Cold War historiography

This chapter examines different historians' viewpoints on why the Cold War developed after World War Two. This **historiography** is specifically focused on the origins of the Cold War. Throughout the other chapters there is more specific historiography on each theme/case study within the Cold War era.

The Orthodox view

The historical position known as the Orthodox or traditional view generally holds that the Soviet Union was responsible for the Cold War. It states that the Soviets were inevitably expansionist, due to their suspicion of the West, and in accordance with their Marxist theory, which advocated the need to spread revolution throughout the world. Thus, Stalin violated the Yalta and Potsdam agreements, occupied and imposed Soviet control in Eastern Europe and 'plotted' to spread Communism throughout the world with Moscow at its centre. The United States, therefore, had to act defensively, from the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan to the establishment of NATO.

Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (1917–2007)

Political historian Arthur M. Schlesinger gives a clear analysis from the Orthodox perspective:

> *Marxism-Leninism gave the Russian leaders a view of the world according to which all societies were inexorably destined to proceed along appointed roads by appointed stages until they achieved the classless nirvana. Moreover, given the resistance of the Capitalists to this development, the existence of any non-Communist state was by definition a threat to the Soviet Union. …An analysis of the origins of the Cold War which leaves out these factors – the intransigence of Leninist ideology, the sinister dynamics of a totalitarian society and the madness of Stalin – is obviously incomplete.*
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> ***Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. 'Origins of the Cold War', Foreign Affairs, October 1967, pp.49-50***

Other historians who have presented the Orthodox view include W.H. McNeill and H. Feis.

The Revisionist view

The alternative perspective, which flourished when the consensus over foreign policy in the United States was crumbling during the Vietnam War, held the USA responsible for the Cold War. Revisionists, such as William Appleman Williams, explained the onset of the Cold War in terms of 'dollar diplomacy'. Revisionists see the motives behind U.S. foreign policy as inherently linked to the needs of Capitalism. Thus, containment of Communism was driven by the requirement to secure markets and free trade, and penetrate Eastern Europe. This followed on from the United States' traditional 'open door' policy of the late 19th century.

This stance was taken further by Revisionist historians Gabriel and Joyce Kolko, who view Soviet action as even less relevant to U.S. foreign policy. They see American policy as determined by the nature of its Capitalist system and by fears of recession. Similarly, Thomas Patterson wrote that 'coercion characterized United States reconstruction diplomacy'. Moreover, many Revisionists hold that Stalin himself was a pragmatic leader, and had the Americans been more willing to understand the Soviets' need for security and offer some compromises, Stalin would have also made concessions.

Perhaps the most radical thesis from the Revisionists comes from the Cambridge political economist, Gar Alperovitz. This followed on from an idea put forward by British physicist, P.M.S. Blackett, who wrote that the dropping of nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was not important as the last military campaign of World War Two, but rather as the first

diplomatic move by the United States in the Cold War. Alperovitz suggests that Japan was already defeated, and that this 'new' weapon of awesome power was used to warn and intimidate the Soviets.

Post-revisionist view

This school of thought does not exactly combine the Orthodox and Revisionist views, but Post-revisionists do stress that neither the USA nor the USSR can be held solely responsible for the origins of the Cold War. One of the key figures of this group was American historian John Lewis Gaddis. He declared in 1983 that there was a growing 'consensus' of opinion that followed the 'Post-revisionist' line of argument.

The Cold War grew out of a complicated interaction of external and internal developments inside both the United States and the Soviet Union. The external situation – circumstances beyond the control of either power – left Americans and Russians facing one another across prostrated Europe at the end of World War Two. Internal influences in the Soviet Union – the search for security, the role of ideology, massive post-war reconstruction needs, the personality of Stalin – together with those in the United States – the need for self-determination, fear of Communism, the illusion of omnipotence fostered by American economic strength and the atomic bomb – made the resulting confrontation a hostile one. Leaders of both superpowers sought peace, but in doing so yielded to considerations, which, while they did not precipitate war, made resolution of differences impossible.

John Lewis Gaddis.* The United States and Origins of the Cold War 1941–1947 *(Columbia University Press, 1972) pp.359–61

John Lewis Gaddis and Walter LaFeber both agreed at this time that misperceptions played an important part at the beginning of the Cold War. Both superpowers overestimated the strength and threat of the other, and much of the growing tension of the 1940s was a result of a pattern of 'action and reaction'. Both sides were 'improvising', rather than following a well-defined 'plan of action'. Stalin's search for security was not deterred initially by strong lines being drawn, while at the same time the West did not fully recognize the Soviets' motives.

Views of the post-Cold War historians

… as long as Stalin was running the Soviet Union, a Cold War was unavoidable.

John Lewis Gaddis,* We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History *(OUP, 1998) p.292

With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989–90, many new Soviet sources were made available. Russian historians were also now free to write their own accounts of the Cold War without Communist Party **censorship**. John Lewis Gaddis, who had formerly been a key spokesperson of the 'Post-revisionists', also had access to the new material and the initial writings of the post-Soviet era Russian historians. He used this material to revise his Post-revisionist view, now putting even more focus on the role of Stalin in the origins of the Cold War. He suggests that it was Stalin's policies coupled with the Soviet totalitarian/authoritarian government that drew the West into an escalation of hostility and the protracted **arms race**. Gaddis considered the role of all other key leaders and players in the early stages of the Cold War, and concludes that if Stalin (rather than any of the others, from President Truman to Secretary of State **John Foster Dulles**) is removed from the equation, the Cold War was unlikely to have developed.

