the atomic bombs was first presented by Harvard historian, Gar Alperovitz, in 1965. In his book, *Atomic 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 15.³ 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.”⁴ 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.⁵ 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 2001. Richard B. Frank, an American 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



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
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Atomic bomb injuries. The patient's skin is burned in a pattern corresponding to the dark portions of a kimono worn at the time of the explosion.

National Archives and Records Administration

food ration in Tokyo in May 1946 had dropped to just over 1,000 calories per day – and this was with functioning railroads and bridges.⁷ Imagine what it would have been like if no food could be delivered – surrender or no surrender?

Frank therefore argues that the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki are critical events in history not because they helped save American lives, or that they were the first acts of the Cold War, but rather that they saved Japan from a catastrophic famine. Looked at in this light, one could argue that the dropping of the atomic bombs were actually a blessing in disguise, and may have, ironically, saved millions of innocent Japanese lives.

Therefore, the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan is more than just names and dates. Was it a horrible act of destruction or was it a blessing in disguise? Was it done to save lives or was it done to scare an ally? It is one of those topics that makes students *think* – which is what the goal of every teacher should be.

References

1. Richard B. Frank, "No Bomb: No End" in *What If? 2: Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been* (New York: Berkley Books, 2001) p. 371-375.
2. Harry S. Truman, *Letter to Irv Kupcinet*, (August 5, 1963). Courtesy of the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum website (Retrieved 9 July, 2008)
3. Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) p. 242.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 213.
6. Frank, p. 377-380.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 377, 378.

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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.⁶

Some perceptive students have

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



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

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