

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael D. Gordin. *Five Days in August: How World War II Became a Nuclear War.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 264 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-12818-4.

Michael Kort. *The Columbia Guide to Hiroshima and the Bomb.* Columbia Guides to American History and Cultures Series. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. 464 pp. \$46.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-13016-5.

Andrew J. Rotter. *Hiroshima: The World's Bomb.* The Making of the Modern World Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Illustrations. 371 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-280437-2.

Reviewed by Philip Nash (Pennsylvania State University)
Published on H-Diplo (December, 2009)
Commissioned by Christopher L. Ball



Five Days in August

These three books on the atomic bombings of Japan represent an apple, an orange, and a banana for comparison purposes. One is a reference work with primary sources, one is a synthetic overview, and one is a narrowly focused monograph. Together, however, they do reflect the diversity of the useful scholarship still being produced despite the admitted vastness of the existing literature on “The Bomb.”

Most innovative of the three is the reference work, Michael Kort’s *Columbia Guide to Hiroshima and the Bomb*. It joins at least a half-dozen other titles in the same series on a wide variety of historical topics. Other reference works and document readers of course exist, but none tries to do what the *Columbia Guide* does.[1] It begins with a seventy-five-page “Historical Narrative,” accessible to the lay reader, which briefly describes the debate over Hiroshima and then traces events from the launching of the Manhattan Project through the Japanese surrender. Part 2 devotes thirty-five pages to ten “Key Questions and Interpretations,” such as “Was the Policy of Unconditional Surrender Justified?” Part 3, “Resources,” uses thirty pages to provide a chronology, glos-

saries of terms and names, and a bibliography of primary and secondary sources. The last section presents over two hundred pages of primary documents arranged in seven sections: American civilian documents; American military documents; summaries of Japanese diplomatic cable traffic obtained via MAGIC codebreaking; Japanese government and military documents and diary entries; Japanese surrender documents; key sections of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, including portions of interrogations of Japanese officials; and postwar statements by Japanese officials collected by the U.S. Army historical division.

The *Columbia Guide* largely succeeds in achieving its goal, “to make available to a wide audience the primary source materials necessary for making a reasoned judgment about the American decision to use nuclear weapons against Japan during World War II” (p. xiii). The collection of documents in part 4 is extensive and extremely useful; it includes not only official documents and diary excerpts but also items from the popular press. Both experts and those new to the subject will find this a handy reference.

However, the book does not fulfill its claims that it “remains impartial throughout” and enables “readers to render informed and independent judgments in the ongoing debate” (jacket flap). This is because Kort, rather than adopting a neutral stance between Hiroshima “orthodoxy”—very simply put, the view that the bombings were “militarily and morally justified”—and “revisionism”—the view that they were not—clearly embraces the former and dismisses the latter (p. 8). This is partly a matter of slanted representation. The book contains several appeals to authority and descriptions *ad hominem*, which are especially problematic considering the nonspecialist target audience. For example, one of the first revisionists, P. M. S. Blackett, is introduced as “a Marxist strongly sympathetic to the Soviet Union” (p. 9); but Herbert Feis, of the orthodox school, is not tagged “a capitalist strongly sympathetic to the United States.” Authors with whom Kort agrees he labels “distinguished” (Robert Ferrell, pp. 98, 116) or “expert” (Robert Newman, p. 102), or he notes their book prizes (Feis and John Gaddis, pp. 8, 110); others, such as Martin Sherwin, he does not. Similarly, Kort describes a “revisionist enterprise,” but no counterpart (p. 10). This asymmetrical framing seems like part of an “orthodox enterprise,” in which revisionist historians appear as ideologues on a mission, while orthodox historians do not.

More important, the promised neutrality is lacking in Kort’s presentation of “Key Questions and Interpretations,” the section crucial in helping the reader transition from the historical narrative to the resources and documents. Kort’s ten questions are excellent. Had he then laid out historians’ various stances on the questions, and the flaws in those stances, and left it at that, his questions would have served as equally excellent guides to the subsequent primary sources. Instead, however, Kort vigorously makes the orthodox case and attacks the revisionist.