What emerges generally from the post-Cold War 'new' historians is that individuals and their actions, rather than the policies of whole governments, are of vital importance in explaining key events in the Cold War. This is particularly obvious in the origins of the Korean War and in the Berlin Crisis of 1961 (see Chapter Five and Chapter Eight).

STUDENT STUDY SECTION

Review questions

1 Summarize the key ideas of the historiographical schools listed below
- Orthodox /Traditional
- Revisionist
- Post-revisionist
- 'New' historians

2 Add examples from Steps One to Eight (see Chapters Two and Three) which could be used to support each of the historiographical viewpoints

European and Soviet perspectives

What was the role of the Europeans in the development of the Cold War?

In the 1980s, mainly due to the end of the '30 year rule' period that secured the confidentiality of government records, historians brought Europe and its role in the origins of the Cold War into clearer focus. Many European governments, economically devastated by war, harboured deep anxieties about Soviet expansionism, and this had an important impact on U.S. foreign policy. The British in particular did much to heighten the U.S. awareness/perception of the 'Soviet threat'. Churchill's Iron Curtain speech is an obvious case in point. European contributions suggested that both the Revisionist and the Post-revisionist historians had not satisfactorily considered the complexity of U.S. foreign policy. A Norwegian scholar, Geir Lunestad, in an article in *Diplomatic History*, asserted that the guiding motives for American foreign policy in the early period of the Cold War can only be properly understood by taking into account the influence of external factors, such as European fears and opinions.

What is the Soviet perspective?

The historiography so far considered is all from a 'Western' perspective. Indeed, as a parallel with the Western historians, it is possible to call the Soviet historians who wrote during the Cold War, (due to the censorship and other controls) the 'Soviet Orthodox' group, and those that began to write following the fall of the Soviet Union, who focused on the role of Stalin, the 'Soviet Revisionists'.

During the initial stages of the Cold War itself, the Soviet line held that the Americans were pursuing a policy of aggressive 'dollar imperialism' dictated by the needs of Capitalism. The Soviet Foreign Minister Sergei Molotov himself wrote a book, *Problems of Foreign Policy*, in which he accused the United States of trying to take over Europe economically and put it under the control 'of strong and enriched foreign firms, banks and industrial companies'. Thus, in response to this, Molotov said the Soviets were only attempting to 'find security', to rebuild after the 'Great Patriotic War' (World War Two) and, where and when possible, to aid in the liberation of the exploited working classes of the world.

Since the end of the Cold War and the opening of former Soviet and Eastern European archives, historians on both sides of the Iron Curtain have reconsidered the role of ideology

and the search for security in Soviet foreign policy. Many historians believe that the furthering of socialist objectives became tied to the search for security following World War Two. This also meant that in the crucial initial stages of the Cold War the Soviets believed that the triumph of socialism was unavoidable and that the USSR should aid Communist groups around the world to fulfil this aim. Other historians using the Soviet archives see the greatest motive for the USSR's foreign policy as being the fear of renewed German and Japanese aggression, and of aggression from the rest of the Capitalist world.

In line with the post-Cold War historians mentioned earlier, some Eastern European historians, such as Vojtech Mastny, focus on Stalin's role in the origins in the Cold War. This perspective could be called 'Soviet Revisionism'. Mastny sees Stalin's' role as pivotal, and believes that Soviet foreign policy during this period can be explained in terms of 'Stalinism' and Josef Stalin's own specific **modus operandi** of paranoia and suspicion.

ToK Time
Consider how and why historical opinion might have changed over time Writer Margaret Atwood says 'context is all', so does this mean that 'historical truth' does not really exist?

'Balance of Power' versus ideology: What is the debate?

Some historians perceive the origins of the Cold War to be simply a traditional 'balance of power' conflict. This thesis can be supported by the insightful, if not prophetic, writings of French historian Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote the following in 1835:

There are at the present time two great nations in the world … I allude to the Russians and the Americans … Their starting point is different, and their courses are not the same; yet each of them seems marked out by the will of Heaven to sway the destinies of half the globe.

Alexis de Tocqueville*, Democracy in America *(Washington Square Press, 1964) pp.124 – 125

French historian Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859)

De Tocqueville wrote this before Karl Marx's *Das Capital* or the 'Communist Manifesto', and long before the Bolshevik Russian Revolution. So, is it possible that the conflict between the USA and USSR is not really about ideology at all? Walter LaFeber and Louis Halle consider the conflict in similar terms, as both see the USA and the Soviets as expansionist powers. Therefore, the hostility that followed 1945 was a continuation of policies they had respectively pursued since the 19th century. LaFeber writes:

The two powers did not initially come into conflict because one was Communist and the other Capitalist. Rather, they first confronted one another on the plains of Asia in the late nineteenth century. That meeting climaxed a century in which Americans had expanded westward over half the globe and Russians had moved eastward across Asia.

Walter LaFeber*, America, Russia and the Cold War 1945–84, *5th ed (Knopf, 1985) p.1

Former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, writing in the 1980s, also claimed that the USSR's motives were not based on ideology, but considers them as a continuum of the long history of Tsarist empire building. However, those commentators and historians that see the origins of the Cold War being initiated by the ideological struggle between Capitalism and Communism identify the starting point of the conflict as 1917 with the Bolshevik Revolution. André Fontaine suggests that the aggressive policies of the USSR in foreign policy were dictated by its Communist ideology. Indeed, some Western revisionists would also highlight the ideological nature of U.S. foreign policy as a spur. Ideology in the USA can be seen as increasingly important in the origins of the Cold War, culminating in the McCarthy witch-hunts of the 1950s (see Chapter Five).