Journal of American Studies, **34** (2000), 3, 503–508 Printed in the United Kingdom
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Review Essay

Cold War Dichotomies

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James E. Cronin, *The World The Cold War Made. Order, Chaos and the Return of History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996, £15.99). Pp. 344. ISBN 0 0415 90821 3.

Richard M. Fried, *The Russians Are Coming! The Russians Are Coming! Pageantry and Patriotism in Cold War America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, £25.00). Pp. 220. ISBN 0 19 507020 8.

Michael J. Hogan, *A Cross of Iron. Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State, 1945–1954* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, £25.00). Pp. 554. ISBN 0 521 64044 x.

Michael Kort (ed.), *The Columbia Guide to the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, £32.00). Pp. 366. ISBN 0 231 10772 2.

Joseph M. Siracusa, *Into the Dark House. American Diplomacy and the Ideological Origins of the Cold War* (Claremont, CA: Regina Books, 1998, $36.95 cloth, $14.95 paper). Pp. 288. ISBN 0 941690 81 4, 0 941690 80 6.

There was a time not so long ago when it seemed that there was nothing new to be written about the origins of the Cold War.[1] The topic appeared to have become stale, with the same battles being refought, along familiar lines.[2] Cold

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[1] Ethan B. Kapstein, "Cold War Scholarship: Time for a Freeze?," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, **19** (1988), 282.

[2] For the way apparently new approaches got dragged back to the old orthodox/revisionist battle, see John L. Gaddis, "The Tragedy of Cold War History," *Diplomatic History*, **17** (1993), 1–16 and Bruce Cumings, "'Revising Postrevisionism' Or, The Poverty of Theory in Diplomatic History," in Michael J. Hogan, ed., *America in the World. The Historiography of American Foreign Relations since 1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 34–44. The first fruit of material from the Eastern bloc was to produce a resurgence of "orthodoxy," though some writers have cautioned against a claim that the Soviet archives provide definitive answers, Vladimir V. Shustov, "A

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875851006474 Published online by Cambridge University Press

War studies have not abated, however, and indeed have been reinvigorated by a number of developments. The writer on American involvement in the Cold War now has to consider how to integrate Eastern bloc material into their work, and the developing theses of scholars from other Western nations, and from within the US to respond to the prevailing intellectual trend in much of academia to focus on ideology, culture and discourse.

These matters are finding their limited way into books designed for undergraduates, of which Michael Kort's and Joseph Siracusa's are recent examples. Kort's *The Columbia Guide to the Cold War* offers interpretive, encyclopaedic and bibliographic material. The standard depiction of the historiography of the Cold War is given – a dichotomy of traditionalist and revisionist – without endorsing a particular viewpoint, but Kort's historical overview offers a basically orthodox view of the Cold War, with Stalin as the active and dangerous element and US policy reacting to the Soviet danger.

Siracusa's book follows a fairly conventional "diplomatic history" approach, built around "key documents." The stated intention is to present the Cold War to students as an ideological conflict, but this is narrowed down quickly to an examination of the development among US policy-makers of a Cold War mentality. Siracusa examines the influence of the British and of certain Communist bloc actions in shaping the ideology of containment. This influence is primarily seen at the political level. Despite the title of the book, Siracusa does not go far in exploring the ideology itself, nor the cultural assumptions and perceptions present in elite opinion. He goes beyond purely American documents (indeed half of the documents printed are British) and usefully draws the student into considering how attitudes of allies may have influenced American Cold War ideologies. The Cold War itself, however, is seen as a US/USSR contest, with Britain and Australia feeding into American opinions, rather than being players in the game in their own right.

