

Recent Cold War Studies

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Reviewer:

Dianne Kirby

'Gosh, I miss the Cold War', Bill Clinton reputedly claimed. Clearly for reasons other than historical scholarship as the demise of the Cold War has certainly not stemmed the ever-increasing proliferation of books about a subject that has been exhaustively analysed and passionately debated. Even allowing for Arthur Marwick's legitimate observation that history is a constant re-writing and re-interpretation, a cumulative development, do we really need yet more student texts and a seemingly endless flow of research monographs? Judging by the output, the answer of the publishing industry is a resounding yes. Indeed, Ann Lane and Klaus Larres claim that the process of accumulating knowledge and assessing the significance of new findings in the context of previous Cold War scholarship 'is still very much in its infancy'. (p.16) Access to new sources, the constant revision of old sources, plus the different insights opened up by other fields, especially at present cultural history, mean that Cold War history is continually being enriched. Certainly there have been some significant developments in the last two decades of Cold War historiography. European scholarship flourished in the 1980s following the opening of the archives. The emerging European perspective laid open a far more elaborate pattern of relations in the international arena than had previously been recognised. It not only challenged existing scholarship, it revealed the valuable contribution external sources make to a nuanced and fuller appreciation of the US foreign policy making process. Perhaps the most significant development has been the opening of the Russian and East European archives that followed the ending of the Cold War. A great deal of excitement has been generated by the 'new' Cold War history coming out of these recently opened archives.(1) This is reflected by Klarres' and Lane's inclusion in their excellent collection of classic essays, entitled simply *The Cold War*, of an extract from Vladislav Zubok's and Constantine Pleshakov's jointly-authored *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Harvard University Press; Cambridge, 1996). Addressing the most critical point of the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Zubok and Pleshakov use Soviet archives to delve into the influences and events that shaped Khrushchev's thinking as the world teetered on the edge of potential nuclear annihilation. In 'Khrushchev and Kennedy: The taming of the Cold War', the two authors present some fascinating revelations about the

Soviet premier, his perceptions of Kennedy and the high hopes he had of the new president. They also disclose how valid public fears were at the time and just how close to catastrophe the world actually came, revealing that at the time the US Chiefs of Staff proposed a preventative strike on the Soviet installations in Cuba, the head of the provisional Soviet troops there, General I. A. Pliyev, had a nuclear option at his discretion. The extract provides a detailed exegesis of the trail of events, already explored by American historians in relation to J.F. Kennedy, which led the Soviet premier and the American president to seek more careful containment and management of the East-West conflict. While material from the Soviet archives is of incalculable value, it should not be forgotten that much remains to be learned from the Western side, where far too much still remains classified. An excellent example of effective and objective use of what is available in the newly declassified sources comes from Gregory Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin: America's Strategy to subvert the Soviet Bloc, 1947 - 1956*. A notable contribution to the Cornell Studies in Security Affairs series, the book is distinguished by meticulous research, measured argument and penetrating analysis. Mitrovich develops a proposition that has recently gained currency, that liberation was implicit in the policy of containment as formulated during the Truman era. W. L. Hixson, in his much-praised groundbreaking cultural study *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture and the Cold War* (Houndmills; New York, 1997), had previously argued that the American aim was to avoid direct military conflict through the application of external and internal pressures aimed at promoting instability in the Soviet bloc.(2) Mitrovich contends that the United States initiated offensive action against the Soviet bloc independently of and simultaneously with the inauguration of containment. Mitrovich is not suggesting that American national security elites planned global economic hegemony. Rather, he posits that the desire to create a world without competing blocs, taken together with Soviet policies in Eastern Europe, 'required that the cold war be a struggle for world supremacy with one system ultimately emerging as victor . as indeed has happened.' (p. 181) Mitrovich uses recently declassified intelligence files to argue that the Cold War struggle, especially from 1948 to 1956, was in reality a true war with a victor and a loser. He notes, however, that post-war US policymakers did not intend nor foresee the long commitment that ensued. In fact, they feared that a long-term division of the world would make economic depression and world war inevitable, whereas an open international economic system without competing political-economic blocs would be a guarantor of peace and stability. These beliefs predisposed US policy-makers to favour the expeditious elimination of the Soviet threat, thus allowing the construction of a global political-economic order that included the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In effect, what we have today. The war was to be fought by non-military methods, psychological warfare and covert action in particular, highly influenced, however, by the military balance of power, which in the final analysis decided the outcome. Ironically, it was the developing nuclear stalemate that came to provide the sought for stability, constraining American efforts directed toward a quick win. Mitrovich presents an intricate outline of the sharp bureaucratic friction and rivalry that pervaded the policy process in Washington. Although there appears to be a consensus from 1948 about the need for covert operations and political warfare against the Soviet Union, there was little agreement on what should be done or who should be in charge. The State Department, the CIA, the Pentagon and the PSB (Psychological Strategy Board), a sub-committee of the National Security Council, held differing views on Soviet vulnerabilities and capabilities, leading to different policy offerings. Naturally, this resulted in programmes that, during both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, lacked clear and consistent guidance and objectives, were inadequately co-ordinated and were without proper accountability. Although the Eisenhower administration is credited with slightly better organisation and success in developing political warfare, Mitrovich identifies an inherent contradiction between propaganda and policy. Despite calls for liberation and 'roll-back', the Eisenhower administration was in actuality exceedingly cautious in terms of implementation, deterred in the main by the Soviet Union's perceived nuclear capabilities. Eventually, the Eisenhower administration emulated the more moderate policies to which Truman had succumbed and which the Republicans had vehemently indicted, retreat from over-pressurising the Soviets and inadvertently provoking a nuclear response. Mitrovich's book joins a growing body of scholarship that has challenged the traditional view that it was the Soviet Union that was the master of propaganda and political warfare during the Cold War.(3) However, gauging the success of covert and propaganda activities is not easy. Mitrovich subscribes to the view that American advocacy of liberation drew the Hungarians into an imprudent and unfortunate uprising. But impetus also came from internal factors, not least a domestic power struggle that escalated from demonstration to insurrection. Nonetheless, this book offers an invaluable exegesis of a

