

The Cold War and the international history of the twentieth century

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Historians have always believed that good sources make for good studies. When Lord Acton was planning the *Cambridge Modern History* a hundred years ago, his view of the massive enterprise was much influenced by the sudden and extraordinary access to historical archives that came about in the 1890s. In his instructions for contributors to the vast effort which he organized but never saw completed, Acton wrote:

In our own time, within the last few years, most of the official collections in Europe have been made public, and nearly all the evidence that will ever appear is accessible now. As archives are meant to be explored, and are not meant to be printed, we approach the final stage in the conditions of historical learning. The long conspiracy against the knowledge of truth has been practically abandoned, and competing scholars all over the civilised world are taking advantage of the change.¹

Many optimistic historians of and in the twentieth century believed that the events of the 1990s made for a breakthrough in historical knowledge similar to that which Lord Acton and his colleagues had perceived a hundred years before. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholars began gaining access to the formerly secret archives of states and governments all over the world – not just because of the fall of authoritarian and secretive Communist regimes, but also because many political leaders in many parts of the world believed that “freedom of information,” as it is now often called, had become an integral part of good governance. While very often producing as selective and partial a documentation as that of the nineteenth century had turned out to be, the new access to information in the 1990s meant real advances for historians, especially those attempting to understand events of the late twentieth century.

¹ Lord Acton to contributors to the *Cambridge Modern History*, March 12, 1898, Acton Archives, Cambridge University Library, Cambridge, UK.

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But while John Acton believed in a progressive and positivist version of history, which met “the scientific demand for completeness and certainty,” the blood-soaked trail of the past hundred years has led scholars toward more skeptical attitudes in their research. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, historians’ evidence tends to be more multiform and their research questions more varied than could have been imagined four generations ago. Fields of human activity and sections of humanity that merited barely a mention in the first edition of the *Cambridge Modern History* have now become large fields of study in their own right. Some of the boundaries of class, ethnicity, and gender are being dismantled. The methodologies for the study of history have become more diverse and its communities more international. As a result of this increasing diversity, knowledge has become less certain, and the space for conflicting interpretations much broader.²

The *Cambridge History of the Cold War* is defined by such skepticism and contention. Very few of our contributors believe that a “definitive” history of the Cold War is possible (or indeed that it should be possible). But a heterogeneous approach creates a strong need for contextualization, what Acton thought of when he called upon his team to “describe the ruling currents, to interpret the sovereign forces, that still govern and divide the world.”³ We need to place the Cold War in the larger context of chronological time and geographical space, within the web that ties the neverending threads of history together. First and foremost we need to situate the Cold War within the wider history of the twentieth century in a global perspective. We need to indicate how Cold War conflicts connect to broader trends in social, economic, and intellectual history as well as to the political and military developments of the longer term of which it forms a part.

This chapter attempts to position the Cold War in the history of the twentieth century along some of its main axes: political and economic history, the history of science and technology, and intellectual and cultural history. It is not an extensive placing of the period within the greater whole – for that, one needs to continue reading until one has finished the last chapter in volume III.

2 For some of these discussions, see Odd Arne Westad (ed.), *Reviewing the Cold War: Approaches, Interpretations, Theory* (London: Frank Cass, 2000).

3 Acton to contributors to the *Cambridge Modern History*, March 12, 1898, Acton Archives, Cambridge University Library, Cambridge, UK. Acton, who has sometimes been lampooned as a very English academic – one who sought contributors to his *Modern History* primarily from the senior common rooms of Oxbridge colleges – was in fact among the most international historians of his time both in terms of orientation and background (he was born in Naples of a French mother and did most of his training in Munich, thereby speaking four languages with ease).

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By looking at the Cold War in its multiple contexts, we hope to better understand its long-term causes and also, perhaps, to get a better grasp of its outcome and consequences. But, in order to do so, it is necessary to begin with a look at that small patch of the century's intellectual history that the study of the Cold War itself has tried to fill.

