Taking History Overseas

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Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Bikini: Teaching American Nuclear Weapons Policy in Japan

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One of the greatest challenges confronting the American historian teaching in Japan is how to present the U.S. decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and how to frame American nuclear weapons policy more generally. Understandably, the bombing is a very sensitive issue for Japanese students, as theirs is the only nation to have suffered atomic attacks. Yet I learned that students have a variety of perspectives about the bombing, some of which might surprise Americans.

I encountered these perspectives while teaching at Temple University Japan (TUJ) in Tokyo as a full-time assistant professor from 1993 to 1996, and again from 2005 to 2009 as an adjunct professor during the summer semesters. Having done research on various aspects of atomic-age America in graduate school, I thought I was fairly well prepared to teach this issue in Japan. It seemed advantageous, however, to become more familiar with how the atomic bombings were taught in Japanese high schools. I did wonder if any of my future students would have family members who either perished in or survived the atomic attacks, and I was concerned about how they would react to an American teaching about this issue, but I hoped that my training as a historian, which would encourage analysis of the bomb from various viewpoints, would enable me to address any concerns such students might have.

Class composition changed considerably in one decade. In the mid-nineties, more than 90 percent of my students were Japanese. The remaining students were American and Korean, and there were a few of other nationalities. Most Japanese students did not talk much in class, probably because they had focused on rote memorization in high school and were not encouraged to ask questions. We examined American nuclear weapons policy in the second half of the U.S. history survey classes as well as in a topics course that I developed while at TUJ entitled "America in the Nuclear Age."

In sharp contrast to the earlier period, from 2005 to 2009 only half of my students in the average class were Japanese. Americans made up the second largest percentage, followed by students from countries such as China, Austria, and Ghana. With a greater number of American students, the classroom dynamic changed, because they were more willing to talk. But more Japanese students now engaged in class discussion—a development that reflects changes in their society. We analyzed American nuclear weapons policy in a lower-level "War and Society" class and an upper-level modern U.S. foreign relations course entitled "Superpower America."

In both decades, the key question used to structure the first part of our analysis was "Why did the United States drop atomic bombs on Japan?" This question had several advantages. It challenged students to think beyond the memorization of names and dates and to consider factors that led to the decision to drop the bomb. Moreover, it led us to a discussion of Japanese and American perspectives. I then introduced students to the essential historiography of this key event, including Herbert Feis' orthodox position, presented in *Japan Subdued: The Atomic Bomb and the End of the War in the Pacific* (1961), and Gar Alperovitz' revisionist interpretation, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (1965).

Asking the "why" question enabled me to complicate the dominant narratives for my students. That process was especially valuable for Japanese students, many of whom believed that all Americans supported the use of the atomic bombs. It also led to focusing on the cause and effect relationship, a cardinal element of studying history that many students had not encountered before.

In the mid-nineties survey classes, the text we used had only a brief discussion of the bomb, so I supplemented it with the debate "Was It Necessary to Drop the Atomic Bomb on Japan to End World War II?" from different editions of *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in American History*. During some semesters I made this a written assignment, while in other semesters students met with me for one-on-one oral discussion and identified the theses, key points, and strengths and weaknesses of both arguments. It was during the office discussions that I occasionally learned students' personal opinions. One Japanese student, for example, complained that neither argument made by Feis or Alperovitz discussed how the atomic bomb hurt many civilians. Her focus on the casualties reflects *higaisha ishiki*—victim consciousness, a widespread feeling in Japan. In sharp contrast, a Korean student said that the United States was right to use the bomb because imperial Japan mistreated its colonies and would not easily give up. No doubt that assertion reflected the opinion of many Koreans on this subject. In some sections of the U.S. history survey, Professor Pat Rosenkjar, a specialist in English language acquisition, assisted students with exercises designed to improve their language skills and comprehension of the material.

