

Book Review

Wilson D. Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, 192 pp.

The decision to use the nuclear bombs has remained a topic of debate among historians, the antagonistic views being surprised by the brief, but the suggestive remark of the historian Michael Kort:

“No aspect of the orthodox/revisionist debate has generated more controversy than Truman’s decision to use the atomic bomb against Japan at the end of World War II.”¹

The priest and professor Wilson Miscamble chaired the History Department within the University of Notre Dame between 1993 and 1998. His main research topics focus on the foreign policy of the United States of America after World War II, but also on the influence of Catholicism in the 20th century in US life. He has published a series of works in which he carries out an articulated analysis of the decision-making mechanisms that predominated in the Truman administration's decisions: *George F. Kennan and the Making of American Foreign Policy, 1947-1950*; *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima and the Cold War*; *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs and the Defeat of Japan*.

¹ Michael Kort, *The Historiography of Hiroshima: The Rise and Fall of Revisionism*, in “The New England Journal of History”, Vol.64, 2007, p.31.

The dropping of atomic bombs was one of the most controversial decisions, both from a moral and military perspective. Miscamble sketches in his work, *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs and the Defeat of Japan*, an exhaustive timeline of the first months of the Truman administration, and captures the way in which were drawn the decisive coordinates of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

This book analyzes the circumstances in which the nuclear attacks against Japan were launched and also provides an adequate explanation of the impact that atomic bombings had on Japan's surrender. Moreover, the explanation gains moral dimension, something perfectly captured in Chapter VII: *Necessary, But Was It Right?* Miscamble states that the main motivation that fundamentally influenced Truman's decision was the numerical limitation of the American war casualties: "Those who rush to judge Truman's decision to use the atomic bombs must hesitate a little to appreciate that had he not authorized the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki thousands of American and Allied soldiers (...) would have been added to the lists of those killed in World War II."²

The reduced size and the analysis of events from general-to-specific order suggest the selection of a certain target group. The highly readable structure and the references of the book represent a perfect starting point, for both students and those who want to have a deeper understanding of the decision-making process of using nuclear bombs. *The Most Controversial Decision* can be interpreted as an introductory study in nuclear strategies history, managing to highlight the transition between the presidential administrations, but also the transition between World War II and the Cold War. Therefore, the readers can more easily identify other reference works that allow them to further research, depending on

² Wilson D. Miscamble, C.S.C., *The Most Controversial Decision. Truman, The Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 113.

the area of interest. The scientific character of the paper is also suggested by the slightly objective way of writing.

This scholarly paper is a key reading in the realm of nuclear history. *The Most Controversial Decision* offered a number of key answers to clarify why the nuclear bomb was a better option compared to other possible decisions that could end the war. Also, it offered a thoroughgoing view about the influence exerted by a limited number of people on the leading figure in the decision-making process, as well as the dominant thinking in the decision-making group.

Although I was initially reluctant about analyzing Truman's considerations through a moral filter, reading this book revealed a clear and coherent vision, which largely rejects the revisionist thesis. The result is a balanced work, a first essential point in researching one of the most contested decisions, which manages to capture the moral implications of the bomb's authorization, but also its effects on the president's cognitive system.

Alexandra Cojocaru

Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Ayutthaya: Siam in the Early Modern World*, Cambridge University Press, 2017, 326 pp.

A History of Ayutthaya: Siam in the Early Modern World by Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit was recently published in the United Kingdom, circulated in Asia by Cambridge University Press, and launched in Bangkok during a special session of the Siam Society.

Dr. Chris Baker is a historian, long-time resident, and honorary editor of *The Journal of the Siam Society*. Dr. Pasuk Phongpaichit is a Professor of Economics at the Chulalongkorn University.

It should be noted that the book under review is published by Cambridge University Press, a publishing house whose mission is to disseminate knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

"History is a narration of the events which have happened among mankind, including an account of the rise and fall of nations, as well as of other great changes which have affected the political and social condition of the human race."

This quotation is taken from the book by John J. Anderson entitled *A Manual of General History*, published in 1876. This definition of history is creatively illustrated by the volume written by Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit.