Consider, to cite one example among several, key question eight: “Did the United States Use the Atomic Bomb against Japan in Order to Practice ‘Atomic Diplomacy’ against the Soviet Union?” From the first sentence, Kort’s answer is almost entirely a refutation of revisionism, indeed, one built on a narrow definition of “atomic diplomacy”: the U.S. motive in dropping the bomb was “to intimidate the Soviet Union into making concessions regarding postwar arrangements” in Europe (p. 110). What about motives for bombing that, while not rising to that level, nonetheless were political and aimed at the Soviet Union? For instance, it is quite clear that a motive for top U.S. policymakers was the desire to end

the war quickly in order to forestall Soviet participation in the occupation of Japan.[2] Why does that not belong under the heading “atomic diplomacy”? Or what of President Harry Truman’s behavior at the Potsdam Conference (downplayed by Kort, see p. 54), which according to participants (see Andrew J. Rotter’s work, p. 163) became much more assertive after he learned of the successful atomic bomb test in New Mexico? Or what about Henry Stimson’s May 15, 1945, diary entry—included among the documents but not among those discussed in the text of “Key Question 8”—in which the secretary of war believed the bomb “would be dominant” over America’s diplomatic problems in Asia and that it would be “a terrible thing to gamble with such big stakes in diplomacy without having your master card in your hand” (document A12, p. 180)? These and other pieces of evidence suggest that some version of the atomic diplomacy thesis cannot be dismissed as easily as Kort supposes.

Which leads, finally, to “post-revisionism.” Kort devotes so much effort to refuting the most extreme revisionists, chief among them Gar Alperovitz, that he almost completely neglects this important synthesis.[3] Post-revisionists tend to argue that Truman decided to drop the atomic bombs primarily for military reasons, i.e., to shock Japan into surrendering and thus end the war as quickly as possible, but that the political goal of strengthening American diplomacy regarding the Soviet Union was a major, if secondary, motive. Kort makes little allowance for this middle ground. To him, Truman either engaged in atomic diplomacy, or he did not. But the history, and the historiography, are rather more complicated, and a Hiroshima primer should reflect that.

To be clear, this criticism is not about the relative merits of revisionism and orthodoxy. Hiroshima revisionism is, of course, questionable on many fronts. Kort presents strong evidence, in particular that the appallingly feckless and delusional Japanese leadership was not genuinely interested in surrender on even remotely realistic terms until after the bombings and the Soviet entry into the war, and that many of the casualty estimates for a U.S. invasion of Japan proper—a key question for historians judging whether the bombings were justified—especially those reaching President Truman, were quite high.[4] Rather, this is about whether the author is fairly equipping readers to judge the merits for themselves, as he claims to be doing. Unfortunately, for all his obvious expertise, Kort has not met this standard—which is a pity, because a neutral *Guide to Hiroshima and the Bomb* would have rendered an even greater service than his still worthwhile book does.

More successful in its category is Rotter's *Hiroshima*. This is also one of a series, in this case Oxford University Press's *The Making of the Modern World*. In a field of secondary-source-synthesizing overviews already plenty crowded, Rotter's stands out.[5] He covers what one might expect: the origins of the atomic bomb; the atomic programs of World War II's major combatants; the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the early Cold War and development of the hydrogen bomb; and, in a final chapter, brief capsule-histories of subsequent cases of nuclear proliferation.

Yet remarkably, in just over three hundred pages of text, Rotter does this and much more. Unlike many other books, he properly situates the bomb in multiple broad contexts. These include the development of poison gas during World War I, which prefigured the atomic bomb in terms of scientists' relationship with their labors; the related issue of the scientists' own motivations for working on the bomb; the incredibly destructive "conventional" bombing of cities during World War II (a context often neglected by those who find the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings morally repugnant); and the indiscriminate killing of civilians. Rotter also makes enough of the underlying science intelligible for lay readers, and he pays the necessary attention to radiation, the new and awful effect brought by the bomb on top of its concentrated power to destroy. Moreover, Rotter skillfully manages these threads, all the while livening and humanizing his account by weaving in personal stories, capturing in particular the horrifying experiences of the *hibakusha* (bomb survivors), as well as related fiction, poetry, and haiku.

