

THE NEW COLD WAR HISTORY

By John Lewis Gaddis

Outside of a dog, a book is a man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read.

- Groucho Marx

I like this quotation from the other Marx because it suggests how limited our view of the Cold War, until quite recently, has actually been. In contrast to the way most history is written, Cold War historians through the end of the 1980s were working within rather than after the event they were trying to describe. We had no way of knowing the final outcome, and we could determine the motivations of only some—but by no means all—of the major actors. We were in something like the position of those puzzled poseurs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Shakespeare's Hamlet, wondering what in the world was going on and how it was all going to come out.

We now know, to coin a phrase. Or, at least, we know a good deal more than we once did. We will never have the full story: we don't have that for any historical event, no matter how far back in the past. Historians can no more reconstruct what actually happened than maps can replicate what is really there. But we can represent the past, just as cartographers approximate terrain. And with the end of the Cold War and at least the partial opening of documents from the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China, the fit between our representations and the reality they describe has become a lot closer than it once was.

So what does it all add up to? What is the new Cold War history -- that is, histories of the Cold War written after the Cold War ended—all about?

First, it is clear now that, contrary to what historians and theorists of international relations expected when the Cold War began, democratic governments behaved more realistically throughout than did their authoritarian counterparts. By realism, I mean the ability to align one's actions with one's interests. The fact that the Cold War ended as it did -- with the world more democratic than it has ever been— suggests strongly that authoritarianism gave rise to illusions more often than it did effective policy.

We now know what some of these illusions were. Stalin, for example, believed to his dying day that the capitalist states would never join together to contain Soviet expansionism. Why? Because Lenin had taught that capitalists were too greedy ever to cooperate with one another: this idea left the Soviet leader ill-equipped to deal such initiatives as the Marshall Plan, NATO, and the reintegration of Germany and Japan into an American-run system of alliances. Mao Zedong, also for ideological reasons, saw the Soviet Union as an ally of the newly-established People's Republic of China; that view too, in time, he had to rethink. And Nikita Khrushchev risked the fate of his country and possibly of the entire world by placing missiles in Cuba in 1962, in the absurd hope that this could somehow ensure the spread of Castro's revolution throughout Latin America.

What these errors have in common is a romantic rather than a realist view of the world: one gets a certain idea in one's head, rather like Cervantes' Don Quixote, and in an authoritarian system no one is in a position to tell the top leader that his conclusions make no sense. Democratic leaders were often no wiser. But democratic systems did at least provide ways to challenge illusions at the top when they arose, and ultimately to remove leaders who persisted in holding onto them. Far from being progressive states, then, the Soviet Union, its Eastern European satellites and China functioned for many years as absolute monarchies, with all the possibilities for impractical illusions that such a system entails.

Second, and as a consequence, Cold War historians are giving greater weight than they once did to the role of ideas in shaping that conflict. We traditionally had viewed the Cold War as a clash of great powers -- as a continuation

of rivalries that had characterized international relations during the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries. We had calculated power in terms of material indices, giving the greatest emphasis to the military capabilities that existed on each side. Despite the fact that both the United States and the Soviet Union were strongly ideological states, neither historians nor theorists of international relations tended to give sufficient attention to the comparative content of these ideologies, or to the extent to which they elicited support from the people who had to live with them.

What we now can see, though, is that one of the Cold War super-powers -- the Soviet Union—abruptly and completely collapsed, despite the fact that its military strength remained unimpaired. That suggests strongly that we who have studied the Cold War over many years neglected the non-military components of power, and especially the role of ideas. For Marxism-Leninism was itself an idea, which in turn determined how the Soviet Union and the other socialist states organized their power, their politics, their economics, and ultimately the appeals they made to their own people as well as to those beyond their borders. And as the events of 1989-91 all too clearly show, that idea had by then lost its legitimacy.

Cold War history is, therefore, the story of how the Soviet Union and its allies managed to squander their ideological appeal over many years, while the Western democracies retained and even expanded their own. In the end, what people thought counted for much more than what states could do -- and that is a big change from how we've previously conceived Cold War history.

The pattern, in retrospect, was clear by the early 1960s. Capitalism had revived, and the record of command economies had shown no signs of matching it. Marxism-Leninism had suffered devastating setbacks with the suppression of the Hungarian revolution in 1956, the outbreak of the Sino-Soviet split, and the humiliation of the Cuban missile crisis. Germany and Japan had been successfully reintegrated into the Western defense bloc at the time, and the West was well ahead in nuclear weaponry. Why, then, didn't the Cold War end at that point?

Here there's yet a third new insight into Cold War history: it is that nuclear weapons stabilized but probably also prolonged that conflict. We've suspected for a long time that these weapons discouraged escalation of the kind that had caused pre-Cold War crises to lead to hot wars. The Cold War was full of crises, none of them escalated to all-out war, and in this sense nuclear weapons were beneficial.

In another sense, though, they may have extended the Cold War beyond the point at which it might otherwise have ended. Nuclear weapons were so awesome -- and the world had apparently come so close to seeing them used during the Cuban missile crisis -- that the tendency developed to measure world power almost entirely in terms of nuclear capabilities, and to neglect its other dimensions of power. It was as if in assessing the health of some great beast one looked only at its external armaments, paying no attention to the functioning of its brain, heart, and liver. Such an animal would remain formidable in appearance until the day it suddenly keeled over and died.

What nuclear weapons did, then, was to conceal the condition of an aging, formidably armed, but internally deteriorating state. With its sudden death, the Cold War was suddenly over.

That brings up a final, albeit controversial, point: can we really separate the Cold War from the Soviet Union itself? Could such a state have functioned in any other environment? It's worth recalling that the Bolshevik Revolution was itself a declaration of cold war against all other states in the international system at the time. No Soviet leader until Mikhail Gorbachev disavowed the goal of ultimately overthrowing capitalism everywhere, however distant that prospect might have come to seem. The Soviet Union was, therefore, a state uniquely configured for the Cold War— and it has become a good deal more difficult, now that that conflict has ended, to see how it could have done so without the Soviet Union itself having passed from the scene.

Cold War history is becoming at last normal history, in that we can at last write it from beyond a Rosencrantz and Guildenstern point of view. We have finally managed to get outside Groucho's dog, and it's a lot easier now to see what's been going on. Given our contentious character, historians are not about to agree, now

or for decades to come, about the precise details and what they mean. We can at least accept the fact, though, that the view is exhilarating.

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This essay is based on the keynote address delivered by Professor Gaddis at the Foreign Policy Research Institute's History Institute on "The Cold War Revisited," May 1-2, 1998. Designed for secondary school teachers and faculty at community colleges, the History Institutes are part of a larger program of research, publication, and education on issues concerning American identity. Forty teachers from sixteen states participated in the conference. It was published in *Footnotes* The Newsletter of FPRI's Marvin Wachman Fund for International Education, Vol. 5, No. 5 June 1998. Other papers drawing on the conference proceedings will be published in the near future. For more information, contact Alan Luxenberg at the FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102-3684, Tel: (215) 732-3774, ext. 105.

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