From a civilizational perspective, Ayutthaya was considered by Europeans as one of the great powers of Asia to be positioned between China and India. However, after the fatal year 1767, when the city was destroyed, its history has not been any more on the list of research priorities of Thai and foreign historians.

Under such circumstances, the book under review has the obvious merit of recommending itself as the very first comprehensive study of Ayutthaya from its emergence in the thirteenth century until its fall.

The book contains a rich panoramic presentation of the social, political, and cultural history of Ayutthaya with a special focus on commerce, kingship, Buddhism, and war.

The book is composed of seven chapters followed by an appendix containing the list of Thai kings, a glossary, notes on some key sources, a rich bibliography, and a useful index.

Why is this book so important? The short answer is provided by its authors in the first sentences of the preface.

Indeed, "European travels in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries placed Ayutthaya or Siam among the three great powers of Asia alongside China and India. They reckoned the city as large as London or Paris and they marveled at the gold in the temples and treasuries."

The book offers a history of Ayutthaya from its very first appearance in the late 13th century to its fall in 1767.

It should be noted that for the political, social, legal, and literary history the authors use mostly original sources in several languages.

There are very interesting discoveries mentioned in each chapter of the book under review.

For example, by the first century, some European objects, especially Roman intaglios, coins, and medallions had reached several sites in Siam on the middle and upper peninsula.

Indian concepts, words, and symbols have been used to strengthen rulers, while Buddhism has imposed some constraints on them. They were requested to have integrity, wisdom, and be benevolent.

The law was increasingly used to manage a society which was becoming more complex. It focused on topics such as marriage, kidnapping, treason, public disorder, crimes against the government, as well as rules on legal procedures. (p. 72)

On the question of spoken languages, we learn from the book that the population used mostly the Thai language which gradually came to dominate, but even this language was a product of merging traditions. The strong influence of the Khmer language has to be fully recognized in this respect.

Another interesting fact is the one that Ayutthaya's merger with the Northern Cities happened not as a result of armed action, but by intertwining of families from various regions.

In practice what happened was a gradual absorption of people, culture, language, aesthetics, and administrative practices. (p.83)

Interesting ideas and facts can be found in the third chapter of the book entitled *An Age of Warfare*. For instance, in a letter explaining the causes of aggression against Ayutthaya the following can be read:

"Naturally, in any Kingdom having beautiful women, white elephants, short -tusked elephants, jewel mines, and gold mines, it is a rule that these will give rise to warfare".(p.89)

The result of the war between Ayutthaya and Burma led from a diplomatic perspective to a division of spheres of influence in the area. Burma succeeded in taking control of Lanna in the Northern area, while Ayutthaya

extended its influence in the Eastern part along the coast to the Khmer capital of Lovek.

What is really remarkable is the very fact that for the next 150 years this division of the spheres of influence remained stable. (p.118)

Chapter four dealing with peace and commerce is quite instructive by the number of relevant facts brought to the attention of readers. The authors illustrate well how Japanese, Persians, Chinese, and Indians became really prominent in the trade and politics of Ayutthaya. At the same time, Europeans, including Dutch, French, and English, visited Ayutthaya as part of the "country trade" around the Asian seas. (p.170)

From a diplomatic perspective, it should be mentioned that the monarchy was able to hire people from Asia and Europe as soldiers, guards, shippers, commercial agents, craftsmen, suppliers, and administrators. The authors call it "deft diplomacy" and assert that by doing that the Kings became able to draw on the military and naval power of the Europeans to assist their political expansion on the peninsula. However, the events of 1688 generated a crisis over Siam's relations with the outside world.

The role of the Europeans was to some extent similar to that played by Japanese and Persians during the earlier times. It is useful to remind in this context the conclusion of the two authors according to which the political involvement of the French in Siam lasted less than a decade and had no strong impact on the culture, language, dress, architecture, or cuisine. (p.172)

From chapter 5, dealing with urban and commercial society, readers learn that from a legal perspective, Kings acted as grade patrons, but at the same time, they imposed only minimal administrative control.

In such a context, Buddhism became a powerful social force and continued to play an important role in Ayutthaya's late history.

