

**H-Diplo** *Roundtables*

**Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005)**

Roundtable Editor: **Thomas Maddux**, CSU Northridge

Roundtable Participants:

**Michael D. Gordin, Gar Alperovitz, Richard Frank, Barton Bernstein, David Holloway**

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**Commentary by Michael D. Gordin, Princeton University**

The publication of Tsuyoshi Hasegawa's *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan*, sixty years after the events it chronicles, should be considered a landmark for diplomatic history. One of the most egregious problems in the literatures about the use of the atomic bombs on Japan, Soviet entry into World War II, and the unconditional surrender of Japan, as Hasegawa rightly notes, is that these are *literatures*, in the plural. Historians of U.S. diplomatic history tend to focus on the first, historians of the Soviet Union on the second, and historians of Japan on the third, all of which seems at first a reasonable division among sub-disciplines. Yet considering that these issues concern, during the period of the most intense pace of events, roughly three weeks of the Summer of 1945 involving all the same principals, it becomes increasingly difficult to justify the militant segregation of quite vibrant historiographical debates. By putting the various documents, archives, and historiographies into conversation with each other, Hasegawa has rendered all three subfields an invaluable service. Even though there is much to engage with critically in *Racing the Enemy*, one hopes that from now on it will be impossible to contemplate the concluding weeks of World War II in the traditional balkanized fashion.

Of course, the segregation of literatures is not as hermetic as I have just implied, and in particular the story of Japan's surrender and of the decision to use atomic bombs in combat are often told in tandem. Hasegawa instead foregrounds the third element in this equation –Soviet entry into the Pacific war—as the missing link, not only because it has been relatively neglected so often before, but because it has the potential to resolve key paradoxes that bedevil any historian who engages seriously with this period. Even history published in Russian that extensively employs recent (albeit limited) archival openings, does not integrate the Soviet-Japanese war into the history of the end of World War II completely, particularly with respect to the role of the Americans.[1] Hasegawa has produced an account that does exactly that, adding to and consolidating the net total of what we now know about these crucial days.

This is not to say that the actors themselves knew everything that Hasegawa informs us about—and here I would like to venture a first point of discussion. Precisely how much does knowing, to the degree we can, what Japanese Prime Minister Kantaro Suzuki or Emperor Hirohito or Soviet Foreign Minister Viacheslav Molotov or Joseph Stalin was thinking change, for example, our analysis of the internal dynamics of the Truman Administration with respect to S-1

(Secretary of War Henry Stimson's code name for the atomic device)? There are, in a manner of speaking, two different books coexisting within the binding of Hasegawa's work. The first is an account of what each of the three governments and associated officials were actually doing (so far as we can determine from available evidence—a qualification that cannot be stressed often enough). The second is an account of how those three governments, but particularly the Truman Administration, made decisions while heavily weighing the potential actions, responses, and intentions of the other two powers. In certain cases, such as the central question of the purposes of the American drafting of the Potsdam Declaration (or Proclamation) and the subsequent exclusion of the Soviet Union from signatory status, the disparity between what Truman and Stalin knew about each other's actions and intentions and what Hasegawa can now show us was in fact the case is massive (165). The reader is unclear, however, whether significant knowledge of the behind-the-scenes action would have changed any of the decisions made, and much of the narrative now serves largely as a hook on which to hang retrospective evaluations of the sagacity of various politicians. Without a clearer understanding of how the facts and the perceptions mutually influenced each other, the depth of Hasegawa's revision of our understanding is limited, although by no means erased.

