

Poltgehrorieon

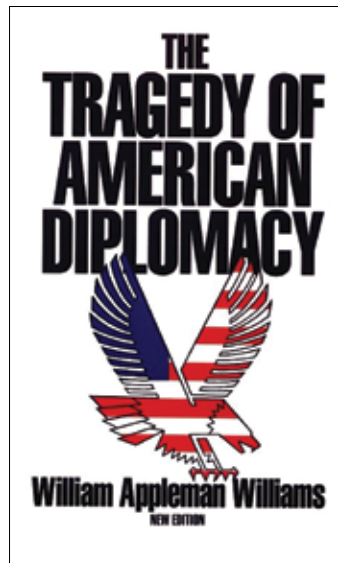
The 'new' historiography of the Cold War

Aaron Watts

A great deal of new writing on the Cold War sits at the crossroads of national, transnational and global perspectives. Such studies can be so self-consciously multi-archival and multipolar, methodologically pluralist in approach and often 'decentring' in aim, that some scholars now worry that the Cold War risks losing its coherence as a distinct object of enquiry. As Federico Romero wrote in the pages of one of two dedicated Cold War history journals, 'diversity is galvanising the field, but historians need to [...] strive for at least a minimum of conceptual clarity'.¹ While 'we should aim at a broad cultural understanding of the Cold War [and] contextualise it in larger processes of historical change,' Romero warns us against 'confusing' this dimension with its character as war. Nevertheless, the 'new' historiography of the Cold War offers exciting ways to rethink the way the topic is taught by teachers of popular courses on twentieth-century international relations at GCSE and A-level.

We know that pupils are usually quick to grasp the main features of the old historiography. Taken at face value, it offers an orderly succession of rival frameworks, from early Schlesinger to Gaddis Mark II via William Appleman Williams, whose *Tragedy of American Diplomacy* seems so obviously a reaction to the grey conformity of the Eisenhower years (though is often conflated with Vietnam-era malaise).² But all too often historiography so configured takes the guise of an elaborate game centred on blame rather than culpability, an awkward framing device ('Post-revisionists argue that...'), or an illustrative addendum that confirms rather than challenges the terms of historical debate. Instead, pupils might be encouraged to frame their understanding by way of a set of historiographically-derived oppositions or themes that have emerged in this most voluminous of literatures in recent years.

The first opposition that might figure is the relationship between material factors and ideal concepts. John Gaddis's earlier work was preoccupied with the first of these: the power interests of the two blocs and their materialist competition for influence and resources.³ By contrast, others have confirmed Nigel Gould-Davies's claim that 'ideology is back' as an analytical category.⁴ Odd Arne Westad, co-editor of the magisterial three-volume *Cambridge History of the Cold War*, is among the best proponents of this approach. In *The Global Cold War* (2005) Westad contends that Americans understood their values to be 'teleological'



as part of his explanation for its foreign policy of intervention and he traces the development of Soviet foreign in similar, mission-like terms, in order to make sense of its political behaviour.⁵ This approach has purchase, for the Cold War is a preeminent example of clashing universalisms.

Another axis against which superpower relations can be appraised sets Soviet authoritarian rule against the USA as a global power. The former is a hallmark of Gaddis in his more recent publications (Mark II), such as *We Now Know* (1997), which argue that

the Cold War pivots around 'authoritarianism in general' and the attempts by the USA and its allies to resist and ameliorate this most Stalinist of impulses.⁶ That Gaddis's 'new history' returns to old answers around about 1997 lends itself to pupil discussions about the ways in which the historian's present influences the historical past. Melvyn Leffler, for instance, claimed Gaddis's work was 'the scholarly diplomatic counterpart of Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History*', and pupils might scrutinise extracts from these two texts, asking what they tell us about the late 1990s – and whether the certainties of that moment hold true today.⁷ A contrasting approach, emphasising the USA as a global power, is best embodied in the exciting and provocative writings of Anders Stephanson. For Stephanson, the Cold War is synonymous with Total War. And it is, in this reading, explicable only as a project for the fulfilment, rationalisation and legitimisation, of the USA's hegemonic pretensions: one that ended in 1963 before it was rekindled by Reagan in the 1980s. His is a deeply controversial but liberating approach – 'more essayistic than definitional' – that forces us to question which conflicts and which processes between 1947 and 1990 truly warrant the 'Cold War' designation.