notoriously difficult-to-research dimension of Cold War history. Mitrovich's scholarship is not only highly commendable, but also testimony to the continuing value of American-based archival research. The same is true of the work of John McNay whose book *Acheson and Empire: The British Accent in American Foreign Policy* is based on rigorous research in archival sources that include the Truman Library, the National Archives, the Public Record Office in London and Acheson's personal papers at Yale. McNay presents a persuasive and compelling argument that is not only a reassessment of Dean Acheson and a challenging revision of a crucial period in Cold War history, but also highlights the personal dimension as being of much more significance than it is usually accorded in the historical record. It is McNay's contention that 'Human agency is an especially key factor in foreign policy making'. On this basis he has undertaken a study of the ambiguities and complexities of US foreign policy in the context of one man's personal history, Dean Acheson. Acheson was one of the main architects of the Cold War as Secretary of State from 1949 to 1953 in the administration of President Harry Truman. Acheson was, according to McNay, 'more responsible for the foreign policy of the United States during his tenure in office than the president he served.' McNay posits that to understand the substance of American foreign policy in these crucial early Cold War years, it is Acheson rather than Truman who needs to be studied. And to understand Acheson, according to McNay's central argument, it is critical to appreciate the way in which his policy choices were influenced by his 'world-view'. According to McNay, Acheson's world-view, to which he adhered throughout his life, 'not only grew out of his Ulster heritage but also encouraged him to see international relations generally, and US policy specifically, in terms derived from traditional style British imperialism.' (p. 2) McNay's argument deserves serious consideration, not least owing to the consequential outcomes for the United States and Britain that he perceives as deriving from Acheson's policies in these years. The British were encouraged to devote more resources than they could afford to often hopeless situations because they mistook the support and sympathy of one man as indicative of general American favour and long-term assistance. Nor were Acheson's policies good for America. Support for Britain in these years brought unwelcome repercussions, generating bitterness and criticism, even hostility, from Third World nations that saw the United States as 'little better than a front for British interests'. (p. 4) McNay tests his hypothesis with a close examination of the responses from the United States and Britain to four nations, India, Ireland, Iran and Egypt, all seeking independence from British control during Acheson's secretaryship. In the process of testing his own conclusions, McNay challenges the widely accepted view that Acheson was a foreign policy realist. He contends that this is a view that requires modification in the light of the 'imperial paradigm' to which Acheson was subject. Most importantly, McNay argues that historians have overstressed the continuity of US foreign policy during the Cold War era. He claims that there were significant changes in US foreign policy between when Acheson entered and left high office and that historians have missed these owing to 'Acheson's success in masking his imperial paradigm behind a veil of realist rhetoric. Certainly the case studies that McNay presents for consideration provide persuasive insights that support his interpretation of Acheson's motivation. Each one is a worthwhile study on its own account, showing a masterly grasp of the minutiae and nuances of unfolding event in the countries examined, not to mention equally profound insights into the evolution of Anglo-American relations and the interaction of individual British and American officials. McNay convincingly shows that human agency matters. In demonstrating this point, however, he raises the difficulties, particularly pertinent to the study of Cold War diplomacy, in discerning the influence in the policy-making process between pragmatic realism and romantic idealism. In arguing that historians have not simply overlooked the nostalgic, romantic admiration for empire incorporated into Acheson's diplomacy, but have mistaken it for realism, McNay raises a significant problem at the heart of Cold War history. Realism as a philosophy is notoriously hard to define. The problem is compounded by the complex phenomenon of the Cold War, the very nature of which remains contested, especially the degree to which it was an ideological conflict as opposed to a pure power struggle. And it is this same difficulty that makes it impossible for McNay to prove his thesis. He himself recognises that a key objection to his study is that it ignores the perceived necessity at the time of preserving the Anglo-American alliance in the Cold War world. McNay's evidence is persuasive, but it does not displace the other cogent explanations provided by realism. What it does do effectively is to illustrate the importance of the ideals, beliefs and values of key leaders in the international arena. The distinguished Cold War historian Melvyn Leffler has elsewhere drawn attention to how the new historians of the Cold War stress the significance of ideas and beliefs. However, while focusing on the importance of ideology and culture, the new scholarship tends to be preoccupied with