In an extraordinarily diverse polyglot and, cosmopolitan society, translation, interpretation, and multilingual conversation became an integral part of everyday life. New thinking emerged about identity based on religion with a line dividing Buddhism from Islam and Christianity. (p.210)

In the reviewers' opinion, the most interesting chapter of the book is chapter six entitled *Ayutthaya Falling*. It is reminded that Siam had a tradition of royal law-making starting in the 15th century. The laws were included in codes and dealt with a multitude of issues related to slaves, inheritance, marital relations, contracts, debt, and robbery. (p.245)

The fall of Ayutthaya is explained in the light of many contradictory facts and special circumstances. The defeat of 1767 is first of all a failure of defense.

It appears that the systems of forced labor on which the strategy of defense in Ayutthaya was based had partially decayed.

In addition, there had been no development of diplomacy to manage relations with potentially threatening neighbors and no advances in a military organization.

To sum up, in the opinion of the authors the fall of Ayutthaya was in fact the result not so much of internal conflict or dynastic decline, but was mostly determined by the failure to manage the social and political consequences of prosperity. This is one of the original findings and conclusions of the book by Baker and Phongpaichit after a strong demonstration based on a detailed analysis of an immense literature and sources in several languages.

The seventh and last chapter of the book is symbolically entitled "*To Bangkok*". The main idea of this chapter is that the creation of the new Siam with its capital in Bangkok was the result of activities undertaken by three groups of people. The first group was represented by the nobles who created a state in which power was divided among semi-independent cities and ministries. The second group was represented by immigrant Chinese who dominated Bangkok

and created segments of a new aristocracy. The third group was composed of former *phrai* and slaves - people who created a new society of agricultural villages.

Under such circumstances, the old city of Ayutthaya was forgotten, but its destruction continued beyond 1767. In 1907 King Chulalongkorn gave a speech about the importance of history, with special reference to the necessity to compile a history of Siam.

The last sentence of the speech as reproduced in the book under review says :

"If someone comes up with the better interpretation and more accurate reasoning, we should happily appreciate the major benefit of having a clearer and more reliable history of Siam." (p.276)

The present book can be considered as the most recent and promising contribution to giving tangibility to the wish of King Chulalongkorn about the necessity of writing a more reliable history of Siam, starting with the real story of Ayutthaya.

This outstanding book is exceptionally documented and can be recommended as essential reading to all people who are genuinely interested in a scientific and detailed presentation of the history of Siam in the early modern world. The two authors have succeeded in demonstrating that Siam was, indeed, a pivotal country in universal history.

This literary achievement is commendable at a time when ASEAN countries are vigorously engaged in establishing a social-cultural community. This community is expected to be dynamic and harmonious, as well as fully aware and proud of its identity, culture, and historical heritage and having the strengthened ability to innovate and proactively contribute to the global community.

Glen Chatelier, Ioan Voicu

Francesco Filippi, *Mussolini ha fatto anche cose buone, Le idiozie che continuano a circolare sul fascismo*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2019, 131 pp.

In the last two decades, scholars, journalists, and political analysts have highlighted the risk of the “return of fascism” across Europe. Moreover, the consolidation of several European illiberal regimes which have taken the path of authoritarianism, shows that the crisis of the European project is definitely related to the crisis of the liberal democracies. A strong link between radical right activism and the rising of the eurosceptic movement, which has grown steadily since the 1990s, has become an element of undoubted impact on the process of European integration.

Illiberal democracies, as the new governance paradigm, reject the EU’s founding values and are typically centered on a leader who concentrates power by overriding – and in some cases even eliminating – institutional and constitutional “checks and balances”. Several elements that fascism used are still available in our society: a strong and charismatic leader, the exploitation of the population’s anxieties and fears, authority, and nationalism.

Accompanied by a prefix, like neo-, post-, or crypto-, the fascism of our lives became so easy to be assimilated and to dominate the minds of the European citizens. In Italy, fascism recalls not only the critique towards the distortions of the capitalist system, but it also builds upon the crisis of the Italian party system, the corruption of the Italian establishment, the lack of representation, and the manipulation of the population’s anxieties and fears, for example, those generated by the 2008 financial crisis and the large inflows of immigrants. It exploits the human desire to be part of an important cause, disappointed by the present.