History and historians

The term "Cold War" was first used by the British writer George Orwell in 1945 to deplore the worldview, beliefs, and social structure of both the Soviet Union and the United States, and the undeclared state of war that would come to exist between them after the end of World War II. "The atomic bomb," Orwell found, may be "robbing the exploited classes and peoples of all power to revolt, and at the same time putting the possessors of the bomb on a basis of equality. Unable to conquer one another they are likely to continue ruling the world between them."⁴ It was a new world system, Orwell found, dualistic, technology-based, in which nuclear terror could be used against those who dared rebel. To the author of *1984*, the systemic aspects of the Cold War showed dark portents of the future.

Historians first took up the term "Cold War" in the late 1940s when attempting to explain how the wartime alliance between the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union had collapsed. In the first postwar decade, the term was mostly used by American historians as a synonym for what they saw as Soviet leader Iosif Stalin's confrontational policies from the latter stages of World War II on. The Soviet Union waged cold war against the West (meaning, mostly, the United States and Britain), while the West was seen as defending itself and the values it believed in. The Cold War, in other words, was imposed on the rest of the world by the Soviet leader and the tyrannical Communist system he had created.⁵

Throughout the Cold War, the main view of the conflict among historians both in the United States and in Western Europe remained colored by the anti-Stalinist approach. Deeply influenced by the wars against other authoritarian collectivist projects – Germany, Italy, Japan – that had just ended, this orthodox Western interpretation of the causes of the Cold War contains both a definition and a timeline. The Cold War means a period of Soviet

⁴ George Orwell, "You and the Atomic Bomb," *Tribune*, October 19, 1945.

⁵ For key accounts representative of these various interpretations, see the bibliographical essay.

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aggression that was initiated by its growing power in the latter stages of the war and which had become doctrine by 1947. Most early historians, not only in the United States, but also in Western Europe, believed that this period would last as long as Stalinists were in command in Moscow. Though in no way uncritical of Western policies – both the United States and Britain were often blamed for not confronting Soviet policies strongly and early enough on the main issues and for inflexibility and lack of cooperation on minor points – the anti-Stalinist interpretation places the blame for the Cold War squarely on the Soviet Union and, increasingly from the early 1950s, on what is termed “Communist ideology” (meaning, in most cases, the anticapitalist agenda of the Soviet state).

The change from emphasizing Stalin to emphasizing Communism as the main cause of the Cold War can easily be seen as part of the rollback of the wartime cooperation between Right and Left inside the West itself. While the Cold War was initially viewed as a security emergency, by the 1950s it had become a battle of global alliances and of political ideas. Wartime cooperation had been an aberration, many historians working in the 1950s thought. The normal pattern was one of confrontation between Communism and its enemies, as had been the case in the interwar period. Even among the few left-wing historians writing on the Cold War in the 1950s – more in Europe than in the United States – the breakdown of the wartime alliance had become a confrontation of superpowers, each imposing their will and their political systems on Europe.⁶

With the expansion of the Cold War to the Third World in the 1960s – and especially with the American defeat in Vietnam – radical historians in the West gained a wider audience for their critique of the US role in the conflict. Still staying within the original political agendas of interpretation, these critics argued that the United States, with its increasingly global anticollectivist agenda, had caused and perpetuated the Cold War to at least as high a degree as the Soviet Union had. To some of them, the American government’s motives were driven by the economic needs of the United States as the global capitalist superpower. To others, Vietnam proved that the United States was simply not suited to pursue change abroad, and that it should rather concentrate on a progressive political agenda at home, rectifying injustices based on race, gender, education, and income levels. Though always a small minority among historians, these anti-imperialist revisionists managed to shift the

6 For an overview, see for instance André Fontaine, *Histoire de la Guerre froide*, vol. I, *De la révolution d’octobre à la guerre de Corée* (Paris: Fayard, 1967).