Rotter's thesis is succinctly encapsulated in his title: the atomic bomb, from the scientists who conceived and built it, to the firm belief, in country after country, that the bomb is worth possessing, was and is a truly global phenomenon. The author usefully reminds us that the bomb emerged from an international, and internationalist, "scientific republic" that disregarded national borders as much as it could (p. 11). Indeed, the polyglot scientists of the Manhattan Project succeeded in large part because of their ability to preserve a piece of the scientific republic, despite the demands of wartime security, whereas Nazi Germany failed in its atomic pursuit in part because of its isolated, nationalist "German physics" (p. 73). Rotter's thesis also yields proper emphasis to the fact that, the illusions of Truman and others notwithstanding, there simply was no "atomic secret," and the Soviet Union, with its own impressive share of the scientific republic, did not "steal" the bomb (p. 13).

On the motives behind the atomic bombings, Rotter espouses multicausal post-revisionism: the military motive was primary, atomic diplomacy was present but secondary, and the "assumption thesis"—most American policymakers assumed from the beginning that the new weapon would be used when ready, and thus it was the object not of an affirmative decision to use it but rather no decision not to use it—was fundamental. Sustaining his broad context, Rotter adds that uniformed strategists of several countries, including the United States—one is tempted to call them a "military republic"—joined each other in an "ethical erosion" so long underway that refraining from use of the bomb would have been the real shock. "Functionally," Rotter writes, Hiroshima "was merely another step on a continuum of increasingly awful weapons delivered by airplanes" (pp. 170-171).

Hiroshima is concise, tautly written, and insightful, and draws on a huge range of the very latest scholarship. It even features a fine selection of photographs. One strains to find fault with it; this reviewer is reduced to quibbling with a few ancillary points, such as the claim that "the Pacific War was fought with a savagery unfamiliar to those who had engaged each other in Europe" (p. 166; this is not true of the Germans and Soviets, who in most respects waged war with equal or greater ruthlessness). In short, Rotter's is a superb introduction to the topic, ideal for classroom use.

Michael D. Gordin's brief *Five Days in August*, as its title suggests, is by far the most narrowly focused of the three books. By shedding unusual light on the period August 9-14, 1945—that is, between the destruction of Nagasaki and the Japanese surrender—Gordin quite usefully restores a sense of contingency to the history of the bomb. That is, he tells "the story of how the atomic bomb was thought about and treated *before* anyone could claim that the bomb had ended the war, simply because the war was not yet over" (p. 10).

After an introduction, chapter 2 focuses on the American strategy of shocking Japan into unconditional surrender. Gordin argues that because the atomic bombs loom so large in our understanding of why Japan surrendered, we have ahistorically read their dominance back into the bomb's actual place in the shock strategy. Rather, that strategy was a broad concept of applying massive military force, including the ferocious conventional firebombing campaign against Japanese cities (which continued after August 9; see pp. 95-103), and Soviet entry into the war, as well as Fat Man and Little Boy. Only after Japan's capitulation, a move coming soon after

Nagasaki and one that Emperor Hirohito subsequently claimed was prompted by this “special” weapon, did the atomic bomb completely eclipse these other elements of the strategy of shock (p. 38).

Gordin then “chronicles the tension between ... two ways of looking at the atomic bomb: as world-shaking event or as tactical weapon” (pp. 39-40). Many policymakers, he argues, viewed the bomb as essentially an ordinary weapon, which helps explain the assumption thesis. In a similar vein, Gordin convincingly deflates “a ‘two bomb’ myth of use: the United States knew *in advance* that two bombs would be sufficient to induce surrender and so decided to use two and only two.” In fact, U.S. officials “were planning to produce—and likely use—more than two bombs, substantially more” (p. 47). Again, like their alleged shock effect, the bombs’ “special” character, viewed as self-evident by most people, was not clear when their impact was not yet known.

The author follows with an extremely interesting military history of the B-29 bomber base on the island of Tinian, from which the atomic bomb raids were launched; how the war and the bomb looked from Tinian is a relatively little-known part of the story. On the island, the only place where U.S. personnel interacted “with the device in full knowledge of its *military*, not diplomatic, features,” these men too did not expect one or two bombs to end the war (p. 59). Preparing and dropping atomic bombs on Japan was an ongoing campaign, a process, which was suddenly interrupted by the Japanese surrender.

The last two chapters trace how after war’s end, the bomb did indeed become a “special” weapon in most people’s minds. In three areas, Gordin writes—“the creation out of nowhere of the discipline of nuclear strategy, the development of thermonuclear weapons and the ensuing arms race..., and the abiding failure of segments of the Japanese polity to acknowledge responsibility for atrocities committed in the Second World War—one finds the fingerprints of the concept of nuclear weapons as ‘special’” (pp. 124-125). His linking of these three themes to explain the solidification of the bomb’s unique status is fresh, provocative, and illuminating. Gordin ends with a brief but excellent essay on the scholarly literature, which he correctly describes as “overwhelming” (p. 189n1).