In this short and provocative book, Francesco Filippi, a Trentino historian, aims to “dismantle” the fake news which more than seventy years after the fall of fascism, still surrounds the mythical figure of the Duce and remains within a part of the Italian society.

The question still concerns us: why so many decades after the falling of Mussolini’s regime this false idea of fascism continues to exist in Italian society? Too many continue to say - *he also did some good things* - like the President of the European Parliament Antonio Tajani’s remark:

“Mussolini? Until he declared war on the whole world following Hitler, until he promoted the racial laws, apart from the dramatic story of Matteotti, he did positive things to create infrastructures in our country.”¹

An answer could be that the Italian revisionist school of the myth of "Italiani brava gente" persisted, and after 1945, especially the myth of the “partisan movement” was brought to the fore, unlike West Germany where the denazification process, although with modest results, made German society responsible of its past.

On the other hand, eminent intellectuals, such as Renzo de Felice and Karl Dietrich Bracher have denied that German Nazism and Italian fascism belong to the same category. Ernst Nolte, the remarkable historian and philosopher of the XX century treated Italian fascism and German National Socialism as a compatible phenomenon. Nolte argued that the *Action Française* was the thesis, Italian Fascism was the antithesis, and German National Socialism the synthesis of the two earlier fascist movements.

¹https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2019/03/13/news/centrodestra_antonio_tajani_mussolini_ha_fatto_anche_cose_buone_-221479884/

Filippi's book has the objective to deconstruct the false ideas, this fake news on Mussolini and his regime, as a "good fascism", with the weapons of History, based on the historical sources and documents: the myths of fascism as the guarantor of welfare society, the humanitarian fascism in the colonies, the fascism as a provider of the national pension system, fascism as a guarantor of gender equality, universal granting of the thirteenth monthly salary introduced by the regime, and so on.

For example, the thirteenth monthly so-called Christmas bonus was officially inserted in 1937 by the Fascist Chamber of Corporations, but it was not given to all workers, only to the industrial employees; it was an exclusive measure, offered to the most loyal social category of the regime, the so-called white-collar workers. Moreover, the author shows that the first organic law on the drainage and the reclamation of the swamps was already in place in 1878, and in 1922, before the March on Rome, the liberal Italian State established several companies in order to enlarge the areas of state intervention.

Treating history as a useful guide to future generations, Filippi deconstructed also the idea that the difference between the Nazi and Italian regimes was the racial aspect, showing that the anti-Semitic attitude was spread through Italian society before the regime was installed. Mussolini went further and built the myth of the Italian race - a diverse and superior race from the others.

Nowadays, in Italy, there seems to be a favorable cultural ground "to forget" one of the most ferocious and bloody periods in the history of Italy and the twentieth century because reiterating the affirmation "when He was there", beyond the satirical implication, can mean a "reassurance of the past and a veiled threat on the present"; The time to combat the threat of fascism is now, because the preconditions for fascism may have already begun to unfold. The Italian fascism represents an internal civil war, a failed economic policy, a colonial

campaign that only led to the death of many Italians, a racial and antisemitic regime, a real threat that should push us to stop replicating that model.

Mihaela Mustăța

Madeleine Albright, *Fascismul. Un avertisment*, București, Editura Rao, 282 pp.

Madeleine Albright is one of the most influential politicians and diplomats of the past decades. She was the first woman Secretary of the State of the USA during Bill Clinton's mandate. Madeleine Albright highlights the birth of fascism in the world and the concept of growing populism in her bestseller, *Fascism, A Warning*.

The author has an impressive series of books, such as: "Madame Secretary", "Memo to the President-Elect", "Prague Winter: A Personal Story of Remembrance and War 1937-1948".

The bestseller, *Fascism, A Warning* is a masterpiece in itself that explains and embraces the biggest warning of fascism, its aggression, and nevertheless the erosion of what it represents as a free democracy. This book also highlights the events that happened in Europe lately and a century ago.

I can state that Madeleine Albright through her book tries to project the idea of fascism and the impact on each state and also considers and compares the similarities between them. Mussolini, in 1932 was described fascism as being a closed universe in which "the state has everything and no human or spiritual value exists". This strong statement brings in a note of warning, it describes step-by-step this magic wrapping up of fascism.