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debate somewhat back in the direction of Orwell's initial idea of the Cold War as a globalizing system.⁷

By the mid-1970s, as superpower détente seemed to take hold, the view of the Cold War as a system had a breakthrough among Western historians. The most comprehensive challenge to the anticollectivist approach during all of the Cold War was the "realist" approach, which – inspired both by Realist thinking in the social sciences and by the evident longevity of the conflict – saw Soviet–American rivalry primarily as an interest-driven clash of the strategic security needs of great powers. In their behavior, the Soviet and American governments were not strikingly different from each other or from other great powers in history. The key concept for Cold War realists was "power," and, implicitly at least, "balance of power" – a global system in which the strategic arms race and formal or informal alliances had moved the Soviet–American relationship toward a high degree of stability and predictability.⁸

Always more popular in Western Europe than in the United States, Cold War realism foundered – as did its Realist cousin in the theory of international relations – on the way the Cold War ended. Instead of slow, gradual change or war – the two outcomes of the conflict that Cold War realism seemed to point toward – the "balance of power" itself collapsed as a result of the fall of the Soviet Union. Moreover, the disappearance of the Communist "pole" seemingly happened mostly because of domestic political changes in the late 1980s. With the Soviet–American confrontation ended and the ideological civil wars in the West during the Reagan/Thatcher era fading, historians for the first time began studying the Cold War as a distinct period of history.⁹

Helped by their own training and by the widening access to source materials, the cohort of historians who came of age in the 1990s began

7 The term "revisionist" is used for by far the most eclectic grouping of Cold War historians, ranging from the (then) Marxist David Horowitz's *The Free World Colossus: A Critique of American Foreign Policy in the Cold War* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1965) via Thomas G. Paterson's *Soviet–American Confrontation: Postwar Reconstruction and the Origins of the Cold War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), which emphasizes broader aspects of US expansionism, to the moderate "corporatist" version in Michael J. Hogan's *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain, and the Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1947–1952* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

8 It is easy to see how the deemphasizing of ideological conflicts is connected to the emergence of détente in superpower relations; see Jan-Werner Müller's chapter in volume III. For the most influential statement of Realist principles, see Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), and, for a discussion, Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

9 For an attempt at rescuing Realism as a tool for understanding the Cold War, see William C. Wohlforth, "Realism and the End of the Cold War," *International Security*, 19, 3 (Winter 1994/95), 91–129.

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emphasizing a more international and multidisciplinary approach to Cold War history. Very often – in spite of varying overall interpretations – they focused on the role of ideas, ideologies, and culture, in stark and deliberate contrast to the approach of their realist predecessors. While undoubtedly an intellectual response to the new knowledge of how the Cold War ended, this focus was also highly influenced by changes in the national historiographies, especially in the United States, where cultural and social studies had been ascendant for more than a generation.¹⁰

A significant subset of the international post-1991 historiography is what one could possibly call Cold War “conceptualism,” from the belief that each group involved in the conflict had sets of concepts or ideas which defined and constituted them.¹¹ These notions, Cold War conceptualists think, were very much products of the minds that shaped them, but they were not mere words or empty phrases, as the more extreme relativists claim. The key concepts in the Cold War had deep significance for the participants in the conflict. Often (though not exclusively) focusing on ideologies and patterns of thought, conceptualist historians tend to see a much wider variety of human agendas and processes of change intermingled in the conflict we now call the Cold War.¹² These agendas and processes center most often on domestic

- 10 For overviews of the debate on ideologies, see Nigel Gould-Davies, “Rethinking the Role of Ideology in International Politics during the Cold War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 1, 1 (Winter 1999), 90–109, and Mark Kramer, “Ideology and the Cold War,” *Review of International Studies*, 25 (1999), 539–76.
- 11 When being tempted by the term “conceptualism” I am thinking more of Immanuel Kant than of art history (even though Christo’s *Iron Curtain* [1962] may be relevant: it consisted of a barricade of oil barrels in a narrow Paris street which held up traffic; the artwork was of course not the barricade itself but the resulting traffic jam).
- 12 Some of the texts I have in mind are Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Detente* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), which connects superpower politics to 1960s youth rebellions; Chris Endy, *Cold War Holidays: American Tourism in France* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), which shows how leisure travel was fashioned politically; Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945–1949* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), which combines social and political history to give an overview of Soviet–German interaction; John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: Norton, 1999), which does the same for Japanese–US dealings under the occupation; Juliane Fürst (ed.), *Late Stalinist Russia: Society between Reconstruction and Reinvention* (London: Routledge, 2006), which defines generational shifts in the Soviet Cold War; Detlef Siegfried, “Time Is on My Side”: *Konsum und Politik in der westdeutschen Jugendkultur der 60er Jahre* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006), which does the same for West Germany; and Robert A. Ventresca, “The Virgin and the Bear: Religion, Society and the Cold War in Italy,” *Journal of Social History*, 37 (2003), 439–56, which shows how the Cold War influenced Catholic devotional practices. In political science, Elizabeth Wood’s *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) places emotions at the center of Cold War battles, while in