Gordin does somewhat exaggerate the extent to which American officials viewed the atomic bombs as “ordinary weapons” (pp. 7, 14, 108; see also, however, p. 56).[6] And there are points at which his claims out-

run his evidence; for example, his evidence that, like the military officers on Tinian, policymakers in Washington immediately after Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not expect that the atomic bombs would end the war, is rather sparse. Nevertheless, this is a concise, wide-ranging, highly readable, and learned study that will provoke thought even among specialists in the field. Gordin’s point, that the path leading up to, through, and beyond Hiroshima and Nagasaki was far more contingent, and far less linear, than many histories suggest, is crucial, especially considering how ahistorical so much of the public debate about Hiroshima remains.[7]

All three of these very disparate works demonstrate that useful work can still be added to the vast atomic bomb literature. All three also show that questions remain, and may never be answered, about the events of August 1945. Chief among these is the question of the extent to which it was the atomic bombs on August 6 and 9, and to which it was the Soviet attack on Japan begun on August 8, that prompted the Japanese surrender. Similarly, Gordin rightly points out that the popular account of Japan’s capitulation, in which the emperor personally intervened to break his government’s deadlock, is based almost entirely on the postwar testimony of Japanese officials. Their statements must be used carefully in light of their possible interest in mitigating war crimes charges or more generally burnishing the emperor’s image. These and other continuing uncertainties should lead us both to continue our study of the atomic bombings, and to maintain a healthy skepticism and humility when so doing.

Notes

[1]. These include Michael B. Stoff, Jonathan F. Fanton, and R. Hal Williams, eds., *The Manhattan Project: A Documentary Introduction to the Atomic Age* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991); Philip L. Cantelon, Richard G. Hewlett, and Robert C. Williams, eds., *The American Atom: A Documentary History of Nuclear Policies from the Discovery of Fission to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); and most recently, a collection of documents and secondary accounts, Cynthia C. Kelly, ed., *The Manhattan Project: The Birth of the Atomic Bomb in the Words of Its Creators, Eyewitnesses, and Historians* (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal, 2009).

[2]. See, for example, James Vincent Forrestal’s July 28, 1945, diary entry regarding James F. Byrnes, document A46, pp. 227-228.

[3]. The best statement of Hiroshima post-

revisionism is J. Samuel Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs against Japan*, rev. ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

[4]. Although in portraying the bulk of the recent scholarship as supporting far higher casualty estimates (see esp. p. 97), Kort does not refer to two equally recent articles arguing for lower estimates: Barton J. Bernstein, "Reconsidering Truman's Claim of 'Half a Million American Lives' Saved by the Atomic Bomb: The Construction and Deconstruction of a Myth," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 22 (1999): 54-95; and Barton J. Bernstein, "Reconsidering 'Invasion Most Costly': Popular-History Scholarship, Publishing Standards, and the Claim of High U.S. Casualty Estimates to Help Legitimize the Atomic Bombings," *Peace & Change* 24 (1999): 220-248; nor does he include one of the first articles to raise the casualty-estimate issue: Rufus E. Miles Jr., "Hiroshima: The Strange Myth of Half a Million American Lives Saved," *International Security* 10 (1985): 121-140.

10 (1985): 121-140.

[5]. To cite just a couple of recent examples, see Gerard J. DeGroot, *The Bomb: A Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Stephen Walker, *Shockwave: Countdown to Hiroshima* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005).

[6]. A point also made by Sean Malloy, *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 199n2.

[7]. One quibble with *Five Days in August*: the huge bomb in the (admittedly good) cover photograph is not a nuclear weapon, but rather a "Tarzon" conventional bomb. These twenty-one-foot-long, twelve-thousand-pound monsters were used during the Korean War. Unless this is an extremely obscure comment on how at first the conventional/atomic divide was blurred, the photo is an odd choice.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Philip Nash. Review of Gordin, Michael D., *Five Days in August: How World War II Became a Nuclear War* and Kort, Michael, *The Columbia Guide to Hiroshima and the Bomb* and Rotter, Andrew J., *Hiroshima: The World's Bomb*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. December, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15573>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.