In a different light, the book describes in a gloomy shade how the Nazis were dividing people based on their nationality and ethnicity grounds whereas for the Communists the division was based on social class. In the Hitler ideology, in Germany, the people that were prosecuted were the Jewish (the impure race) and the gypsies and in the Soviet Union, the prosecution was around the middle

class. In other words, I can say that the author tries to describe all the faces of fascism, all the radical changes that come with it during that century, and how all these changes are still vivid nowadays.

The teacher from the University of Georgetown, Madeleine Albright talks about another very interesting subject or term, free democracy, which she describes as partial democracy, lower in intensity and impact on the individual but enhanced on the community level needs. It is a democracy in itself because it represents and follows the idea of the majority and ignores the issues or the problems of the minority.

I can affirm that this book is being recognized as a true masterpiece through the style and nevertheless the sincerity of the events and it is meant to bring homage to all of the fascism victims, all their pains, and all the horrors that they had to endure during fascism.

The credentials and the story bring a lot of color and sense to this book even more with the fact that the author has lived and witnessed fascism making it a true reality written story. Her life had a strong impact on fascism which made her question and search the biggest fears of this right-wing.

The author describes in more detail the Turkish State of which the president is Erdogan and his tendencies. As Madeleine Albright states in less than a decade under Erdogan's leadership Turkey, was known as the European workshop. All of this happened because its economy was growing, the people were earning good wages and the middle class was also expanding. Turkey abolished the death penalty, made important steps to enhance civil controls, and nevertheless the protection of the freedom of speech and the rights of women and minorities were taken into account.

The president's biggest desire was to become stronger and have more power due to his election results, but all this slowly destroyed all that Erdogan created and built in the past. He made Islam courses mandatory this being

another of his desires stating that Islam is the main source of Turkish unity. Another order was to cancel the homosexual parades and he contempt the LGBT activism saying that this was against the Turkish values. The contraceptive methods which in the past were open and accepted, now they've become unaccepted asking women to have three or more children and even calling working women 'half people' whereas at the beginning of his governance he was fighting for women's rights.

In 2016 a fraction of the Army tried to kill Erdogan and take control of the country but this coup didn't stand a chance.

Locally Turkey is a very divided state and its president should know how to correctly proceed to amend the democracy of his nation. I can state that all this could happen if Erdogan will listen and take into consideration the criticism that comes even from his own party members.

None of the Turkish leaders has ever managed to build a democratic society that could last, in which its citizens with different points of view agree and happily live together in peace and full freedom. So the main question remains if Erdogan is willing to take this route.

The author's vision and mine are that Erdogan should change the Turkish state, he should listen to his inner voice and do the right thing for Turkey as he well knows what's missing and how it should be done.

In conclusion, I can state that this book is a unique box of memories that the author desires to be forever forgotten but still lives within every person that lived the violence and aggression of fascism.

Mara Rotaru

Christopher Coker, *The Rise of the Civilizational State*, Polity Press, Oxford, 2019, 224 pp.

Professor Christopher Coker's book sheds new light on a number of fundamental concepts that we operate on every day and that we encounter in the speeches of political analysts, international relations experts, or great leaders, and in the materials produced by journalists from worldwide.

Concepts such as "civilization" and "globalization" are debated for a long time and each time new elements are attributed to them, either from the perspective of the conditions that support them or by exposing the threats that will sooner or later lead to restriction or blockade of all of the impact they have on the collective mind.