Other writers in this forum will likely venture a discussion of Hasegawa's specific arguments, and the thoroughness and richness of the book ensure that detailed engagement with even a significant number of his thoughtful interpretations would exceed the bounds of a short review. Suffice it to say that Hasegawa has conclusively demonstrated, to my mind at least, that the issue of Soviet entry into the Pacific War was a central preoccupation of both American and Japanese decision-making for months before the event took place on August 8, 1945 (with Soviet forces crossing the border into Manchuria an hour later at midnight, August 9, Transbaikal time). Whether a welcome or unwelcome development—and most of Hasegawa's actors fluctuated on this issue dramatically, not least of all President Harry S. Truman—elaborate calculations for an end-of-war strategy on all sides hinged around one's perceptions of the likelihood and impact of that entry. Hasegawa interprets the Potsdam Declaration, for example, as a dual attempt to get the Japanese to surrender before the Soviets entered the war and complicated the politics of postwar Asia: to soften (slightly, but not dramatically) the demand for “unconditional surrender,” and thereby induce a capitulation by the Japanese regime; and to provide retrospective cover for the initiation of atomic bombing, the Americans' best option to induce a Japanese surrender before the full-scale invasion of Kyushu slated for November 1945 (at which point the Soviets would certainly already be in the war). The atomic bombs, in this rendition, were not an attempt to “intimidate” the Soviets to make them more pliable in Europe or to set up a future Cold War, as suggested as far back as 1948 by Nobel-Prize-winning physicist P. M. S. Blackett and later developed by Gar Alperovitz [2], but instead an attempt to intimidate (or provide an excuse for) *the Japanese* and so obviate a Soviet presence in the Pacific conflict.

There is much to discuss, dispute, and elaborate on in this picture of the end-of-war decisions, but the fundamental assumption behind this posing of the question offers a deep truth: the true focus on how the war ended should emphasize not the Americans and the Soviets primarily, but how those two parties evaluated the future actions of the Japanese government. Only Japan has the power to end World War II. Legally speaking, the war ended when the Japanese government surrendered. Historically speaking, the war ended when it became obvious after the Emperor's radio announcement on August 15th that Japanese forces would not continue fighting, a fact that

only became clear a few weeks afterward. What prompted that surrender is a question on which reasonable and well-informed people can differ. What is beyond dispute is that the war was not over until the *Japanese government* decided that it was; the Allies could engage in various gambits, but only the Japanese possessed the power to make any of those gambits “work.”

Thus a central problem for any historian attempting to grapple with the end of the war is the question not so much of why the Japanese surrendered, but why that surrender happened *when* it did. The issue is not, as some would have it, why Japan surrendered so quickly and presumably so early—was it the Soviet entry into the war or the atomic bombs (on which more soon)—but why it happened so *late*. It was clear from shortly after the fall of the government of Hideki Tojo in late Summer 1944, according to the Hasegawa's analysis of the findings of Rear Admiral Sokichi Takagi on ways to end the war, that “the only way to end the war was for the emperor to impose his decision on the military and the government” (28). And yet nothing happened for the greater part of a year, when the war ended in precisely the manner that Takagi had foretold. Hasegawa's account of these developments updates, supplements, and in some places modifies the classic account by Robert Butow, which has recently been further extended by Sadao Asada.[3] Hasegawa frames his answer squarely around the Soviet Union: the Emperor delayed because he hoped (quite rationally) that the Soviet Union would help mediate better surrender terms with the United States and Great Britain (30), and he changed his mind largely because the Soviet Union became a belligerent, and not because of the atomic bombs (186). Since this is clearly among the most controversial evaluations in the book, I trust that the other reviewers in this forum will treat Hasegawa's often-compelling case in more detail than I shall.

Instead, for the rest of this review, I will discuss some of the methodological questions raised in Hasegawa's work, both where those connect and where those diverge from those employed in most other histories of the use of the atomic bomb on Japan and the end of World War II. Given that we as historians have a very restricted amount of evidence for the three major sides—due to official secrecy surrounding the atomic bomb before the destruction of Hiroshima, the very limited releases from Soviet archives, and the incineration of many reams of absolutely crucial documents by Japanese officials before the American occupation—any history of these events has to make assumptions and generalizations. The question is not whether speculation should be avoided; it is simply inevitable. The question instead ought to revolve around the validity of particular choices and arguments. In most instances, Hasegawa's determinations are laudable and eminently reasonable. I wish to flag them here not so much to initiate a critique, but in hopes of generating a broader discussion of how these assumptions are deployed in historical analysis of this period.