The final framework offers a choice between 'Europe' and the 'Third World' as the centrepiece in understanding the global and globalising Cold War. For Romero, Europe, and especially Germany, is the political and symbolic hub of the conflict: not only in the earliest years after 1945 but during and after détente too, when the landscape was dominated by figures not only like Thatcher, Brandt, Kohl and Mitterrand

but also like Karamanlis and Papandreou, Suárez and Fanfani. Romero's is a bold challenging thesis that pushes against Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to 'provincialize Europe' and also reconfigures the analytical weight given, rather than to conflict, to co-operation, reciprocity and mutual understanding. Whereas Romero argues that, in the Global South, superpower rivalries imposed upon rather than supplanted already existing conflicts, Michael Latham's ground-breaking studies exemplify the shift in Cold War studies to the Third World. His imaginative arguments chart the histories of American conceptions of modernity in the development practices of postcolonial nations like India and Ghana, explaining the tragedies that engulfed Iran, Vietnam and Guatemala, in terms of ill-conceived American development policies. The same lens might well be applied to the Soviet side too, for the Soviet Union drew on its own sense of itself to shape the outside world in its own image, couched in terms of control and improvement, as in the case of the Angolan Civil War in the 1970s.

To these could be added the many interesting studies of propaganda and culture – pertinent themes in a world challenged by 'alternative facts' – and Samuel Moyn's ground-breaking work on 1970s human-rights discourse, *The Last Utopia* (2012).⁸ But the approaches surveyed above offer productive and exciting entry points for pupils of twentieth-century international relations. In practice, pupils could be shown how to deploy the analytical lens provided by this historiography so as to reconcile the tensions inherent in writing about the diplomatic relations between two nations within their necessarily global context. Beyond this useful activity on the Cold War's geographical contours, pupils might also be encouraged to evaluate which yields most fruit at a given time or in response to a given question, adopting the sort of reflexive methodological pluralism about chronology and causation that has so galvanised the field in recent years.

Designing enquiries to make students think about the 'new' historiography of the Cold War

The author suggests several approaches for students within his text, none of which we shall repeat here. He also suggests some pitfalls to be avoided – the generalisation of arguments within historical schools, or the failure to build something new. He invites students to become involved in exactly the kinds of historiographical debates in which modern historians are, themselves, engaged. How best to achieve this? Students might ask *How far has methodology affected Cold War historiography?* This might help them to build their own pluralist reflexes while analysing others. You could of course change the word 'methodology' – for ideology, geography, the time of writing.

Students working towards an independent enquiry might be encouraged to dig down into the comparison Watts makes between Gaddis and Fukuyama. What does it mean – what can it mean – to compare these pieces? *How far can historians be saying the same thing even if they are writing about different subjects?* Finally, students of all ages might enjoy looking at interpretations in a slightly different way, as Watts does in his description of Latham's work. *What factors make an interpretation particularly 'imaginative'?*

The Editors

Further reading

Michael Latham: (2003) *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and 'Nation Building' in the Kennedy Era*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press and (2011) *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press

Anders Stephanson, who describes the Cold War as 'war-like in every sense except the military:' (2018, forthcoming) *Cold War Considerations*, New York: Verso

Two journals to consider are *Cold War History*, London: Taylor & Francis and *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press

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- Gould-Davies, N. (1999) 'Rethinking the Role of Ideology in International Politics During the Cold War,' *Journal of Cold War Studies, Volume 1*, Issue 1, pp.90-109
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This edition's Polychronicon was compiled by Aaron Watts, Teacher of History, Merchant Taylors' School (11-18 independent, London).

Polychronicon was a fourteenth-century chronicle that brought together much of the knowledge of its own age.

Our Polychronicon in *Teaching History* is a regular feature helping school history teachers to update their subject knowledge, with special emphasis on recent historiography and changing interpretation.