In the topics course, "America in the Nuclear Age," we used a wide variety of sources. The introductory chapter from Kyoko and Mark Selden's *The Atomic Bomb: Voices from Hiroshima and Nagasaki* (1989) placed the atomic bombings in the critical larger context of total war and the firebombing of Japanese cities. This chapter also presented multiple perspectives on the bombing,

including those of Japanese survivors. Showing multiple perspectives helped me earn the students' confidence, I think, as I was not telling just the "victorious American side" of the story. Equally important, I emphasized that professional historians address controversial subjects by analyzing different points of view. Examining primary sources further reinforced this point. In contrast to students' usual experience of looking at history from a leadership standpoint, we listened to popular music that reflected the reactions of common people. For example, we played country songs that talked about revenge and the belief in the divine origin of the atom, such as the Buchanan Brothers' 1946 version of Fred Kirby's "Atomic Power." Sam Hinton's 1950 cover of Vern Partlow's "Talking Atomic Blues"—a rare anti-bomb song—urged an end to nuclear proliferation and called for world peace in the memorable final line, "Peace in the world, or the world in pieces."

One crucial issue that we addressed in class was the influence of race on the decision to use the atomic bomb. Some students believed that the United States used the bomb on Japan because the Japanese were "colored" and did not use the bomb on Germany because the Germans were "white." I addressed this issue by asking students when the first bomb was tested. When we determined that testing did not occur until July 16—more than two months after Germany had surrendered—a number of students seemed to reject this assumption. More difficult to address was the belief expressed by some that the Japanese were used as guinea pigs in a scientific experiment. The fact that the United States used two different types of bombs and that the target cities were virtually untouched by conventional bombing raids made it appear that Japanese civilians at Hiroshima and Nagasaki were indeed part of a test to see which nuclear device was more powerful.

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Most students opposed the American decision to use the atomic bombs. In conversations outside of class, many students told me that they thought that all war was bad. I rarely hear this perspective from my American students at Bloomsburg University in Pennsylvania, where I have taught since 1996. It is interesting that a few Japanese students supported the use of the bomb. When I asked why, the most common response was that it kept the Soviet Union out of Japan. A few believed it was necessary because the Japanese army would not have surrendered otherwise. Several students indicated that they had learned about some of these issues in high school. One student noted that her grandparents were *hibakusha*—atomic bomb victims.

The second major element of our study of American nuclear weapons policy was an analysis of nuclear testing in the Pacific. We discussed the atomic tests at the Bikini Atoll, which began in 1946, and the hydrogen bomb tests, which began in 1952. Our main focus was on the March 1, 1954, BRAVO H-bomb test. Although I was not sure how much students would know about this test, I assumed that they would not know much, because most Japanese history texts do not have extensive coverage of the twentieth century and none of the American texts I consulted included a discussion of this significant event. When the United States detonated the 15-megaton hydrogen bomb in the BRAVO test, fallout scattered far outside the government-designated safety zone, irradiating the entire crew of the *Daigo Fukuryu Maru* (Lucky Dragon No. 5), a Japanese fishing vessel thirty miles outside the security area. After returning to port, the seriously ill sailors were all hospitalized, and one died from radiation sickness a few months later. The sale of their fallout-laden catch, which occurred before anyone realized what had happened, led to a "tuna panic" in Japan, and the incident hurt Japanese-American relations at a particularly crucial time in the Cold War. Remarkably, the *Daigo Fukuryu Maru* is preserved at an Exhibition Hall in Yumenoshima—Dream Island Park—in Tokyo. On a class trip to the museum, we examined this key artifact of the nuclear age, which dominated the interior space, along with many photos, newspapers, and other material artifacts related to the vessel, crew, and the domestic impact of the incident on Japanese society. The museum's narrative of this event was consistent with the victim-consciousness perspective. Few panels had English translations. Our visit sparked much conversation. None of the students had heard of this event, and they expressed surprise that an American knew about it. Some felt uncomfortable being near the ship, asking if they should be concerned about radiation.

