

# The Cold War in the Classroom Week 8

## Cold War Fellowship Report

Ben Walsh, 4th April 2017

### When did the Cold War end?

This was the final week of the online course in the Cold War in the Classroom programme. Fittingly, the teachers were looking at the historiography of the end of the Cold War and specifically the debate over exactly when the Cold War ended. Teachers were asked to look at an article by Frederico Romero, a video of a discussion by the Council on Foreign Relations and also the Socialism Realised website and then review the question of when the Cold War ended.

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

In the manner of good historians, they tended to move off the brief and consider why the Cold War ended as well as when. In this respect the role of Gorbachev featured prominently:

- “As to why the Cold War ended, there is a surprising degree of consensus amongst historians as to the factors at work, with more disagreement focused on the structural vs the contingent factors. With most historians, this again leads back to disagreement over the major factors why the Cold War started. If like the traditionalist interpretation you blamed Stalin and his ideology, then the Cold War could conceivably end with the appointment of a Russian leader who in many ways represented the antithesis of Stalin’s ideology. It taking a revisionist or post-revisionist viewpoint, then the end of the Cold War would be much more due to larger structural factors, such as the decline of the USSR economy, driven by the draining effect of global proxy wars and the failure to reform the economy in perestroika. It is further interesting to note that Gaddis, moving beyond the post-revisionist framework with *We now Know* and returning in sorts to a traditionalist viewpoint, believes the Cold War ended when the USSR moved beyond Stalin’s form of Communist ideology. All of these however, represent larger long-term structural factors (ideology, communism) and some, such as opposition to the USSR within the USSR could be traced back to Poland 1980, Czechoslovakia 1968, and even Hungary 1956. From the 2009 Council on Foreign Relations panel discussion titled “Why 1989? The Fall of the Berlin Wall and the End of the Cold War” it is interesting to hear all of the panellists discussing which historical actors were essential: Reagan, Gorbachev, or John Paul II. Most seemed to agree that Gorbachev was the most essential due to his willingness to ‘let’ the Berlin Wall fall. While

this links into the larger structural factors, such as the move away from Stalinist Communism, it is also a useful reminder that historical actors do have a sense of agency and are not pre-destined to take certain paths and decisions.”

- “Archie Brown contends that the Cold War ended in 1989 with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. He links the collapse of communism in these countries to Gorbachev’s reversal of the Brezhnev doctrine in his 1988 speech to the United Nations. The collapse in the SU of communism was the logical consequence, he says, of the policies pursued by Gorbachev: the liberalisation of the Soviet political system, Glasnost and Perestroika. Brown argues that Gorbachev hoped the changes would strengthen the system and that when the August coup of 1991 failed, its collapse was inevitable. He disagrees with Michael Myer who believes that there were longer term trends which led to the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War. Brown believes that the first half of the 1980s were completely different to the second and that 1985 was a turning point. Gorbachev’s role is also emphasized by Jacques Levesque who states that Gorbachev sought to reconcile socialism and democracy, thinking that it would be beneficial to socialism.”
- “Leffler’s review essay ‘The Cold War: What do “we now know”?’ is very thorough in its examination of Gaddis’ most recent interpretation in light of the new evidence available at the end of the Cold War. ‘What is so distinctive about Gaddis’s new book is the extent to which he abandons post -revisionism and returns to a more traditional interpretation of the Cold War. In unequivocal terms, he blames the Cold War on Stalin’s personality, on authoritarian government, and on Communist ideology. As long as Stalin was running the Soviet Union, “a cold war was unavoidable”.’ Leffler 1999. Gaddis’s turnaround from post revisionism to an arguably orthodox view of the Cold War has been controversial and much criticised. Indeed, Leffler clearly sets out alternative views in his essay. In contrast to Gaddis for example, Zubok and Pleshakov have argued that ‘Stalin’s post war foreign policy was more defensive, reactive, and prudent than it was the fulfilment of a master plan.’ It seems obvious to me that the fundamental cultural and ideological aspects of the Cold War run so deep that historians have been unable to fully extricate themselves from these influences. The more we learn about the Cold War the more pervasive and all-encompassing it seems to have been. Manipulating and manipulative for the respective political agendas of opposing world super powers. ‘At its core, the contest was about harnessing and steering the “winds of change”’ Romero 2014.”

Another was the curious phenomenon of nostalgia for the Cold War:

- “Lawrence Freedman raises the point that we need to ‘untangle the Cold War from all the other strands of twentieth-century history’ and ‘work out what was distinctive and special about it, and then assess how it interacted with all the other strands’. In other words, we shouldn’t confuse CW events with other conflicts and happenings around the world – which links to Burk’s idea that the CW could still be taking place, whilst also linking with Stephanson’s belief that it was primarily a physical contest. Jusi Hanimaki mocks those who apparently have a sense of nostalgia for the CW; he states ‘To be sure, the world changed after 1989. Yet, should one really regret the end of the Cold War because it ended an era of global stability? Ask an average Pole, a Hungarian or a Czech national with experience from the pre-1989 era and the answer is likely to be negative’. As always, this raises the point about perspective and why certain people argue about the end date – and even if the end of the CW was a good/bad thing!”

### Impact on teaching?

The discussions were very satisfying in the sense that the teachers clearly felt that the reading they were doing was relevant to their current teaching and was helping them in challenging their students to aim higher

- “The reading this week has supported my in class work with my A-Level students. We are on the coursework element, and a few of them have chosen to explore how far Soviet economic problems were the key reason for the end of the Cold War. Consequently I've been immersed in this topic for a while, and reading Robert Service's ‘End of the Cold War.’ ... Romero's article was also interesting - it reflected my view that the Cold War historiography is becoming a bit of an unwieldy beast with a lot of events from the 20th century dragged into it. Hence our teacher based problem of where to start when planning to teach it!”
- “I very much enjoyed the focus of this week’s task, as questions about beginnings and endings are always pleasingly simple at face value and complex on closer inspection. I also find the 1980’s an under-appreciated area in school history and the academic literature compared to the origins (1940s) and high points (1960s) of the Cold War, and as a result it was good opportunity to expand my subject knowledge and unpick some of my pre-existing assumptions. I’m not sure my response to the task went much further beyond “it’s complicated!”, however I did enjoy trying to consider how the phrasing of this international state of conflict and tension as a ‘Cold War’ may have been responsible for part of the difficulty in charting when it started and ended. Our assumptions about how ‘wars’ have clear beginnings and endings may be obscuring some much more complicated historical phenomena, more akin to an empire

like the Roman or British, or a periodization such as the Dark Ages or Enlightenment. Certainly it makes an excellent debating point, and I will be using it to frame my final Cold War in Europe lesson.”

Most of the teachers also now have a broad area of focus for their planned resources, which will of course be shared via the HA website. They are now busy planning their submissions and doing the relevant thinking, planning and research. We at the HA and University of Birkbeck would like to express our thanks and sincere appreciation to the teachers for the enthusiasm, dedication and sheer quality of hard work on the programme!

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

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