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developments, but also on generational experience and, in some cases, on international or even transnational or “imagined” communities.¹³ In a manifestation pleasing to those who look for historiographical dialectics, some Cold War conceptualists have a sharp reductionist approach to the larger role played by the conflict, seeing it as one of several “grand events” of the late twentieth century, linked to – but perhaps not as important as – decolonization and Asian economic resurgence. If the Cold War was ever a hegemonic discourse, then the reduction of it by historians who still claim to study the conflict is a nice twist of the historiographical tail.¹⁴

Among students of the Cold War outside Europe and North America, new perspectives are emerging, which will – eventually – merge with the historiographical debates in and on the West (here, of course, including Russia). As much of this work turns out to be undertaken by social scientists as by historians. In China, for instance, a popular world-history approach sees the Cold War as part of a long-term “Europeanization” of the world, as a period in which international rules and regulations were set up to preserve the global predominance of Europeans after they had taken control of the globe by force over the span of three centuries, settling three continents in the process. In Africa (and in parts of the Middle East), some scholars see the popularity of socialism and a Soviet alliance after independence first and foremost as a means to protect the patterns of the past from an onslaught by the ideas, and the economic practices, of the West. At the local level, at least, the language of Marxism was sometimes used to justify established customs and practices; it was a defensive measure more than a revolutionary one.¹⁵

anthropology Heonik Kwon’s *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) does the same for the physical and spiritual presence of departed souls. A good overview of the “conceptual” turn in Cold War studies is Patrick Major and Rana Mitter (eds.), *Across the Blocs: Cold War Cultural and Social History* (London: Cass, 2004).

¹³ The latter expression, of course, is Benedict Anderson’s, from *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

¹⁴ For examples emphasizing demographics and food, see Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), and Nick Cullather, “The Foreign Policy of the Calorie,” *American Historical Review*, 112 (2007), 337–64. See also Matthew Connelly’s chapter in volume III.

¹⁵ For China, see Liu Jinzhi, *Lengzhanshi: 1945–1991* [History of the Cold War, 1945–1991] (Beijing: Shijie Zhishi, 2003); on Africa and the Middle East, see for instance Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 2004). See also Elizabeth Schmidt, “Cold War in Guinea: The Rassemblement Démocratique Africain and the Struggle over Communism, 1950–1958,” *Journal of African History*, 48 (2007), 95–121.

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It has been clear for some time that the world regions in which there were clear connections between Cold War issues and other definitory contests – the Arab–Israeli conflict in the Middle East, the India–Pakistan tug-of-war in South Asia, and the contention created by US dominance in Latin America – are where the fluidity and hybridity of Cold War ideologies are easiest to observe. Perhaps, over time, historians of these parts who are *not* primarily preoccupied with studying the Cold War (or its immediate effects) will help develop patterns for how the different segments of twentieth-century international history can be put together in ways that incorporate the Cold War but do not attempt to subsume all other incongruities under it. Like some newer approaches to studying the contest itself from within, such attempts at seeing the conflict from its edges, as one part of much bigger histories, is perhaps the best way for the future to make sense of it all.¹⁶

Given the uncertainties that still surround the study of the Cold War, any placing of it within its wider context must be cautious and careful. In the three sections that follow, the main issue is therefore to suggest ways in which the wider implications of the Cold War may more readily be seen, along the axes of politics and economics, science and technology, and culture and ideas. The account is undoubtedly influenced by where the historiography stands today (not least because its author has helped edit the seventy-two contributions to this *Cambridge History*), but also by a need to see connections and relationships between the literature on the Cold War and the wider historical literature at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Politics and economics

The historical background for the Cold War was created by the expansion of capitalist economies in ever-widening circles from the West European and North American cities in the nineteenth century. While offering plentiful opportunities for people to change their own lives, the new economic system also created recurrent social and political crises, such as the depressions of the 1890s and 1930s, which were followed by World Wars I and II. Given the many underlying strengths of the economic system, it is reasonable to believe that the utopian and authoritarian alternatives to liberal capitalism – such as National Socialism, Fascism, and Communism – would not have stood

¹⁶ See, for instance, Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); on India, see Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

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a chance of mass popular support if not for these crises. Instead, by the middle of the twentieth century, for many people capitalism had become synonymous not with progress, but with wars and economic collapse.