Combining knowledge from various scientific fields, from zoology to neuroscience to diplomacy is the method by which the 'The Rise of the Civilizational State' presents the way the great powers of the world construct their identity discourse by appealing to the notion of civilization, although, as we shall see, throughout the book, the 'civilizational state' is for many a painless endeavor, while for others it is a serious deviation from liberalism and respect for human rights. The author himself explains the motivation of the academic effort in the introduction to the book: «My interest in writing this book indeed first took shape in 2013, when for the first time Putin declared Russia to be a 'civilizational

state'. Today Russia is busily refabricating its own past to reflect ancient truths and ancestral verities in a bid to inoculate itself against the contagion of liberal ideas and Western norms.»¹

The analysis of the concept of 'civilization' involves a broad effort of clarification, starting from the idea that man is the 'supreme storytelling species', which is why the language we use and the stories we choose to believe will define us as individuals and later as a community. As a result, throughout the book, we will come across a quote from Michael Oakeshott, who says that 'a civilization is basically a collective dream'². From a historical perspective, we know that civilization has two fundamental characteristics, the lingua franca - the language imposed on those who are civilized by the civilizing entity - and the ability to share knowledge and advanced technological means compared to what the 'uncivilized' already have.

Certainly, we would not really understand the concept of civilization without Professor Coker's analysis of Greek and Roman civilizations, but also of the subsequent mix of the two, to which is added Christianity, which is the basis of modern European civilization. Civilization myths are subjected to a rather harsh critical exercise in trying to illustrate the phenomena that lead to civilizational isolationism and to forms of centrism caused by the cognitive dissonance we face when we believe that European-Western civilization should

¹ Christopher Coker, *The Rise of the Civilizational State*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2019, pag. xi.

² Oakeshott's Conversation of Mankind,

<https://mikelove.wordpress.com/2007/01/14/oakeshotts-conversation-of-mankind/>.

become the universal model. imposed on the whole world. Cultural borrowings such as astrology, the alphabet, and the calendar, which the ancient Greeks made from the Babylonians, Arabs, and Phoenicians, have long been ignored and regarded as an exclusive creation of European civilization.

The factor by which this book enriches thinking, especially for a WEIRD reader - Westernized, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic - is the lesson of humbleness, complemented by a lucid analysis of the current status of the civilizational discourses of the great centers of world power. From Russian traditionalism to newly-restored Chinese Confucianism, to American isolationism, to Indian multiculturalism and diversity to Islamic extremism determined by the ideal of the outlawed caliphate. The return to nationalist and fundamentalist discourses is determined by the way in which heads of state and governments try to define their own culture in relation to the values of a civilization. For example, in May 2016, the Polish president said: "In today's Europe there is, without doubt, a crisis of values on which European civilization has been built, and I am thinking about a civilization with Latin roots supported by Christianity ... All those ideals have been lost in today's Europe. They are being forgotten and trampled by other ideologies that debase the essence of humanity and the human being"³.

³ Adam Balcer, Piotr Buras, Grzegorz Gromadzki and Eugeniusz Smolar, *Change in Poland, but What Change? Assumptions of Law and Justice Party Foreign Policy*, Warsaw, Stefan Batory Foundation, 2016, p. 7.

What we see happening around us today is the fact that the notion of “global citizen” is collapsing and that the ideals of internationalists are about to be destroyed. It is almost impossible for billions of people with different histories to be able to build a common ‘collective civilizational dream’, especially at a time when fundamentalists are asserting themselves more and more. Figures like Trump and Putin tend to coordinate their actions because their struggle is a common civilizational struggle with China, and then the rapprochement between the two powers is justifiable. The formation of the Islamic State is justified and supported by its fervent promoters by idealizing the image of power that fights against Western imperialism and globalization.

We have already seen throughout the book the stories that the great powers tell in order to define a solid myth that would bring them the status of a civilized state, but the era in which we find ourselves still comes with a series of challenges. Manipulation through fake news and mass fictionalization brought the period after the events of 2016 the name of the ‘post-truth era’. Moreover, organizations such as Facebook, which address nearly 3 billion people on the planet, can provide sensitive information about users, and political interests can be achieved through the psychographic method, a science as petty as it is effective, as evidenced by the influence US elections in the 2016 presidential campaign, but also the results of Brexit.

The conclusion that the ‘The Rise of the Civilizational State’ has is significant and morally charged: in a world where the most powerful people in

key positions speak of “improving reality” and “inferiority of truth to myth”, it is essential that each of us to understand their cognitive limitations, to develop their ability to objectively operate information and the ability to lucidly analyze international political reality, to promote the use of ethical language rather than “political correctness” only from a perspective narrowed by its own cultural affiliation.

Andrei Stupu