

The Cold War in the Classroom Week 2

Cold War Fellowship Report

Ben Walsh, 13th February 2017

Nuclear War

This week in the programme the focus was on nuclear politics and the experience of living under the constant threat of nuclear war. We asked the Teacher Fellows to study another HA podcast, Matthew Grant's [Living in the Atomic Age](#).

We also asked them to read a couple of articles by David Holloway and David Seed and a book chapter by Jussi M. Hanhimaki and Odd Arne Westad. The references are at the foot of the report. As a task, we then asked them to look at three different examples of film sources relating to the Cold War and we put them in a hypothetical position where they could only choose one film to use in teaching and to justify their choices. Since we do that kind of thing to our students all the time the aim was to give the teachers a taste of how it felt!

The films were:

- [Duck and Cover](#) (1951)
- [Protect and Survive](#) series (UK, 1980)
- [Bomb scene](#) from *Barefoot Gen* (Japan, 1983) [a warning that this is quite harrowing]

Once again this group rose to the challenge, combining scholarship, incredibly imaginative and thoughtful pedagogical thinking and impressive advocacy.

Key points emerging about the history were...

The majority of teachers chose to focus on *Duck and Cover* or *Barefoot Gen* (although inevitably some cheated and chose both!). The main theme emerging here was the way in which the nuclear threat was packaged and presented to domestic audiences. As teachers commented:

- “Having focused upon the clear limitations of ‘Duck and Cover’ this is still the film that I would choose to use in a lesson. We will soon be studying McCarthyism and the Red Scare at GCSE and I could see that this would be a useful resource in trying to help students understand the culture of fear that must have pervaded the US in the late 40s and early 50s.”
- “‘Bert the Turtle’ is certainly useful for demonstrating to students how America perceived the threat of nuclear war in the 1950s. The US Federal Civil Defense Administration (in consultation with the National Education Association) appeared to give a sense of inevitability about ‘when the bomb goes off’ (rather than ‘if...’) – which suggests that the USA was not only

preparing itself physically for a nuclear war, but also preparing the mentality and psyche of the population.”

- “I would be interested in getting my class to think about the different ways that the topic of nuclear warfare has been presented to school children. I think students sometimes get caught up in the high politics of the Cold War, so to bring it back to the average person, and in this instance, students like themselves would offer an interesting topic for discussion ... There is also very much a sense of constant threat and an emphasis that the pupils in the video should always be alert. The youth of the intended audience is reiterated by the use of Bert the Turtle – if they wanted to protect the innocence of students was there another way to deliver this message?”
- “Listening to the Matthew Grant podcast it got me thinking further about motivation (something I seemed to be drawn back to) and how the US government used the concept of the ‘American family’ to get public support behind US foreign policy and in particular nuclear spending. My students are always shocked when I use the figure \$5.5 trillion to describe US spend on nuclear weapons from 1940 – 1996 and will often have interesting questions about why it was such a priority for the USA, alongside the spend, as Steven pointed out on Marshal Aid and Point 4. The podcast also highlighted themes that came out of the podcast last week on the ideological differences of the superpowers and the fear that each side felt for the other. I thought Grant’s focus on the belief that ‘anti-communism would save the American family’ really interesting.”

Only a couple of teachers chose to focus on the British Protect and Survive film. If anything, this seemed to highlight even more powerfully the ways in which civil defence shone a light on the relationship between government and people:

- “After watching ‘Protect and Survive’, I then watched a [Panorama episode](#) from March 1980 (2 months before the release of ‘Protect and Survive’) which criticised the British government’s civil defence theory and the lack of information being disseminated to the general public. The programme revealed that the government only intended to release the film if war was imminent (3 days before) ... They interview a specialist, who had worked in the civil defence department, who says that ‘Protect and Survive’ should actually be known as ‘Neglect and Die’. I therefore think there is great scope in getting students to investigate why the British government took this approach. Political expedience is a reason put forward in an article entitled [The strange death of UK civil defence education in the 1980s](#), which states that ‘Protect and Survive’ was only ever meant to be ‘politically defensible’ and that the reiterated instruction to ‘stay at home’, echoed in an earlier 1960s civil defence pamphlet the ‘Householders Handbook’, was merely aimed at prevented social panic and rioting.”