The thrust of the first half of *The Columbia Guide to the Cold War* is similar: it is part of a series on US history and culture, and the Cold War is essentially depicted as a US–Soviet conflict, though a non-superpower dimension is acknowledged at times. The emphasis in the essay and the biographic entries, as in Siracusa's book, is essentially on policy-makers, with little on the economic, cultural or geopolitical context in which they operated. However, in the most useful part of the *Columbia Guide*, the resources section, Kort begins to go beyond a narrow "diplomatic history" concept of the Cold War by including cultural materials, though in this case it is just US culture. In doing so, this book points the way to the multidimensional nature of the Cold War in the US. While saying little in its text on the cultural impact or nature of the Cold War, the list of resources, and the informative annotations give a good lead for the interested student to understand the range of aspects of the Cold War that can bring the

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View on the Origins of the Cold War and Some Lessons Thereof," in Geir Lundestad and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *Beyond the Cold War. New Dimensions in International Relations* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1993), 24; Melvyn P. Leffler, "Inside Communist Archives: The Cold War Reopened," *Foreign Affairs*, **75** (July/Aug. 1996), 120–35.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875851006474 Published online by Cambridge University Press

necessary interdisciplinary perspective. It lists some major films and other cultural sources such as novels and documentaries, as well as giving a flavour of some of the material available on the world wide web.

Siracusa and Kort pass over economic motivations for the Cold War. A focus on economics is characterized as "revisionist" and lumped with the old theory of the predominance of the "Open Door" in American policy formulation. Too many historians, particularly those writing for the general market or for students, are anxious to distance themselves from 1960s style revisionism, and acknowledge little in the way of economic motivations for American policy-makers, despite the advent of corporatism as a theory for interpreting US foreign relations.[3] Cronin's book, while not revisionist, sees economics as playing a central role. To Cronin, the Cold War was essentially a world system, and one posited on the duality of socialism and democracy. Covering the whole of the Cold War, Cronin sees the outcome as the triumph of democracy and capitalism and the end of the socialist experiment. It is not clear how the continuance of Communist Party rule in China fits into this easy dichotomy. While this is very much a broad-ranging overview, Cronin does have some interesting things to say about the early Cold War, and in particular his world-system approach allows him to see that Soviet policy-makers were influenced by their perceptions of American policy, and were as reactive as the Americans.[4] The Americans themselves had aims and objectives and sets of assumptions about the world that they acted upon during World War II and after, as did the Soviets, and the Cold War resulted from the perceptions of each of the other and how these were unfolding. This is a conclusion which can also be drawn from a reading of two books which take quite a different approach to the early Cold War.

Richard Fried has responded to the challenge to write "cultural history" by examining the organization of patriotic observances, such as the "Freedom Train," pageants and commemorative days during the days of the high Cold War. He examines in detail the dramatized "Communist take-over" of Mosinee, Wisconsin on May Day, 1950. The pageants and displays that Fried describes, the various "days" (such as Loyalty Day, Law Day, Armed Forces Day and I Am An American Day) and historical commemoratives, represented an effort primarily by groups from the middle echelon of the elite, whom he calls "patriots," to generate popular support for domestic anti-Communism and containment of the Soviet Union. Loyalty Day was thus deliberately scheduled in opposition to the left's May Day celebrations. However, closer analysis of the evidence that Fried presents suggests a more nuanced and complex situation. Underlying is a conviction by progenitors that it was necessary to galvanize the American population to a more active and vigilant engagement in the defence of their cherished liberties. Fried shows interestingly that such concerns were prevalent in the World War II years and before: that is, they predated the Cold

[3] Thomas J. McCormick, "Drift or Mastery? A Corporatist Synthesis for American Diplomatic History," *Reviews in American History*, **10** (1982), 318–30; Michael J. Hogan, "Corporatism: A Positive Appraisal," *Diplomatic History*, **10** (1986), 363–72.

[4] A view stated persuasively in Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao and the Korean War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 220.

