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Conflict and Co-operation in the Cold War: New Directions in Contemporary Historical Research

In recent years historical scholarship on the Cold War has moved in many new directions. Scholars, notably John Lewis Gaddis, Melvyn Leffler, and Vladislav Zubok, have produced narratives that cover the entire period, integrating archival sources from various societies and re-examining long-standing questions about origins, duration, costs, and consequences in light of this evidence. We now have deeply considered histories of the entire Cold War.¹ Other historians, particularly Odd Arne Westad, Piero Gleijeses, Chen Jian, and Mark Bradley, have examined how ‘third world’ societies, despite their relatively weak international position, influenced the dynamics of the Cold War. We now have histories of the Cold War that are truly international in scale and scope.² Perhaps most controversially, another group of historians has focused on the role of non-traditional actors operating across societies and regions. For Martin Klimke, David Ekbladh, Bradley Simpson, Matthew Connelly, Andrew Rotter, and myself, among others, the story of the Cold War involves a contested re-definition of power through the deployment of new ideas, institutions, and technologies that do not match the lines of state authority on our maps of

1 John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York 2005); Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York 2007); Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill, NC 2007).

2 Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of our Times* (Cambridge 2005); Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001); Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC 2000); Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919–1950* (Chapel Hill, NC 2000).

the period. We now have histories of the Cold War that are theoretically innovative and empirically multidimensional.³

This is an exciting time to research and write the history of the Cold War. With each passing year the flow of books, articles, and dissertations increases at a dizzying pace. Journals devoted, in part or entirely, to the period have proliferated: *Cold War History*, the *Journal of Cold War Studies*, *Diplomatic History*, *The Sixties*, *Intelligence and National Security*, the *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, and the list goes on. Electronic discussion lists, from H-DIPLO to H-1960s, provide enough daily reading for all of a scholar's waking hours, with even a few minutes for some angry email missives to fellow list subscribers. Above all, huge reference works have emerged to cover all of the obvious historical topics – large and small – in exhaustive depth. The thick two-volume *Encyclopedia of the Cold War*, published by Routledge, and the even thicker three-volume *Cambridge History of the Cold War* provide well-researched and thorough accounts of the period.⁴

Reading all of these materials, and keeping up with new arrivals, is an inhuman task. No one can claim that he or she knows all the scholarship on the Cold War. No one can claim unchallenged expertise on all major issues. The field of Cold War history now looks more like the historiography of the French Revolution, the American Civil War, or nazi Germany in its breadth, its fragmentation, and its unceasing scholarly proliferation.

That is the overwhelming challenge in the field: how to make sense of it all? In the deluge of new work, many scholars are swimming in an ocean of new sources and interpretations without anchors of insight for guidance and stability. The diversity and richness of the subject has become disorienting. How does one identify key historiographical markers? Or, as one of my graduate students recently asked me: 'How do we know where to start and where to stop our reading? There is just too much.' I did not show much sympathy for that student at the time, but she made an important point.

There are many potential rubrics one could employ to chart the ocean of new histories about the Cold War. None will match the stale demarcations of 'orthodox', 'revisionist', and 'post-revisionist'. These labels reflected the

3 Martin Klimke, *The Other Alliance: Student Protest in West Germany and the United States in the Global 1960s* (Princeton, NJ 2010); David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton, NJ 2010); Bradley Simpson, *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and U.S.-Indonesian Relations, 1960–1968* (Stanford, CA 2008); Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, MA 2008); Andrew Rotter, *Comrades at Odds: The United States and India, 1947–1964* (Ithaca, NY 2000); Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, MA 2007). For a broad review of much of the new Cold War literature – particularly the recent works focusing on ideas, institutions, and technologies – see Thomas W. Zeiler, 'The Diplomatic History Bandwagon: A State of the Field', *Journal of American History* 95 (March 2009), 1053–73.

4 Ruud van Dijk, William Glenn Gray, Svetlana Savranskaya, Jeremi Suri, and Qiang Zhai (eds), *Encyclopedia of the Cold War*, 2 vols (New York 2008); Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (eds), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, 3 vols (Cambridge 2010).

somewhat provincial and self-serving politics of the Cold War in the American academy, especially after the Vietnam War. If anything, these categories simplified sophisticated work and they distracted from the interesting and enduring research questions. 'Right' and 'Left' do not make much sense as historiographical labels, especially since most of the contemporary young historians writing in the field fit neither tradition in their methodologies or politics. All of the major new works on the Cold War examine elite leaders and ordinary citizens. All of them at least gesture to history 'from above' and history 'from below'. All of them also include attention to the 'hard' power of money and weapons, as well as the 'soft' power of ideas and culture.

