

The Cold War in the Classroom Week 5

Cold War Fellowship Report

Jessica Reinisch, 12th March 2017

The Cold War in the home: kitchen debate, consumerism, everyday life

This week was all about moving away from the standard Cold War narratives of political summits and military showdowns of the superpowers. Instead, we asked our teachers to think about how the Cold War dynamics impacted upon 'ordinary life' on either side of the Iron Curtain. The reading focused on the Soviet National Exhibition in New York in June-July 1959, and the reciprocated American National Exhibition in Moscow a few weeks later. Susan Reid's article on 'Soviet popular reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow', and a document collection edited by Shane Hamilton and Sarah Phillips, provided context on the infamous 'Kitchen Debate' between Richard Nixon and Nikita Krushchev. Elena Hore's podcast considered the impact of the Cold War on Russian families. An essay by Cristina Carbone looked at US reactions to the exhibition in New York. A list of references is included at the end of this report.

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

The two exhibitions took place in the late 1950s because of a new emphasis on US-Soviet cultural exchanges and mutual understanding. But most of our teachers agreed that they were still vehicles for a competition between the superpowers – particularly a competition over living standards, which took place alongside the more familiar military and diplomatic showdowns of the Cold War:

- “The Cold War was, at its simplest level, a competitive relationship between the two dominant superpowers of the time, the USA and USSR. While this relationship was often fractious and defined by direct political conflict, this was not the only level at which the relationship operated. The impact of this relationship on everyday life has been explored by social historians such as Reid (2008), Hamilton & Phillips (2014), and Carbone (2008). However, it should still be noted that social historians of the Cold War often focus on how standards of living and advances in technology were still used as weapons during the Cold War.”
- “The publicly stated objective of these exhibitions was to ‘strengthen the foundation of world peace’ through mutual understanding of the other country’s lives in a range of areas such as science, culture and

technology. The exhibitions had lesser publicised motives however – for the Soviets it was learn from the allegedly superior Americans so that they could ‘catch up and overtake’ whilst for the Americans it was an exercise in counterpropaganda and an opportunity to culturally infiltrate the Soviet Union. On that basis I would argue that the two national exhibitions were another showdown between the superpowers, just in the field of the lesser known cultural Cold War.... This was not really about peaceful co-existence but about what both sides could gain in the ongoing cultural propaganda capitalist/communist competition.”

- The exhibitions were “ideologically driven, designed to show the other side the positives of living in either a Communist or Capitalist society. The time and effort that went into organising them and the level of displays (having Sputnik there, and rebuilding 'American homes') demonstrates that really this was quite high stakes.”
- “The situation in the ‘home’ became the battleground which would demonstrate the success of their ideology. Through a comparison of the power of consumerism each side sought to outdo the other.
- “The Cold War was not just summits and showdowns. The emphasis of the high politics of the Cold War leaves us assuming that this ‘competition’ was not felt by the average citizen. The intrinsic nature of the Cold War is best demonstrated through the study of the cultural exchanges emerging in the period of Peaceful Coexistence.”

Many agreed that the Kitchen Debate was not an isolated encounter, but rather stood for a much more general ‘Soft’ Cold War’:

- The exhibitions were “not the only example of the ‘Soft War’ between capitalism and communism within the Cold War; this was the ideological contest which would be measured by the qualities of people’s lives. Khrushchev’s ‘Virgin Lands’ policy and housing reforms transformed parts of the USSR; the Soviet leader announced ‘All you have to do to get a house in the USSR is be born. In the USA you only have the right to live under a bridge’. So, perhaps life in the USSR was not as bad as western historians would have us believe. The ‘Soft War’ was mainly an American barrage which was meant to undermine the social fabric of the Soviet Union.”
- “While the exhibitions were the centrepiece of this new ‘peaceful competition’, there were also other examples of this type of policy through the international promotion of US household goods and

services, and announcements about strides in Soviet technology, such as the success of Sputnik in 1957. Through any means possible, both superpowers attempted to demonstrate the superiority of their values and economic systems.”

- “behind the scenes, the lesser known ‘Soft Cold War’ reveals as much about the aims and objectives of the establishments in both countries and more about how ordinary people felt about life behind the iron curtain.”