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War, and may perhaps be seen then as more of a cause of, or at least impetus for, the Cold War, than a symptom of it. The emphasis on vigilance fits in with the national security ethos, but Fried points out that it had its origins in concerns to Americanize immigrants in the earlier part of the century. Its continuance was part of a continued belief by a range of organizations and individuals, harking back to the unity and sacrifice of the war years, that people were apathetic about their citizenship duties. Fried does not ask whether these assumptions had any grounding in fact. It is not clear whether these "patriots" had real evidence for this, or were making a priori assumptions.[5] A linked question arises, which is exactly what effect these events had. He shows that commemorative days tended quickly to become an excuse for a trip to the beach and to be drained of any specific message, as people suffered "patriotic overload". There is documentation of the organization of the events and the organizers' views of responses to them, but more evidence of public receptivity and memories of them by surviving participants would be welcome. Finally, it is a pity that Fried did not spread his net a little wider and consider some of the popular culture of the 1950s that is listed in the *Columbia Guide*: the Mosinee events exactly mirrored training films shown to US Army recruits, and have resonances in a number of films, including for instance *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.[6]

Michael Hogan's extensive study enables us to place these events in a national political context. He recapitulates in detail the disagreements both within the Truman and Eisenhower administrations and with Congress, upon issues like Universal Military Training, the defence budget, aid to allies, and the organization of defence and national security. Hogan addresses these issues in terms of a continuing dialectic between two opposed visions of American policy: those of national security managers, principally in the State Department and the Department of Defense, and of conservatives, located in the Treasury and also having a powerful presence in the Senate. He finds that Truman and Eisenhower shared an approach that had characteristics of both sides in the debate, and both sought to construct compromise solutions that fulfilled their basic objectives. This scenario is by no means a novel one. Hogan's new approach, however, is to discuss it in cultural terms. The central theme of the book is that all sides in these fierce and fractious disputes shared and drew upon a common cultural narrative concerning the origins and uniqueness of American values, and that both repeatedly addressed their concerns in terms of fears that the policies of their opponents would destroy those values by leading to the creation of a "garrison state." They identified their way with preservation of American liberties and that of their opponents as leading to destruction of those values by the creation of an over-powerful executive, a huge military beyond civilian control, heavy taxation and a

[5] Others have identified elite concerns about public apathy at the start of the Cold War, for instance, Thomas G. Paterson, *Meeting the Communist Threat. Truman to Reagan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 80–81; and Daniel Yergin, *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State* (London: Penguin, 1977), 172–73, 284–85. Yergin suggests public complacency was in decline by 1948.

[6] See, e.g., Eric Smoodin, "Watching the Skies: Hollywood, the 1950s and the Soviet Threat," *Journal of American Culture*, **12** (1989), 35–40; Nora Sayre, *Running Time: The Films of the Cold War* (New York: Dial Press, 1982), 201.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875851006474 Published online by Cambridge University Press

burdensome bureaucracy. Such themes are common knowledge in conservative rhetoric, of course, imbued with their hostility towards the New Deal, but it is interesting to find that national security advocates shared in the same fears, for they believed that a retreat from global responsibilities (defence of the free world) and a failure to see that peace and liberty were indivisible would lead not to a safe democratic fortress, but to a beleaguered island in an ocean of totalitarianism, to the ultimate detriment of American liberties. As in Fried's work, the issue was American identity. Each side used strategies of "otherness" to legitimise their viewpoint. Hogan painstakingly describes how these themes were deployed repeatedly as each major defence and national security issue came up. Hogan's use of vocabulary and concepts drawn from cultural studies, such as "otherness" and "cultural narratives," shows an attempt to respond to the culturalists' challenge. It is, however, firmly embedded in the documents of the policy-making elite, to such a detailed extent that the point is rather belaboured, with the consequence that one begins to wonder what exactly the significance of this "binary system of symbolic representation," and this shared set of images was. They begin to appear merely rhetorical devices, calling upon cherished but commonplace ideas. If these ideas truly were shared, then they cannot explain the very real and bitter differences at the level of perceptions as well as policy.