Another theme which emerged was the relationship between popular culture and the nuclear threat and the Cold War in general:

- “I would imagine that the different generations of children would react differently - those of the 1950s I feel may not have had that much knowledge about the atom bomb, and so it had to be raised in a carefully considered way. Those in the 1980s however may have been much more aware of the dangers of nuclear attack – it was so much more prominent in daily media and in political events across the globe by that point. It was becoming much more prominent in popular culture by that point - pop music was referencing the dropping of the bomb and artists had been reflecting on its horrors too, and literature such as 'On the Beach' by Nevil Shute (which I found incredibly moving) would have been widely read.”
- “I remember [the song] ‘Two Tribes’ very well and hadn’t realised that they had used soundbites from ‘Protect and Survive’ in it. Another really interesting article entitled ‘Britannia Rules the Atom: The James Bond Phenomenon and Postwar British Nuclear Culture’ shed an interesting light on the context of the James Bond films of the Cold War. The article notes that James Bond films consistently overvalued Britain’s nuclear capabilities and that the ‘James Bond Phenomenon often paralleled British government policy and propaganda’. A specific example is given from the 1980s ‘Never say Never Again stood in sharp contrast to cultural manifestations of the fear of the global thermonuclear war that surfaced during President Ronald Reagan’s first term in office....And, what is more, Never Say Never Again seemed to mirror official British government propaganda, most notably Whitehall’s official civil defense booklet ‘Protect and Survive’.”

So what about the impact back in the classroom?

One of the founding principles of the HA Teacher Fellowship Programme has been the assumption that improving subject knowledge improves the quality of teaching, no matter how good the teacher was to start with. On the basis of the comments of teachers from Week 2 we feel more confident than ever that this is the case. Some of the teacher comments illustrate this most eloquently:

- “I teach British Society 1979-1989 at A Level and I am now very aware that there is little reference made to nuclear paranoia and the way that popular culture responded to the international context at this time. I will certainly spend a bit of time looking at this this year. I might also think about planning a unit of work for year 9 entitled 'Living through the Cold War' which looks at the British experience along with the US, Soviet, Japanese and Eastern European experiences. Alternatively, I might narrow it down and get Year 9 to look at British government public information films (There are dozens of these on the National Archives website) and their value to the historian researching British society/culture at that time.”

- “I found this week’s focus on the popular culture and media portrayal of the Cold War a fascinating one, and it has definitely provided me with some more high quality clips to use in my own teaching as well as distributing amongst colleagues. I find that a good video source can often provide students with a much needed opportunity to connect knowledge to a wider contextual framework, and to build that valuable sense of period which is often skipped past in order to get to the ‘exam focus’. In this I was reminded of Michael Fordham’s blog post about the value in teaching a knowledge rich curriculum that goes beyond the essentials (found here:<https://clioetcetera.com/2016/11/19/what-makes-a-curriculum-knowledge-rich/>), as while none of these video clips could be considered ‘essential’ to teaching the Cold War, they are crucial in helping students build connections and gaining confidence.”
- “I found the focus this week of the cultural narrative of the Cold War a really interesting one. Seed's article really stressed the unique quality of the Cold War in comparison to previous conflicts. I hadn't really considered before, who was the 'enemy' in the Cold War - an ideology rather than a figurehead. I really like the idea of comparing the narratives of the Americans and Soviet Union, the Americans willing to depict the horrors of nuclear war in comparison to the topic being banned in communist countries. I would be interested to research further into what narrative was being told in the Soviet countries and how much they understood of the nuclear race against America. I would also be curious to find out the impact of the narrative on American society, the fact it was such a feature of science fiction almost allows it to take on a mythical stance so quickly after the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima.”

If you like the look of what is going on in the Fellowship, we hope to run more programmes of a similar nature on a range of different periods of history. Keep an eye out for further details!

References

- Film: [Duck and Cover](#) (1951)
- Film: [Protect and Survive](#) series (UK, 1980)
- Film: [Bomb scene](#) from *Barefoot Gen* (Japan, 1983)
- [HA podcast: Matthew Grant, 'Living in the Atomic Age'](#)
- [HA podcast: Matthew Grant, 'The significance of atomic and nuclear weapons'](#)
- David Holloway, “Nuclear weapons and the escalation of the Cold War, 1945–1962”, *Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Vol. 1
- David Seed, “The Debate Over Nuclear Refuge”, *Cold War History*, 2003, Vol.4, No.1, 117-142
- 'Women and Civil Defence, 1961', in: Jussi M. Hanhimaki and Odd Arne Wested (eds.), *The Cold War: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts* (Oxford, 2003), Chapter 9: Technologies, Weapons and the Arms race, pp. 297-299