Central to this ‘Soft’ Cold War were skewed portrayals of ‘ordinary life’ on the other side of the Iron Curtain as significantly worse than at home.

- “Both East and West were able to use propaganda to perpetuate these images of the other, images that while having some basis in reality were very convenient to those in power. As Dr Hore explained in the podcast; the Cold War was convenient for the Soviet leadership as it meant that people were willing to sacrifice in order to prevent attack. This image of the oppressed people of Eastern Europe was a convenient one for the West. It gave them justification for high defence spending, questionable foreign policy and involvement in proxy wars throughout the period.
- “I also found the exhibitions interesting [because] of course neither of them truly reflected what everyday life was like in the Cold War under both ideologies- both were idealised presentations of the achievements of either side. And those idealised versions were generally (if we are to believe the feedback) disliked by those viewing the exhibitions. It was interesting to see that the US and USSR citizens were very against the other's ideals too - that this ideological conflict wasn't just being fought at the highest level but that everyday citizens were hostile to their ‘opponent's’ way of life.”

What results did this propaganda war ultimately have?

- “The US hoped to prove the superiority of the capitalist system by finding answers to questions such as ‘Is there potential for resistance to the Soviet regime? Is disaffection growing? They wanted to uncover ‘the real attitude of the Soviet people towards the regime and the society in which they live’. The Soviets, on the other hand hoped that the exhibition would reveal a solidarity amongst its citizens, a belief in the socialist project that would be enhanced by seeing what they ‘could have’ somewhere in the not so distant future. The reading reveals that neither side really got what they wanted from the 1959 exhibition or the

exhibitions that followed.... the US failed, short term, to prove the superiority of their domestic situation. Had they exerted more influence over the Soviet people through the exhibitions, their victory in the Cold War may have been secured more quickly, a victory secured away from the 'showdowns and summits' More long term, however, the Soviets failed in their quest to 'catch up' with the West and their decision to 'compete with the United States in consumerism was the final nail in its coffin'. The Soviet state could not compete in both fields and survive, economically. The system lost 'popular legitimacy'."

Some of the teachers also thought about the role played by public opinion in this propaganda.

- "governments had to be responsive to, and to some extent wary of, public conceptions of what the Cold War meant for each country. This is reinforced in two ways by Reid's analysis of the responses to the 1959 exhibition amongst the Soviet public. Firstly in the suggestion that the US government's decision to focus on consumerism (perhaps partly inspired by Mrs Rice) backfired, that the Soviets saw this as too concentrated on fripperies rather than the substance of what had made America great, causing the US to fail in making the propaganda breakthrough which they had hoped for. The decision to take such an approach can partly be attributed to US public pressure to display what they viewed as one of the key benefits of the capitalist system, consumer choice. The second example of the importance of public opinion is the Soviet reaction to the exhibition. Reid argues that this was largely negative, perhaps in response to the Soviet conception of the main strength of the communist system - that they were working collaboratively to build a better future for the USSR. Their focus on heavy industry, culture and self-sacrifice effectively protected from the deliberate 'temptation' of the US exhibition. These examples suggest that the public opinion in each country, shaped though it was by propaganda, was key in both sustaining the Cold War - the public of each side supported the actions of their government as they were committed to their world-view."
- "If this link between changing representations of communism, public opinion and the collapse of communism could be better substantiated then it would certainly re-frame the ideas about the nature of the Cold War, the importance of public opinion (the triumphalist view that the Soviet people were 'duped' for example) and the context of Gorbachev's reforms."

Although most agreed that this 'Soft' Cold War was significant to the history of the Cold War, some of our teachers argued that it would be a mistake to forget about the military and diplomatic confrontations.

- “Dr Elena Hore in her podcast highlights her personal experiences and identifies a change to economic competition from a purely military [one]. However, this understanding does rather glibly relegate events linked to any military competition and ignore tensions that continued throughout the period as shown in the Cuban Missile crisis through to ‘Star Wars’ in the 1980’s.”
- Although debates about living standards “demonstrate that the Cold War existed beyond the summit meetings and high-stakes showdowns, it would be a mistake to take them at face value as “peaceful competition”. The ‘Kitchen Debate’ may not have been in danger of sparking a nuclear war, however there is no question that both Khrushchev and Nixon were working hard to demonstrate the superiority of their ideological systems with real stakes in terms of international relations. Similarly, even within the context ‘peaceful coexistence’ and ‘containment’, these moments constituted showdowns of a sort. As a result, while studies of the Cold War should consider more than just the high points of conflict, they should never do so at the expense of losing sight they fit into the competitive element of the Cold War.”