My comments concern three major areas:

1. The issue of intention in diplomatic history, and in history in general. There is no question that Truman, Stalin, Hirohito, and their advisers had intentions in pursuing the actions they did, and that quite possibly those intentions shifted. The important difficulty is how we as historians are supposed to have access to those intentions. This is important because so many of the actions described in *Racing the Enemy*—the breaking of the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact, the writing and issuing of the Potsdam Declaration, the decision to employ nuclear weapons in combat—acquire vastly different significance depending on the intention motivating the actors. It is

difficult because even if we had access to all the documents we could hope for (such as diaries, transcripts of meetings, marginalia on memoranda), a large amount of which we just do not have, these would in all likelihood not help us with the intention problem. Especially in the world of diplomacy, where one often says one thing and means another, even written documentation is unreliable. The problem is exacerbated for all three of the nations Hasegawa discusses: Stalin's innermost thoughts were rarely committed to paper, and the Soviet archives have not been especially forthcoming on such crucial matters; the Japanese documents have been mostly destroyed, and in any event would not have registered the silent Hirohito's views, the most relevant factor in Japan's surrender; and the fiercely opinionated Truman vacillated so dramatically in even his stated views on crucial questions—Soviet entry, the proposed efficacy of nuclear weapons, the retention of the Emperor, and so on—that even in this rather well documented case the historian is somewhat left to his or her own devices.

The problem of gauging intention crops up again and again in this volume. To list just a few examples, in no particular order: Stalin's motives in renouncing the Neutrality Pact and then persuading the Japanese that he would not abrogate the one-year grace period (46-48). “If Soviet action had any impact on American decisions, it reinforced the resolve of the U.S. government to continue the course it had thus far followed: to achieve Japan's surrender unilaterally” (195). “Indeed, Soviet attack, not the Hiroshima bomb, convinced political leaders to end the war by accepting the Potsdam Proclamation” (198-199). Each of these claims by Hasegawa requires a careful weighing of individuals' intentions in proposing certain actions, yet Hasegawa does not offer us a clear calculus of how he comes to evaluate evidence in favor of these views. What should be the importance/validity of memoir literature? How are conflicting accounts reconciled in general, as opposed to in each specific case? Certain factors that must be considered in any evaluation of intention are given short shrift in Hasegawa's account. Of course, he already covers so much so well that it would be churlish to point to nitpicking omissions, but some of these omissions bear on crucial decisions. For example, domestic matters in both the Soviet Union and (more importantly) in the United States are often neglected. If Truman's main goal was to convince the Japanese to surrender before the Soviet Union entered the war, then why did he take no actions on the domestic front—preparing for demobilization fever and postwar inflation—that would signal some confidence in achieving that result? By including largely diplomatic and military considerations in his assessment of intentionality and not these more mundane domestic political factors (with the important exception of popular opinion on the retention of the Emperor), the reader leaves the book a bit confused about how to reconcile competing accounts and critiques.

2. How do historians construct the boundaries of a historical “event”? The simplest way to highlight this as a conceptual problem, carefully articulated in Hasegawa, is by focusing on the question of when we as historians decide the Second World War actually ended. For U.S. diplomatic historians, the answer is almost trivial: the war was over when Emperor Hirohito decided to accept (August 14th) and then announced over the radio (August 15th), that the Japanese government had accepted the Potsdam Declaration and the armed forces were surrendering unconditionally. From the perspective of the Japanese and the Soviets, however, the issue of when the war ended is complicated in two ways.

First, the war between Japan and the Soviet Union was quite frankly not over on August 15, 1945; fighting continued throughout August, and the Kurile Islands were not seized until after the beginning of the American occupation of Japan with the signing of the instruments of surrender on board the *U.S.S. Missouri* on September 2nd. The nature, scope, and implications of the continued fighting is one of the most surprising and important features of Hasegawa's book, and his willingness to look beyond the formality of Japanese surrender to the combat forces on the ground offers many compelling insights (252, 255).