The effects of the two great wars of the twentieth century did more than anything else to shape the Cold War. In addition to the impression of systemic crisis that the wars created, they removed, through the destruction and economic decline that they caused, much of the primacy that the main West and Central European powers had held in international affairs. The wars also led to an unprecedented emphasis on national security, in which domestic surveillance and international intelligence gained a significance never seen before. Perhaps most important of all, the losses suffered by the powers involved in the wars convinced two generations of leaders that lack of military preparedness and political determination in the future had to be avoided at all costs. After World War II, especially, the lesson many statesmen and ordinary people believed they had learned was that weakness and irresolution unavoidably lead to war.

The great wars of the twentieth century contributed decisively to the creation of the modern state. Without the increase in the cohesion, the strength, and the reach of the state that took place in the first half of the century, the form of rivalry that the Cold War took would have been impossible. The sheer expense of the conflict, both military and civilian, would have destroyed states if they had not already been primed for the effort. Also, without the experience of two world wars, states would not have been able to mobilize their citizens for a war that had few big battles and little visible heroism. The extraordinary loyalty to the state was primarily based on the measures governments had taken to curtail the chaos of the market and provide some form of security for its citizens. For all countries, including the United States, which saw fewer such efforts than other nations, the acceptance of the sacrifices that were needed to fight the Cold War was contingent on the social services and educational opportunities offered by the state.

While similar in terms of the state emphasis on big projects, civilian as well as military, the United States and the Soviet Union symbolized two modern extremes in the way politics was conducted domestically. In the United States there were many centers of power, and even though the president's administration always held the upper hand, the legislature, the courts, and the state governments had significant autonomous influence both on specific decisions and on how politics was conducted. In addition, military leaders and the heads of big companies had their own voice in decisionmaking. In the Soviet Union, on the other hand, politics was extremely centralized, in theory and

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very often also in fact. Intended from the very beginning to be a one-party dictatorship, the Soviet system during Stalin's terror of the 1930s developed only one universal center of power: the Communist Party Politburo and its general secretary. In most periods, except in the late 1960s and again in the late 1970s, one man at the top had the final say in all matters that were presented to the party leadership. With the abolition of the market and with no independent seats of power, the Soviet Union deliberately presented itself as the antidote to capitalist chaos and confusion. All countries that had to reestablish themselves after the cataclysms of the first half of the century were presented with these two forms of government as ultimate alternatives.

The combination of capitalist crises and world wars was a key factor in the collapse of the European colonial empires, a chain of events that decisively influenced the Cold War, especially in its later stages. By 1945, it had become clear both in the colonial periphery and in the capitals of the imperial centers that colonialism in its late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century form had to go: in Europe, there was neither the political will nor the economic strength to keep it going, and in the colonized countries resistance was on the rise. The United States took a strong interest in what should happen in the colonial territories right from the beginning of the Cold War era. Its purpose was both to abolish European colonialism – a form of government that most Americans found objectionable – and to influence the Third World to follow the US example in politics and economics. Increasingly, in the 1950s, with the strengthening of the radical Left and of Soviet influence in the Third World, a key US motive also became to secure these countries against Communism and alliances with the Soviet Union.

By the 1960s, the emergence of new states had done much to intensify the rivalry between the superpowers, and for the rest of the Cold War Asia, Africa, and Latin America stood at the center of the conflict – a key reason, in the view of many historians, why the Cold War lasted as long as it did. The Cold War in the Third World was not just a battle for influence between Washington and Moscow; it was a struggle within the new states for the future direction of their polities and their societies, a conflict between the two versions of Western modernity that socialism and liberal capitalism seemed to offer. The globalization of the Cold War that these struggles led to both intensified the superpower conflict through international interventions and increased the cost of the competition, while destroying many of the societies in which the battles were carried out.

As was shown in the Third World throughout the Cold War, the military power and the international involvement of the United States always far