Because we could not do a class trip each semester, we sometimes utilized other primary sources to examine the impact of the March 1, 1954, H-bomb test. We listened, for example, to Bill Haley and His Comets' "Thirteen Women." Written by Dickie Thompson with assistance from Milt Gabler, this April 1954 "dream" song depicted the last man alive in a post-nuclear world, being attended to by thirteen women. (Apparently, traditional gender roles managed to survive the nuclear holocaust.) We also watched an excerpt from the science fiction film *THEM!* that was released in June 1954. The growing concern over fallout from the H-bomb provided the context for this movie, which depicted gigantic ants, mutated as a result of nuclear testing, devouring Americans. Although some students focused on the 1950s special effects, which were crude by 1990s standards, they understood the linkage between the events. These sources helped support Paul Boyer's argument in *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (1985) that 1954 saw the beginning of the second cycle of activism and fear prompted by the bomb and radioactivity.

After the Smithsonian Institution opened its Enola Gay Exhibit in 1995, one of my former TUJ students, who had transferred to the school's main campus in Philadelphia, asked me to take her to see it. Although the original exhibit had been transformed almost beyond recognition because of political pressure, what remained

still resonated for her. She was almost brought to tears by the sight of groups of Americans posing for pictures in front of a life-size photograph of the B-29's crew, laughing, smiling, and making "V for Victory" signs. We talked about why Americans would act in this manner, but given the somberness of the experience for her, she found it difficult to understand their actions. Later she wrote a letter to the *Asahi Shimbun*, one of Japan's largest newspapers, to express her astonishment at this scene.

When I began to teach again in Japan in 2005, I took advantage of the rapid expansion of atomic bomb-related websites, which include a wealth of primary source materials. These easily accessible sites influenced my decision to shift my focus away from popular culture to emphasize the actions of policymakers and scientists. Over the five summers we have examined several significant sources. Utilizing "Minutes of the second meeting of the Target Committee, Los Alamos, May 10-11, 1945" helped students realize that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the result of decisions made by men who were weighing different factors, such as the psychological impact of the bombing on Japan and other nations. The "Szilard Petition, First Version, July 3, 1945," which urged the president not to use the bomb because it would accelerate the increasing ruthlessness of war and place responsibility on the United States for opening the door to a nuclear arms race, showed that some nuclear scientists opposed using the bomb even before the first test. It surprised not only Japanese but also American students. Finally, an entry from "Admiral Tagaki's Diary," dated August 8, 1945, showed the growing concern among Japanese policymakers that the Hiroshima bombing would accelerate deteriorating domestic conditions in Japan.

Secondary and primary sources sometimes led to interesting and lively discussions. One Chinese student asserted that "history is written by the victors," perhaps to suggest that we were not examining all perspectives. We then briefly reviewed the key points in our class discussion to determine if our analysis was an example of that type of history, and we agreed that it was not. An American student proclaimed that Japan "deserved to be nuked." When asked why he made this comment, which was not challenged by other students, he said that his grandfather had told him so. We then considered the historical context of the era in which his grandfather grew up, which helped to explain his perspective. Another American student commented, "What do you expect during wartime?" I did not hear such callous remarks in the previous decade. They suggest how difficult it is to instill historical mindedness in students, and they also demonstrate the difficulty of striking a balance between encouraging students to feel free to offer observations and trying to get them to argue historically.

> The experience of teaching American nuclear weapons policy in Japan has been intellectually rewarding. It has revealed that Japanese students' understanding of why the United States dropped the atomic bombs on Japan is far more complex than I had initially imagined.

During one summer session I took students on a class trip to see the *Lucky Dragon No. 5*. Several changes had been made to the exhibit since the mid-1990s, the most significant being additional English translations and an international timeline that depicted at what time nations joined the "nuclear club" and when and where they tested their weapons. Placing the *Lucky Dragon* incident in an international context helped students to see the broader dimensions of nuclear weapons testing. They seemed stunned by the number of tests, so we embarked on an extended discussion that linked the tests to the dynamics of the Cold War. Like the students from the mid-nineties, most of them had never heard of this event and some expressed fear of lingering radiation from the ship. This time, however, Americans comprised the largest percentage of students.

