

The Cold War in the Classroom Week 4

Cold War Fellowship Report

Ben Walsh, 27th February 2017

Iron Curtain: how permeable was it?

This week the focus was on the Iron Curtain, and the extent to which it was really an impenetrable barrier or whether it was possible for people, information and ideas to cross it. Our teachers were asked to read Michael David-Fox's book chapter 'The Iron Curtain as Semipermeable Membrane' and Mark Smith's article 'Peaceful coexistence at all costs: Cold War exchanges between Britain and the Soviet Union in 1956'. They were also asked to look at the multimedia online resource [Commuting between East and West](#). There was a lot of discussion on how these articles challenged preconceptions about the Iron Curtain, along with some thoughtful responses to the ways in which Berlin might be used as a resource for helping students to develop an understanding of the mechanisms of the Cold War which went beyond the simplistic.

Key points emerging in the discussion about the history were...

The contrast between the relative (im)permeability of the Berlin Wall compared to the Iron curtain more generally:

- "Whilst the reading this week alluded to the ability to gain knowledge and resources from the West despite the descent of the Iron Curtain across Europe, I feel that the Berlin Wall in particular came to represent Stalin's portrayal of it after Churchill's initial speech: a way of keeping the West out. Whilst a vital measure in stabilising Europe after its construction in 1961, it ultimately divided families and allowed for the creation of a semi-totalitarian state in the GDR which affected people's lives in a variety of ways. The Berlin Wall was not permeable in the way that the Iron Curtain was."

The essential importance of expert knowledge in making sense of, and injecting nuance to, historical situations by placing them in context, particularly the context of differing perspectives:

- "Michael David Fox's 'The Iron Curtain as a semi permeable membrane' was illuminating. I particularly liked Peteri's phrase 'The Nylon Curtain' to symbolise the desirability and availability of Western consumer goods. Despite Khrushchev's declaration that the USSR would 'catch up and

overtake' the USA in consumer goods it is clear that many Soviet citizens believed that 'Soviet culture, values and lifestyle trumped advances in technology or goods.' This reminded me of Marietta Shaginian's article, 'Reflections on the American Exhibition', that we discussed at the residential. What a fascinating insight into the difference in values between the East and West to challenge the 'western capitalist' assumption that consumer goods must always be desirable. Kitchen household appliances in the 1950s and way beyond were marketed in the West as a means with which to 'liberate' women and make their roles as wives and mothers easier. As Shaginian argues from a different cultural perspective 'The countless everyday conveniences of the Americans forever consolidate, as it were, the mission of woman as household manager, as wife and cook...But we like new developments that actually emancipate women: new types of buildings with a large shared kitchen for all inhabitants, that is to say, with a cafeteria; with a laundry room where gigantic machines do all the laundry, not just for a single family...'"

- "The reading this week has certainly developed my subject knowledge. I found the Michael David Fox article on the origins and demise of the Stalinist Inferiority Complex particularly interesting. The way in which the idea of superiority was protected by isolationism and threatened by Khrushchev's thaw is intriguing. Yagoda's arrest during the Great Terror revealed 'that the Soviet elite were addicted to the far-from-forbidden fruits of Western material culture', yet they continually asserted Soviet superiority. Soviet troops, as they moved into Poland in September 1939, assumed that they would be 'raising the newly conquered territories up from backwardness', but found that Poland was actually 'the land of plenty'. They also continued to assert that 'we have everything'."

The value of particular sites in Berlin in understanding particular aspects of the Cold War:

- "Tränenpalast ('Palace of Tears') at Friedrichstraße station is a great place to visit after seeing segments of the Berlin Wall or Checkpoint Charlie. It was at the Friedrichstraße train station where families from the east and west were allowed to meet and eventually say their tearful farewells (hence the nickname). The museum is small, but fairly new, and contains some great resources which you can use to explain the 'permeable divide'."

Reminders that the Cold War is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon and that many individual stories fail to conform to traditional bipolar accounts:

- “Rudi Dutschke Strasse could be used to illustrate the possibility of political and ideological interchange. This would be an opportunity to explore how the two sides were not completely ideologically isolated by looking at the story of Rudi Dutschke, a memorial plaque to whom is found here (he was shot in the head here by a anti-communist during a protest in 1968). Dutschke was educated in the GDR, but fled to the West just before the building of the wall. Here he was involved in the 1968 student protests against the oppressive nature of the West German regime and the Vietnam War. He was then expelled from the UK whilst attending Cambridge University by Ted Heath for being an ‘undesirable’. We could therefore assume that he was almost a communist agent, however In the 1970s he began to plot against the communist governments in Eastern Europe. His story therefore might illustrate the non-binary nature of Cold War politics (as stressed in the Mikkonen and Koivunen article).”

Impact on teaching?

At the end of the week, it was clear that the reading and discussion had really got our teachers thinking and several of them were getting quite excited as they had visits to Berlin coming up! Several of the teachers are also beginning to clarify their thinking about the resources they are going to create, which will of course be shared via the HA website.

- “I enjoyed the first focus this week, as I have always found Berlin a fascinating example of where a geographic location can be imbued with symbolic significance beyond its strategic value, similar to Jerusalem during the Crusades or Stalingrad during the Second World War. Within my teaching I have returned to Berlin as a ‘touchstone’ at key points and used it as a way of identifying changes as well as continuities within the conflict. This will now be supplemented with further examples drawn the HA podcast this week by Holger Nehring, which I found very useful. For example, while I do use the Kennedy speech in my teaching, I have not considered using the Reagan speech in the same way even though I knew it existed. As a result, I feel once again that my subject knowledge has been deepened by this course in a way that will make a direct impact in my classroom teaching.”

- “Khrushchev's continuation of the superiority complex, in terms of culture and lifestyle also really interests me. The way in which the idea that consumer goods could be used in a 'collectivist, socialist lifestyle' was pushed - collectivist carpools for example - is fascinating. The 'insuperable' challenge that the superiority complex faced when the SU opened to the outside world is something that I would certainly explore with A Level students, and possibly GCSE. In terms of the resource, I am definitely drawn to the idea of creating something which focuses on everyday life in the SU and Eastern Europe. I'm intrigued by why an 'Ostaligia' - yearning to return to the communist past - emerged in Post Communist Europe and I think this could be a good enquiry question as part of the Year 9 topic on 'Living under Communist rule' I am hoping to plan”

If you like the look of what is going on in the Fellowship, we hope to run more programmes on this and other periods of history. Look out for announcements on the HA website.

References

- Michael David-Fox, “The Iron Curtain as Semipermeable Membrane”, in: Patrick Babiracki and Kenyon Zimmer (eds), *Cold War Crossings: International Travel and Exchange across the Soviet Bloc, 1940s – 1960s* (Arlington, 2014), 14-39
- ['Commuting between East and West'](#), The Berlin Wall museum
- Mark B. Smith, “Peaceful coexistence at all costs: Cold War exchanges between Britain and the Soviet Union in 1956”, *Cold War History*, August 2012, Vol.12, No.3, 537-558