After his extensive discussion of these debates in Washington, which resulted in the qualified victory of the national security advocates, Hogan devotes his final chapter to the wider circle. Here his work covers some of the same ground as Fried's. He looks at some of the same events, particularly Attorney-General Tom Clark's Freedom Train and the Mosinee enactment. This section is mostly based on secondary materials, until Hogan moves to trying to assess the public opinion dimension, a task which Fried does not attempt. Hogan seeks to discover whether the same cultural narratives and fears of a garrison state were evident in public discourse. He chooses newspaper editorials and letters to editors to give evidence of this, and finds, probably not surprisingly, that indeed these same images are present. What Hogan, like Fried, is unable to establish is whether the "patriots" had any grounds for their perceptions that the American people had "gone soft" and actually needed actions to recapture the moral discipline and civic virtue they had possessed in an earlier time (as George Kennan put it). Hogan reports that the response to the Freedom Train was one of awe and astonishment, but the suspicion remains that the architects of these activities were pursuing their own objectives, independent of evidence of a real public problem in this area. The discussion in this chapter also goes further to reinforce the impression from the earlier sections, that these anxieties and objectives predated the opening of the Cold War, and were based on a bundle of attitudes including elite concerns about maintaining a certain American identity, conservative hostility to the profound changes wrought by the New Deal, a sense of the production benefits of mobilizing the population for extraordinary efforts during World War II, as well as an antipathy to totalitarianism that predated the predominance of fear about Stalin's Soviet Union. If such an impression is correct, it means that, without returning to the over-simplified critique of 1960s revisionists, and regardless of evidence now available about Stalin's expansionist objectives, it is not plausible to continue to see United States policy-makers as merely or even predominantly

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reactive. The USSR appears indeed in the debates Hogan describes as a useful "other," of a symbolic nature (alternating with "Prussian"), to support and carry forward domestic ideological positions that had already been formed in the New Deal and World War II periods, even if by the early 1950s, both conservatives and national security advocates were placing containment and anti-communism above anti-statism and the welfare state respectively.

These diverse studies reveal the continuing richness of the Cold War as a subject. They represent varied efforts to widen the scope of Cold War study. In this they are to be applauded. However, taken together they highlight what has been one of the factors limiting our understanding of this phenomenon. We remain, it seems, attracted by the binary vision so characteristic of the Cold War. One of the central characteristics of the Cold War discourse has been the use of dichotomies. Such dichotomies included good/evil, capitalist/communist, moral/amoral, religious/irreligious, barbaric/civilized, imperialist/liberationist. Scholarship on the Cold War has tended to affirm these dichotomies – partly at least because such scholarship was part of the Cold War discourse itself. The Cold War is now over, and it is perhaps time to question the very basic paradigms by which it is reconstructed in historical accounts. While this is proceeding in certain areas, it is notable that the dichotomy approach remains seductive. Each of the works under review here finds it a useful conceptual device for understanding the Cold War, be it the conservatives/national security enthusiasts division of Hogan or the traditional bipolar US/USSR spilt, or indeed the familiar and rather tired description of historiography as orthodox or revisionist. Certainly the dichotomies work well in establishing the confrontational nature of discourse in the Cold War, and indicate how Cold War definitions of self, nationhood and state were shaped by reference to a dangerous "other," either within or outwith the homeland, whose characteristics represented absolute opposites. This was certainly the way that the world appeared to protagonists, most particularly in the defining period of the early Cold War from 1945 to 1955.

However, there is a point at which accepting this essentially early Cold War dichotomy becomes less than useful in understanding the complexities of this phenomenon. In point of fact, the analyses of Cronin, Fried and Hogan's books become too nuanced to be contained comfortably within such an approach, and point to a more multidimensional approach. Hopefully, in years to come, Cold War studies will go beyond binary divisions, and see, as Hogan's work suggests, that it was a complex, multifaceted phenomenon of culture and politics, in which American policies were shaped by both cultural and political debates, long-standing and new – and were also influenced by the outcomes of similar debates in other states both sides of the Iron Curtain.

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