During the most recent summer session at TUJ, I taught a section of "War and Society" with Japanese students alone. I developed a questionnaire to gauge their opinions about the bomb more systematically. The nineteen students provided seven different responses when asked "Why did the US drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?" The most common replies were: Japan refused to surrender; the Americans wanted to perform an experiment by testing the bomb on the Japanese people; and the Americans wanted to demonstrate their power to other nations. Only one student cited race as a factor, and it is possible that her grandfather's death in the Philippines during the Pacific War helped shape her opinion. When asked what their knowledge was based on, most of the students cited junior high school history class; others mentioned history books and high school. One student specifically noted that when he attended high school in Osaka his teachers were Communists who stressed that Japan committed only "negative" acts during the war. Other sources of information included elementary school, museums, TV, comic books, and school trips to Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Most interesting were their responses to "Was it necessary to drop the atomic bombs on Japan to end World War II?" Eight argued no, seven said yes, and the rest gave different replies. At first glance the seven "yes" results are surprising; they appear to be in sharp contrast to student perspectives in the 1990s. However, the reasons the students gave for their belief that it was necessary for the United States to drop the atomic bombs are instructive. Three students argued that it was necessary for human beings to learn how dangerous nuclear weapons are—an interpretation that may have helped to give meaning to the deaths of so many civilians. Two stated that the United States used the bomb because Japan refused to surrender. Another argued that using the bomb was necessary to keep the Soviet Union out of Japan—a contention that suggests a persistent fear of Communism among some Japanese. In the 1990s, a few students had also cited the army's refusal to surrender and the fear of Soviet occupation. Finally, one student who believed the bomb was necessary pointed out what she saw as the positive consequences of that "terrible,

unhuman" act: Japan took the opportunity to change its government and became the first country to refuse war officially. Though she did not directly mention it in her answer, she seemed to be one of the many Japanese who still supported Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, which prohibits an act of war by the state. It has been an increasingly controversial issue in recent years. Clearly, these responses indicated that young Japanese students had varied and complex attitudes toward the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

I administered the same questionnaire in the upper-level U.S. foreign policy course. Twenty-six students responded: eleven Japanese, ten Americans, and five students from four other countries. The most common reasons cited by American students for the use of the bomb were to influence the Soviet Union, to end the war as soon as possible, and to justify the enormous expenditures of the Manhattan Project. Many of these students were junior and senior International Affairs majors at TUJ, and their responses reflected the influence of their professors and the reading that they had done for classes. One student, for example, had read Tsuyoshi Hasegawa's important recent interpretation, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (2006). A few had also gathered information from documentaries. The most common responses among Japanese students were that the bomb was used to end the war as soon as possible and to influence the Soviet Union. While no one posited race as a factor, two Japanese students wrote research papers on the influence of race on the atomic bomb decision, which strongly suggests that they believed that race was indeed a crucial factor even though they neglected to mention it in the survey. Most Japanese students' knowledge came from senior and junior high school classes. One student said that he first learned about the bomb in elementary school when he read Keiji Nakazawa's powerful manga *Hadashi no Gen* (*Barefoot Gen*), first serialized in 1973. Overall, seven students of different nationalities cited their classes at TUJ as a source of knowledge.

Nine of ten Americans said that it was not necessary to drop the bomb to end the war. While this might seem surprising at first, the influence of coursework at TUJ probably influenced their perspective. Several of them said that Japan was already very weak and would soon collapse, and several said Japan was ready to surrender. Although I have not offered a similar questionnaire to my Bloomsburg University students in years, I suspect, based on my work with them, that they would not respond in the same manner. Perhaps American students who study in Japan are different from those who remain at home. Seven Japanese also said that dropping the bomb was not necessary, while one argued

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(cash bar)
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Saturday, April 10,
11:30 am – 1:00 pm

At the luncheon, **Elizabeth Borgwardt** (Washington University in St. Louis) will deliver the 2010 Stuart L. Bernath Lecture:

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SHAFR will also announce the winners of the 2010 Stuart L. Bernath Book Prize, Stuart L. Bernath Lecture Prize, Stuart L. Bernath Scholarly Article Prize, Myrna Bernath Book Prize, and Robert Ferrell Book Prize.

Tickets to the luncheon must be purchase in advance from the OAH. Details will appear in OAH registration materials.