



A scene from Steven Spielberg's 2015 Cold War film *Bridge of Spies*
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What is interesting about the Cold War?

Eirini Karamouzi

The screening of Steven Spielberg's Cold War thriller *Bridge of Spies* on the margins of a 2015 NATO summit reportedly made some of the western leaders nostalgic for the Cold War. It recalled an era when the 'enemy' was easy to identify, unlike today, where the major powers are 'playing eight-dimensional chess'.¹ Around the same time, Mikhail Gorbachev, the former leader of the Soviet Union, commented on rising tensions between the USA and Russia in the midst of the Ukrainian and Syrian crisis, and declared that there were, once again, 'signs of a Cold War'.²

The 'Cold War has not ended' paradigm partly reflects different views of what happened in the period from 1945 to 1991, and of what the 'Cold War' really meant. Should we use it as a metaphor to denote a social, economic and political framework that permeated all levels of society, foreign relations, and even individual consciousness? Or is it another name to describe the system of international affairs as it emerged after the end of the Second World War? Or should we insist on a more restricted definition of the Cold War as a geopolitical and military conflict between the two superpowers of the era?

Almost 30 years after the end of the Cold War, diversity is suddenly galvanising the field of scholarly research into the Cold War. As the historian Federico Romero has

argued, older, simpler interpretations 'seem to be giving way to a looser understanding of the Cold War as an era that encompassed different although interconnected conflicts and transformations'.³ Such conceptual ambiguity now permeates historical research. No one can doubt the importance of the Cold War, but no one seems to know quite what it was. These are the challenges we face not just in explaining the Cold War to our students, but in our efforts to use it to help understand the contemporary world.

Old historiography

The term 'Cold War' was first coined by George Orwell in an article published in *Tribune*, two months after the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. He used the term in an attempt to make sense of the political and social order at the dawn of the nuclear age, concluding that the advent of such a powerful destructive weapon would create a 'a peace that is no peace'.⁴ Since that time there have been four clear waves of Cold War scholarship, each corresponding to a particular political era and research agenda.

During the early decades of the Cold War, Western scholars such as Thomas Bailey and Herbert Feis were preoccupied with assigning blame for the breakdown of the wartime alliance



US Army tanks face off against Soviet armor at Checkpoint Charlie, Berlin, October 1961

between the Big Three and for the emergence of Cold War tensions. Most of this scholarship drew almost exclusively on Western archival sources. In the late 1940s and 1950s, the 'Cold War' was often used as a synonym for Stalin's adversarial policies. In the 1960s and early 1970s – in the wake of the American defeat and humiliation in Vietnam and the expansion of the Cold War to the Third World – a wave of revisionist American historians – among them William Appleman Williams, Walter LeFeber and Gar Alperovitz – blamed the perpetuation of the conflict squarely on the United States and its insatiable capitalist and imperialist needs. During the later period of détente, post-revisionist scholarship often associated with authors such as John Lewis Gaddis was influenced by the realist school of thought in international relations, focusing not just on the issue of culpability but also on concepts of national interest and balance of power. For this cohort of scholars, the global system of the Cold War with the strategic arms race at the epicentre was predictable and relatively stable.

In the 1990s, the unexpected and strikingly peaceful end of the Cold War had two major repercussions. It challenged the credibility of the previous schools of thought which had failed to foresee this ending, and triggered the quest for the next big idea that would help us explain 'what really happened'. In this quest, the partial opening of previously secret archives from the countries of Eastern Europe, Soviet Union and China allowed young scholars with the relevant linguistic skills to mine new documents, offering methodological plurality and a widening coverage of the Cold War on a global scale.

New historiography

The scholarly gains from the opening of these archives and the introduction of new global perspectives have revolutionised the field. A variety of new interpretations have come to the fore, with an increasing consensus on the ideological character of the conflict, and on the importance of economics, culture and technology. This new literature has also challenged the framing of the Cold War in terms of high politics, and there has been an increasing effort to understand Cold War societies and social

change. The conflict played out against tremendous political and cultural transformations that were largely independent of the bipolar rivalry in the post-1945 period, from decolonisation and mass migration to consumerism and globalisation. Debates among historians have thus shifted to address the role and influence the Cold War had on these processes.

In other words, we have seen the emergence of a new and energetic cultural history of the Cold War that has manifested itself in two ways. First, research on culture has tended to focus on the creative outputs of artists, musicians, writers, and filmmakers, whose work became entwined with the ideological conflicts of the era. Secondly, some historians have adopted a more anthropological approach that sees the cultural Cold War as a struggle to influence a common set of beliefs, ideas and rituals. More flexible interpretations of the Cold War have allowed scholars to explore how much the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union influenced key elements of post-war history, from gender relations and technological developments to mass media and education. Recent studies on Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have transcended the binaries of the Cold War era: liberalism/communism and dominance/resistance.⁵ While the restrictive nature of the repressive regimes is still recognised, there is a move towards a multifaceted understanding of the Soviet system where autonomous social spaces and interactions were possible beyond the political control of the state.