Second, albeit not an issue addressed by Hasegawa, is a question for us as historians as to whether even the American-Japanese war ended on August 15. The reason we say now that the war ended on that date is because there was no right-wing or militarist coup against the Japanese government, kamikaze attacks did not strike the incoming Americans, and the Occupation began and concluded relatively peacefully, shaping Japan into the nation it is today. But until it was evident to the historical actors that the war was in fact over—because no other events contradicted this picture—and especially in the second half of August, a time of great uncertainty in Japan and in mainland Asian occupation zones, the war was in a half-alive, half-dead state. Hasegawa is very sensitive to this uncertainty in the case of the Soviet-Japanese fronts, but somewhat less so for the American-Japanese case. He treats that aspect of the war as more or less continuous up until August 14th, at which point it truncates. This occasions one of his rare missteps with the historical record. Hasegawa believes that after Nagasaki's bombing on August 9th more than 1,000 bombers continued to be sent from August 10th to August 14th on firebombing raids from U.S. bases in the Marianas (234). This is true, but it is not true that Truman overruled Stimson and refused to allow an aerial cease-fire for those days; in fact, there were *no* bombing raids on the 10th through 13th, and all those planes flew on a single day to comprise the largest bombing raid of the war. The reason this error matters is that it further demonstrates how uncertain Truman and his advisers were that surrender would “take,” even on the verge of Hirohito's announcement. Recognition of this uncertainty only strengthens most of Hasegawa's arguments in the final sections of his narrative about how the war ended on the ground.

3. Finally, to take up an issue Hasegawa confronts directly in his conclusion, there is the potential methodological validity of counterfactual reasoning. Instead of explicitly defending the utility of such reasoning, Hasegawa structures his final chapter around various questions posed counterfactually and then evaluated. [4] His final analysis? “On the basis of the available evidence, however, it is clear that the two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki alone were not decisive in inducing Japan to surrender. The Soviet invasion was” (298). The conclusion is one matter, and can certainly be disputed; but what about the reasoning? In a limited philosophical sense, every causal claim (which is what historians are in the business of making) implies a counterfactual: if A caused B, then that implies that if A had not occurred (*ceteris paribus*), then B would not have occurred. But how does Hasegawa - and how do we - evaluate the history of matters that never took place, indeed by definition *could not have* taken place, since events were otherwise? The atomic-bomb literature is filled with counterfactuals, and I do not believe that they are going away in the near future, but some discussion of their limits and potentials is in order.

Hasegawa's *Racing the Enemy* is a tremendous book, destined to assume an influential place in our understanding of this vital moment in twentieth-century history, and not just in diplomatic history. It is, in a very real way, a model of how international history should be written: sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences, deep in archives, astute in argumentation. However one evaluates Hasegawa's conclusions, it has raised the standards of evidence and argumentation in this area. For a historian, there is scarcely higher praise.

Notes:

[1] See, in particular, Boris Slavinsky, *The Japanese-Soviet Neutrality Pact: A Diplomatic History, 1941-1945*, tr. Geoffrey Jukes (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004); Boris Slavinskii, *SSSR i Iaponiia—na puti k voine: diplomaticheskaiia istoriia, 1937-1945 gg.* (Moscow: Iaponiia segodnia, 1999); and V. P. Safronov, *SSSR, SShA i iaponskaia agressiia na dal'nem vostoke i tikhom okeane, 1931-1945 gg.* (Moscow: IRI RAN, 2001).

[2] P. M. S. Blackett, *Fear, War, and the Bomb: Military and Political Consequences of Atomic Energy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1949 [1948]); Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965); and Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb, and the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

[3] Robert J. C. Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954); and Sadao Asada, "The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan's Decision to Surrender—A Reconsideration," *Pacific Historical Review* 67 (1998): 477-512.

[4] This is similar to the organizational approach in Robert P. Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995).

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