Despite the claims of some, there are very few serious 'triumphal' histories of the United States in the Cold War. Similarly, there are very few serious 'condemning' histories of American policies. Most sophisticated works now fall somewhere in between. The unequivocal self-righteousness of George Kennan and William Appleman Williams has given way to the agonized, judicious, and ultimately qualified claims of Wilson Miscamble and Melvyn Leffler.⁵ Leffler concludes his influential recent book by arguing that everyone was responsible for the Cold War, but no one acted unreasonably:

The Cold War lasted as long as it did because of the ways in which American and Soviet ideas intersected with evolving conditions of the international system. U.S. and Soviet leaders thought they represented superior ways of organizing human existence... These contradictory visions of mankind's future were inseparable from Soviet and American ideas about the past.⁶

This is a sensible and balanced conclusion, but it leaves a lot unanswered about the interplay of ideas and circumstances across five decades of international history. Some of the most interesting and revealing debates among historians working with new evidence focus on the complex relations between societies, and the changing nature of their interactions. Was the period characterized by more conflict or co-operation? How did forms of conflict and co-operation coexist at the same time? When did one dominant mode of political behavior replace another? In this context, the basic nature of the Cold War is under investigation, and historians have shown how even the most elemental characteristics of the period were dynamic, contingent, and even uncertain at times. There were, therefore, many Cold Wars wrapped within the 'evolving conditions' cited by Leffler.

The essays in this special issue begin from this point of departure. Drawing on newly available archival materials from multiple societies, and a sophisticated reading of these materials in the light of prior scholarship, each of the

5 George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (Chicago, IL 1951); William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, enlarged edition (New York 1988 [1959]); Wilson D. Miscamble, *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima, and the Cold War* (New York 2007); Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York 2007).

6 Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind*, op. cit., 452–3.

authors examines ideas, decisions, and events that show the complex interplay of conflict and co-operation at many levels – redefining nationalism and ‘civilization’ after the second world war, re-educating German citizens, reconstituting Great Power stability in the Near East, rebuilding post-Occupation Japan, reinvigorating human rights in Latin America, and, perhaps most extraordinary, rethinking nuclear weapons on the edge of Armageddon. The essays are focused in their cases, but broad in their interpretive implications. They re-define the Cold War and they re-define the international history of the period. Most of all, they capture the most fundamental element of contemporary history – the enduring influence of decisions made at one moment for those living years and decades later. The past is also part of the present in these well-researched articles.

In each case, the authors narrate efforts by leaders and citizens to create something in between conflict and co-operation: something more than traditional national sovereignty, but less than empire. We might call this the dilemma of Great Power politics in an era of democratized citizenries. State leaders from Josef Stalin to Leonid Brezhnev felt a strong need to exert power across distant geographies, and they did this through centralized, sometimes repressive, rule. Citizens and less powerful state actors, from postwar emigres to human rights activists, felt emboldened to assert themselves, and demand independence, protection, and consumption in unprecedented quantities. In each of these essays, leaders and citizens struggle with this contradiction between great power and democratic demands, the desire for authority without the costs of control. In each of these essays, this contradiction contributes to conflict and co-operation, and different efforts at managing their relationship. The key point is that policies on postwar nationalism, German re-education, the Near East, post-Occupation Japan, Latin America, and arms control were not pre-determined in any of the major societies. They emerged from uncertain negotiations, circumstantial responses to pressures, and unplanned decisions. The Cold War, according to our authors, was made and remade in various moments.

As a whole, these essays complicate our understanding of power and ideology in the Cold War, and they force us to think beyond traditional categories and formulate new ones. These are not articles about programs for power in the Cold War, but instead the complicated and contingent processes of managing allies and adversaries (as well as citizens and critics) in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These essays are striking in their originality, their depth of research, and their breadth of interpretation. They do not cohere with one single conclusion, but that is their strength. They capture contingency and complexity – the key elements of a relevant and useful contemporary history.

The publication of these essays adds more water to the deluge of Cold War scholarship. That is an unavoidable fact. These essays will not make order out of the sometime chaos of the field. That is not something they endeavor to accomplish. Instead, what we have in the evidence, analysis, and interpretation of these Cold War moments are a series of case studies that shed light on the

dilemmas of conflict and co-operation across regions. We are not mapping the ocean, but probing some of its deepest and most interesting waters. We are also examining one set of flows in the various currents of understanding that constitute the New International History of the Cold War.⁷

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⁷ For more of my reflections on the New International History of the Cold War, and earlier periods, see Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge, MA 2003), 260–5; idem., ‘Transnational Influences on American Politics’, in Michael Kazin, Rebecca Edwards, and Adam Rothman (eds), *The Princeton Encyclopedia of American Politics* (Princeton, NJ 2009); idem., ‘The Limits of American Empire: Democracy and Militarism in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries’, in Alfred W. McCoy and Francisco A. Scarano (eds), *Colonial Crucible: Empire in the Making of the Modern American State* (Madison, WI 2009), 523–31.