Impact on teaching?

Some of this weeks’ primary sources and podcasts seemed particularly useful for giving students a richer picture of the Cold War.

- “I am trying to bring the podcasts into my teaching as I think they provide a fascinating insight into the motivation of the two superpowers. Hore was also quick to point out that the war itself was fought between the authorities not the people, highlighting the imperable nature of the Cold War.”
- “I also particularly enjoyed the video footage of Khrushchev and Nixon, and will be using that in future lessons without a doubt!”

Our teachers also saw plenty of ways in which the ideas and content of the week’s readings could be put to use in the classroom.

- “I think that the kitchen debate provides students of the Cold War with a welcome break from learning about summits and showdowns and a ‘top down’ approach, which for understandable reasons dominates Cold War study, particularly at GCSE and A Level. Not only does the kitchen

debate and the exhibitions in both the US and USSR allow students of the Cold War to gain an insight into the views, values and attitudes towards the 'other' of ordinary Soviet and American citizens, albeit through the use of sources which are at times questionable in their reliability, it also allows for a great opportunity to make memorable to students some of the many 'fronts' on which the Cold War was fought - propaganda, scientific and technological progress and of course, the comparative living standards and consumer products in the East and West."

- "Individual experiences and 'stories' enrich our understanding of the Cold War. They also make it more accessible for our students and challenge them to question the 'official view', taking into account the positive aspects of life under communism."
- "I also found, as part of the Kitchen Debate, the perceived position of women as an interesting point to explore. As part of the A Level Modern Britain course we explore how consumerism arguably reinforced the image of the woman as the 'angel in the home' and this is something Khrushchev argued with Nixon about - that socialism and the collective community was more liberating for women. Another area deserving further exploration is the position of African Americans - regularly exploited in Soviet propaganda. Hamilton and Phillips point to the 'deep cracks' in the post war liberal economic consensus in the US - segregation being one of those cracks. Capitalist mass consumption, hailed in US propaganda, was not possible for Black Americans and was used as a powerful weapon by the civil rights movement. Therefore, I think that civil rights progress in the US could be an interesting and quite different way of considering how ordinary lives were affected by the Cold War. Lastly, Khrushchev's fall from power being as influenced by his kick starting of the consumer society as his foreign policy 'showdowns', has also been a salient learning point for me this week."

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

- The 1959 'Kitchen Debate' between Richard Nixon and Nikita Krushchev: [video](#) and [transcript](#)

- Susan Reid, “‘Who Will Beat Whom?’ Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, No. 4 (2008), 855-904.
- [HA podcast](#): Elena Hore, ‘Impact of the Cold War on the ordinary Russian family’
- Shane Hamilton and Sarah Phillips, *The Kitchen Debate and Cold War Consumer Politics: a brief history with documents* (Bedford/ St.Martin’s, 2014), “Introduction: The Kitchen Debate in Historical Context”, 1-31.
- Cristina Carbone, ‘Staging the Kitchen Debate: How Splitnik Got Normalized in the United States’, in: Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann (eds), *Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology and European Users*(Cambridge MIT Press, 2008), 59-81.

(i) More sources on the Kitchen Debate:

- “Nixon and Krushchev argue in public as U.S. Exhibit opens”, [New York Times, 25 July 1959](#), and other press coverage from the New York Times
- Interviews of Former American Exhibit Guides, [US Department of State, series ‘Diplomacy in Action’](#)
- “My dad videoed Nixon-Krushchev debate”, [BBC ‘On This Day’](#)

(ii) Other primary sources on everyday life behind the Iron Curtain:

- “Living in the GDR”, in Jussi M. Hanhimaki and Odd Arne Wested (eds.), *The Cold War: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts* (Oxford, 2003), 253-257.
- [‘A Letter to Prison’, Prague, 1950](#), and other sources on the *Socialism Realised* project website.