

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dennis D. Wainstock. *The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996. x + 180 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-95475-8.

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Few topics in American diplomatic history arouse more controversy than the decision to drop the atomic bombs. Were they directed at Japan or at the Soviet Union? Was Japan attempting to surrender before the bombs were used? Did the Truman administration really believe that the invasion of the Japanese home islands scheduled for the following year would be necessary? Did Truman view the bombs as a means to renege on concessions made to Stalin at Yalta? Into this quagmire steps Dennis Wainstock's *The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb*, a concise study of the period from April to August 1945 that attempts to provide "a general history of Japan's attempt to surrender and the United States' decision to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (p. ix). Although he addresses a number of related issues, Wainstock's focus is on Truman's decision to drop the bomb. Generally, he agrees with revisionist historians that the bomb was unnecessary, that Japan was "an already defeated enemy" (p. 132), whose peace overtures were purposely rejected for a number of reasons, including the administration's desire to intimidate the Soviet Union.

Wainstock's account provides some valuable services in the historiography of the atomic bomb. At 132 pages of text, it presents a concise summary of the major debates in the field, and it is easily accessible to the non-specialist. Wainstock includes interesting accounts of key events, and is especially strong on the disputes within the Truman administration concerning the Potsdam Declaration and the unconditional surrender doctrine, both of which he sees as crucial events in the process of Japan's surrender. Nevertheless, a number of problems offset the book's contributions and hinder its usefulness for anything beyond a basic introduction to the topic.

The most obvious problem is the book's poor grammar, style, and organization. Sentences frequently begin with conjunctions, and one-sentence paragraphs are common (three exist on page 15 alone). Quotations are often improperly formatted, typographical errors

abound, and even the index is alphabetized incorrectly. Wainstock also relies too heavily on quotations without including his own analysis; chapter 2, for example, has 111 footnotes in thirteen pages, and chapter 4 has 216 footnotes in twenty pages. Although not fatal by themselves, these problems do distract from the author's substantive points, and reflect a lack of thoroughness by those involved with the book's publication.

A more substantial problem is Wainstock's reluctance to take a definitive stand. At different times he attributes the decision to drop the bomb to a desire to make the USSR more manageable (p. 66), to an attempt to justify the enormous cost of the bomb (p. 122), to a desire for revenge and hatred of the Japanese (p. 124), and to the fact that Truman had no real decision to make, because he inherited the assumption that the bomb was being built to be used (p. 67). Even at his most definitive he moderates his assessment with "perhaps" and "probably," such as the conclusion that, "perhaps Truman's decision to drop the atomic bombs was an attempt both to impress the Soviets with American firepower and to end the war before the Soviets entered and seized the Far Eastern territories that Roosevelt had promised them at the February 1945 Yalta Conference" (p. 127). This is not to say Wainstock does not have an opinion; as already noted, he sees the issue from a revisionist standpoint that views the bombings as militarily unnecessary. However, his ambiguity concerning Truman's motivation reflects Wainstock's tendency to gloss over central issues too quickly, and does little to advance or even defend the revisionist position he seems to want to articulate.

Wainstock's brevity also prevents him from fully explaining some of his more controversial assertions. He contends, for example, that Japan might have agreed to the Potsdam Declaration if Truman had just given them more time "to get all factions to agree to surrender terms" (p. 129). Considering that as late as August 9 the Japanese military unanimously voted against accepting any surrender terms, this seems unlikely. He further concludes

that giving such extra time could have “forestalled Soviet entry [into Manchuria],” another questionable statement considering the *realpolitik* nature of Stalin’s foreign policy (p. 129). Similarly, in dismissing the failed military coup on August 14-15, Wainstock argues that, “The military’s code would not allow it to disobey an imperial order” (p. 130). Yet a number of military leaders did attempt a coup, one that came close enough to succeeding to suggest that things were not as simple as he concludes. Had Wainstock defended these arguments in more detail, his book might make a more substantial contribution to the historical literature. Instead, he seems content to pro-

vide a basic introduction to the topic, and in this task he succeeds admirably. Nevertheless, the controversial issues that any work on of the atomic bomb must address deserve a more thorough examination than is provided here.

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