

Book Review: Paul Ham – Hiroshima and Nagasaki;

The Real Story of the Atomic Bombings and their Aftermath

The question of “was the atomic bomb really necessary?” is widely debated and difficult to answer definitively. What Paul Ham does in *Hiroshima Nagasaki* is put forward a persuasive argument showing the bomb was not required to defeat the Japanese in the Pacific War but was a display of power by the Americans to deter Russia from any further conflict. He is an Australian historian who specialises in war, politics and diplomacy. He has also written *1914: The Year the World Ended* and *Kokoda*, which focuses on Japanese and Australian perspectives of the second world war. Ham successfully uses primary sources from both America and Japan to show the political, military, and civilian dynamics of both countries during the war. Once Germany were defeated in the Second world war, the Allies turned their attention to the Pacific. It was no secret that Japanese national suicide was preferable to surrender, and the mobilisation of every man, woman and child over the age of 12 is testament to this. Ham sympathises with the civilians throughout the book, arguing that they were victims of an authoritarian elite that prolonged the war. Whilst it is not very concise at reaching its overall conclusion, it is a valuable contribution to the subject and highlights situations that led to the bomb being dropped and reflects on the affect it had on the Japanese civilians.

In order to gain perspective, Ham begins the book by explaining the political situation in Europe at the end of the Second world war. In winter 1945, the Allies met at Yalta to discuss the imminent defeat of Germany. Ham explains that London and Washington both knew the defeat of Germany meant that Stalin would want to be involved in the defeat of Japan. However, British and American relations with Russia were strained due to disagreement over the post-war division of Germany. In addition, Stalin made no secret of the fact he wanted a communist foothold in Asia. This is the background to Ham’s argument that the bombs were a warning to Stalin to deter him from further expansionism. Many scholars agree with this, Barton Bernstein and Tsuyoshi Hasegawa explain that Japan were in ‘such direct peril’ that the war would have finished not long after the Russians invaded.¹

Ham’s analysis of the situation on the home front in Japan gives weight to his argument that the bombs were not necessary for Japan to surrender. He explains that the naval blockade by the US was slowly exhausting Japan’s raw materials, and the average daily rations fell well below 1500 calories, starving the population. This, along with the loss of over 60 cities due to air raids, made it clear that the Japanese had effectively been defeated. However, Ham asserts that the Allies’ continuing demands for unconditional surrender prolonged the war unnecessarily. Hanson W. Baldwin agrees with this, saying that America were ‘twice guilty’;

We dropped the bomb at a time when Japan already was negotiating for an end of the war...we demanded unconditional surrender, then dropped the bomb and accepted conditional surrender...[this] indicates pretty clearly that the Japanese would have surrendered.

Ham is adamant in *Hiroshima Nagasaki* that despite the threat from the Allies, Japan were more concerned with the inevitable invasion from Russia. He argues because of the humiliation of the Soviets in the Russo-Jap war 1904-5, Tokyo knew Stalin wanted revenge. The Russian threat scared Japan due to their strategy of direct military attacks compared to the “cowardly attacks on civilians” from America. Sure enough, he sent 1.5 million troops into Manchuria a week earlier than planned

¹ Alperovitz, G. (2011). *The Decision to Bomb Hiroshima*. [online] [Accessed 4 Dec. 2016]. <http://www.counterpunch.org/2011/08/05/the-decision-to-bomb-hiroshima/>