There have been substantial gains from this wave of scholarship that has seen a renewed interest in campaigns for human rights, anti-nuclear mobilisation, sport, and the role of dissidents, and which has gone beyond the interest-driven, cost-benefit analysis that dominated historical thinking in the last decades of the Cold War. In the past decade, Cold War historians have supplemented their traditional use of political and diplomatic documents with a new range of different sources. Given the centrality of the visual in the post-war period, photographs, film and television, newspapers, music, video games, and literary journals all played a vital role in shaping how people understood the Cold War. Inspired

by sociological concepts of framing, scholars have become more interested in how everyday people 'imagined' and understood the Cold War.⁶ As this understanding did not come automatically, historians have sought to explore how the Cold War was defined and framed by politicians, scientists, social movements and ordinary people at different points in time.

Looking forward

These new developments and interpretive frameworks were summed up in a number of major scholarly works which appeared around the 25th anniversary of the end of the Cold War. The three volumes of the *Cambridge History of the Cold War*, the *Routledge Handbook of the Cold War* and the *Oxford Handbook of the Cold War* sparked anew the debates over definition, scope and periodisation. What was 'cold' about this conflict? Were all social, political, and cultural developments during the second half of the twentieth century related to the Cold War? What happens when we take off the 'Cold War lens'?

Even traditional approaches to Cold War history that focus on leadership and statecraft have been re-evaluated. The actions of Trump and Putin raise questions about the power that leaders such as Gorbachev and Reagan held over world affairs, reminding us how human agency in response to systemic pressures can act as a catalyst for historical change. Structural and social changes may limit the scope within which leaders operate, but how they respond to these limitations is still a matter of choice.

In his latest book, Odd Arne Westad urges historians to embrace the heterogeneous nature of the Cold War, and to accept that a definitive history can only be an aspiration. He also declares that the major priority should always be to situate the Cold War within the wider developments of the twentieth century.⁸ Teachers and scholars need to challenge teleological interpretations of the Cold War and be attentive to contingency – to moments, people, decisions, and developments that offered a range of different historical outcomes. The Cold War was not predestined to unfold the way it did. Most importantly, we should stay alert to the fact that the term 'Cold War' is historically and culturally bounded. The Cold War encompassed local vernaculars and different meanings, and manifested itself in a plethora of ways that spoke to a diverse set of national, social, political and religious audiences. Instead of Cold War history, we should talk about Cold War *histories* in the plural.

Further reading

In addition to the major publications mentioned in the footnotes:

The three major works published around the 25th anniversary of the end of the Cold War are Merlyn P Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (eds), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Richard Immerman and Petra Goedde (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Artemy Kalinovsky and Craig Dedde (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2014).

On the definitional and periodisation dilemma: Holger Nehring, 'What was the Cold War?' in *English Historical Review*, 77:527 (2012), 920–949; and Prasenjit Duara, 'The Cold War as a historical period: an interpretive essay' in *Journal of Global History*, 6: 3 (2011), 457–480.

Jussi M. Hanhimäki and Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: a history in documents and eyewitness accounts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). An excellent edited volume of primary documents accompanied by useful introductions, essential in teaching the international history of the Cold war in all its aspects.

President Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev signing the INF Treaty in the East Room of the White House, 12 August 1987. Library of Congress



There are two major journals dedicated to Cold War history; *Cold War History* journal based at LSE, and *Journal of Cold War Studies* based at Harvard University.

Online resources

The Wilson Center Digital Archive contains once-secret documents from governments all across the globe, uncovering new sources and providing fresh insights into the history of international relations and diplomacy:
digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/theme/cold-war-history
digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/theme/nuclear-history
www.wilsoncenter.org/program/cold-war-international-history-project

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- ¹ Gillian Tett, 'G-zero: the new world order' in *The Financial Times*, 9 October 2015.
- ² Tom Parfitt and Roland Oliphant, 'Mikhail Gorbachev accuses US of stoking new cold war' in *The Telegraph*, 2 December 2014.
- ³ Federico Romero, 'Cold War historiography at the crossroads' in *Cold War History* 14:4 (2014), 685–703.
- ⁴ George Orwell, 'You and the atomic bomb' in *Tribune*, 19 October 1945.
- ⁵ Neringa Klumbyte and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova (eds), *Soviet System in the Era of Late Socialism, 1964–1985*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014.
- ⁶ Matthew Grant and Benjamin Ziemann (eds), *Understanding the Imaginary War: culture, thought and nuclear conflict, 1945–90*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016.
- ⁷ Matthew Connelly, 'Taking off the Cold War lens: visions of North-South conflict during the Algerian War for Independence' in *The American Historical Review* 105:3 (2000), 739–769.
- ⁸ Odd Arne Westad, *Cold War: a world history*, Basic Books, 2017.

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