

Book Review: The Age of Hiroshima by Michael D. Gordin & G.J. Ikenberry

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Gordin, Michael D., and Ikenberry, G. J., (Eds.). *The Age of Hiroshima*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. 431 pages. Softcover, \$99.95.

The twentieth century profoundly changed the world. Between the catastrophes of World Wars I and II, the Nuclear Age, the international bipolar political arena, and the numerous other disasters that plagued the globe, the twentieth century reassigned the world's power dynamics and political landscape. *The Age of Hiroshima*, edited by Michael D. Gordin and G. John Ikenberry, touches on one of these important twentieth century dynamics. Through the lens of the Nuclear Age, the book looks at how the bombing of Hiroshima as an event—and later a realized threat of nuclear war—became an influential dynamic in the political agenda. Gordin and Ikenberry write, “This meaning of Hiroshima is relatively widespread and uncontroversial: the city stands as a metonym for the destructiveness of nuclear weapons. Yet from the earliest days the meanings of Hiroshima multiplied and dispersed, and it has become almost impossible to grasp all its various significations at one glance. This book is an attempt to do just that.” (p. 1). *The Age of Hiroshima* offers new perspectives about the Nuclear Age and how it continues to influence international relations.

The Age of Hiroshima is an intriguing collection of essays that look at the international political arena through the lens of the Nuclear Age. The authors explain that the bombing of Hiroshima should be viewed as “both an event and as a phenomenon” (p. 14) and thus a catalyst for how it influenced numerous political agendas throughout the twentieth century and beyond. According to the authors, “Hiroshima, understood as an event, is captured in portraits of the moment itself within the grand flow of history—in the actions of people, in the war and its aftermath, and in the human experiences surrounding the dropping of the bomb,” (p. 14). The authors continue to write, “we hope to make sense of its causes and consequences, placing it in the context of unfolding dramas of war and peace, science and technology, empire and liberation

and geopolitics and world society,” (p. 14). Considering these important facets to understanding the nuclear age, the book is divided into three sections including Part 1: “Decisions and Choices,” Part 2: “Movements and Resistances,” and Part 3: “Revolutions and Transformations.” The chapters collectively come together to tell the story of Hiroshima through how the decision to drop the bomb emerged, how the Cold War began, how these political tensions impacted other countries in the world, and how these political tensions created new discussions, alliances and tensions following the Cold War. The book ends with intriguing and thought-provoking questions in a chapter by Francis Gavin that puts the entire age of nuclear weapons as discussed in the book into an intriguing, scholarly context.

While the book aims to create an interesting dialogue about the Nuclear Age, it also provides a unique perspective. Francis Gavin’s essay at the end of the book entitled, “History and the Unanswered Questions of the Nuclear Age: Reflections on Assumptions, Uncertainty and Method in Nuclear Studies,” brings forth several questions that conjure up a new way of thinking about this period of history. He writes, “There are two crucial trends shaping the nuclear world, pulling in different directions. The first is the disarmament movement, which is animated by the idea that the world should move toward eliminating nuclear weapons altogether....On the other hand, nuclear weapons are playing an increasing role in world politics.” (p. 298). While Gavin aims to highlight how these arguments are at the center of the scholarly discussion of the Nuclear Age, he also brings forth several important questions including, “how dangerous have nuclear weapons made world politics? How does nuclear deterrence work and can nuclear weapons be used to achieve other political goals? What determines whether a state decides to pursue nuclear weapons? Once it possesses these weapons what is the ideal number to have and what are the best strategies to employ them?” (p. 300). These questions change the essence of the

basic understanding many have about the Nuclear Age and leaves the reader with enlightening thoughts about how Hiroshima affected world politics.

The Age of Hiroshima is a fascinating read and highlights many interesting perspectives. Most political science students are intimately aware of how much the Nuclear Age redefined international politics. However, this book offers unique perspectives that place this period in a new context for explaining numerous facets of how Hiroshima impacted the international political arena. The book is particularly well written and guides the reader through concepts that may (or may not) change their perspective. The book would be a wonderful read for someone interested in understanding more about the international political arena, political science, homeland security, or international relations majors and would also be an important read for a history student of the twentieth century. Ultimately, the book is a timely and important scholarly piece and an important addition to any social science program or library collection.

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