communist ideology rather than that of the West. (4) The trend is discernible in *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* by John Lewis Gaddis (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1997), the best known historian of the Cold War and foremost proponent of a school of interpretation -- post-revisionism -- that stresses the importance of geo-politics and power balances. (5) Gaddis's new work is distinctive owing to the extent that it abandons post-revisionism and returns to a more traditional interpretation of the Cold War, blaming the Cold War on Stalin's personality, on authoritarian government and on Communist ideology. (6) American ideas and the actions they inspired have been rather marginalised in the new literature, which conveys an image of a passive Washington. (7) In reality, as McNay shows, American officials held powerful beliefs that influenced their approach to policy-making. And, as McNay again shows, these beliefs were more than simply about the superiority of American institutions, culture and way of life. Thus, while McNay might not persuade everyone to accept his central contention about Acheson's motivations, he raises profound questions about the role of individual beliefs and values in the policy-making process. For students newly embarking on the study of the Cold War there are two excellent new texts from Blackwell. The prize-winning author of *The Iron Curtain: Churchill, America, and the Origins of the Cold War* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1986), Fraser J. Harbutt, reveals a firm grasp of the period from the Yalta conference in 1945 to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 in *The Cold War Era*. A first class contribution to Blackwell's useful series 'Problems in American History', the text is more than an important introduction to the Cold War, it is an outstanding overview of a complex and critical period in which the Cold War was sometimes the key player and sometimes simply the backdrop. In addition to being a comprehensive survey, the book is distinguished by perceptive insights into the historiographical debates, which Harbutt not only shrewdly assesses, but to which he also makes significant contributions. A key feature of this book is that the reader derives a sense of the ways in which historians, academic, journalist, novelists and others, have defined and explained compelling Cold War issues, while simultaneously being treated to Harbutt's own distinctive approach to the period. Harbutt's judicious insinuation of his particular notions provides an original and stimulating outlook that brings fresh perspectives to material that can otherwise seem deceptively familiar. For example, Harbutt views American diplomacy as in the main the expression, not of a warrior or imperial culture, but of a compulsively managerial ethos. Harbutt is 'intrigued by the uneasy co-existence of a conservative political structure and a private realm of techno-business volatility and radical popular culture'. (p. ix) Additional insights are derived from Harbutt's invoking the neglected concept of generational change to supplement the hallowed trinity of class, race and gender. Above all, Harbutt's multi-dimensional treatment of the era provides rich insights into and telling analyses of American society and the way in which the Cold War was at all times a formidable cultural and intellectual presence. He also writes with a flair and clarity that make the book a pleasure to read. Equally pleasurable to read, well presented and discerning is *The Cold War: The Essential Readings*. The editors, Klaus Larres and Ann Lane, are to be commended on a selection that provides not only an introduction to the period, but also an introduction to some of the very best scholars and scholarship in the field. The essays are solicitously arranged into four thematic sections that provide a logical and coherent overview of the period: 'Cold War Origins', 'First Attempts at Conflict Management', 'War and Détente' and 'The End of the Cold War'. Each section is introduced by an informative summary of the period, including an erudite and astute review of its historiography. While the value of the Melvyn P. Leffler survey (see note 4) lay in its authorial overview, the value of this book is very much in the diversity of views presented. The two texts are extraordinarily complementary and students would certainly profit from studying the two together. From Larres and Lane, in particular, students will learn to appreciate the opposing scholarly views and different interpretations that are the essence of Cold War historiography. For example, to illustrate how the debate about Cold War origins is one about perceptions and intentions, the selection begins with two of the most eminent Cold War historians, Leffler and Gaddis. While both authors express reservations about Soviet intentions, Gaddis argues that the US was ultimately a reactive power and that the primary element in bringing about the Cold War was the personality of Josef Stalin. Leffler, on the other hand, is rather more equivocal about American foreign policy. The end of the Cold War took scholars completely by surprise. Insightful, cogent commentaries on this unpredicted event come from two doyens of Cold War history, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr and H. W. Brands. Other important contributions on key Cold War episodes come from Richard Crockatt, Raymond L. Garthoff and Klaus Larres himself, not to mention the important essay from Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov discussed above. Lane and Larres are to be congratulated on bringing together

this wide range of excellent scholarship into a coherent whole that makes a first class contribution to our understanding of the era and the ceaseless debates surrounding it. And in the crisis climate of the present, with the ominous resonance of the 'War on Terror' increasingly redolent of America's Cold War past, these debates are of more than just historical merit. Bill Clinton missed the Cold War because anti-communism provided a more potent rationale for American interventionism than did humanitarian missions and promoting democracy in the eyes of the all-important American electorate. Michael Ignatieff is not alone among political commentators in discerning the degree to which the political and intellectual climate of the 'War on Terror' now resembles that of the Cold War. (8) David Blight reminds us that 'All memory is prelude.' (9) Therefore, keeping in mind George Orwell's famous epigraph, 'Who controls the past, controls the future', the fact is that we need more books of the calibre of those discussed here. More research, more debate, more understanding of the Cold War is today an urgent imperative. April 2002 Notes: 1. John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1997). 2. I make the same point in a study of how religious forces were mobilised to create dissent and contribute to instability behind the Iron Curtain, 'Harry Truman's religious legacy: the holy alliance, containment and the Cold War', in D. Kirby, ed., *Religion and the Cold War* (Palgrave: Basingstoke, 2002). 3. Scott Lucas, *Freedom's War: The US Crusade Against the Soviet Union, 1945-1956* (New York University Press; New York, 1999). 4. Melvyn P. Leffler, 'The Cold War: what do "We Now Know"?', *American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), 501-24. 5. Gaddis, *We Now Know*. 6. Leffler, 'The Cold War'. 7. Ibid. 8. Michael Ignatieff, 'Is the human rights era ending?', *New York Times*, 5 February 2002. 9. David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2001), p. 397. Klaus Larres and Ann Lane are happy to accept the review of *The Cold War: The Essential Readings*.

Other reviews:

[5]

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