

The Cold War. A Television History. "Program 1: Comrades, 1917-1945". British Broadcasting Corporation,

Reviewed by Richard C. Raack

Published on (October, 1997)

The least important contributors to the current BBC-CNN series on the Cold War were historians, if I may judge from the one program I saw before leaving the States for some European research and teaching, and other evidence I have since been given. Most important were the commercials; disregarding them was difficult. But, even as I concede their necessity in the States, they were in this case used by the distributors (who, as I understand it, are also originally responsible for the production) in such a number, and such a way, to break up what continuity Episode One, *Comrades, 1917-1945*, had. Actually, the choice by the television producers to attempt to cover such an extensive period doomed this first program inevitably to appear as a number of discontinuous episodes none of history's seamless web for their viewers.[2] A fellow watcher, no historian, a person with but a modest background in European history, could make nothing of it after the viewing. In any event, the first program's tried and true ("cornball," is perhaps the *juste mot*) format, a jumble of talking heads and actuality footage, offered nothing much new. As history, it contained much would be fact and analysis that is downright incorrect. I say the historians were evidently dispensable for a number of reasons, and not only because they were not relied upon to comment on the action during the program. This point others have already made. Indeed, "historians," well managed

by a journalist, did appear in a subsequent, conjoined hour of talking heads. Their appearances came along with episodes of television production, vignettes about events beyond 1945. The latter were perhaps meant as teasers or to serve the useful exploitation of completed production segments that could not be fitted into the final cuts of the programs. Yet even the "historians" used for the first episode of talking heads were not historians at all (if a Ph.D. in history and a job teaching the subject be regarded as the usual definition of the title, "historian," these days). One "historian" of the three on camera is, I believe, boss of a private archive oddly titled *The National Security Archive* it being neither governmental (as the title implies; in fact its lawyers have spent more than a little time suing the United States government), nor national, nor concerned with security that is, as the latter term is normally used in government. A second "head" has academic credentials from the former Soviet Union. Whatever they are, he never made them clear in the history book he co-authored. The book, bringing in materials from some former Soviet archives, deals mainly with Soviet Union's foreign adventurism in the twenty years after 1945. But this Harvard University Press book's writers manifest, *en passant*, a truly flabbergasting, one might say, Stalinist, indifference to the Europe that is central to their subject (just two, of many examples: they have Poland moved eastward, and not westward, as a

result of Stalin's territorial machinations during World War II; they misplace the site of the founding of the Cominform by a hundred or so kilometers, and put it in the wrong country). I say "Stalinist" because that murderous boulder shifted peoples and borders about with like indifference. In any case, this "historian" consultant is, or was, employed at the archive which presumably lacks both a geographical reference section and a budget for carfare to the Library of Congress. <p> The third performer is, I believe, a political scientist, but she has actually researched and written from former Soviet and other archives some commendable, tightly argued, historical reports on key events of the Cold War. Her credentials to talk about the parts of Cold War she expertises are indubitable. Yet the journalist-moderator did not ask these historians to comment on the television presentation of history, 1917-1945, but put to them historical and futurological questions on which they were scarcely expert, or that did not pertain to what had just passed on the screen. Perhaps one may jump to the conclusion that the producers did not want their video products content analyzed or criticized as history. It was also clear from the credits, which are topped by Ted Turner ("Concept"), Martin Smith ("Producer") and Sir Jeremy Isaacs (I believe he also enters the roll somewhere near the top, but my notes are unclear on this point) who was in charge. The actual historian-advisers (of which, to my recollection, only a minority may actually be historians) found themselves listed later, as I recall somewhere down the line below the grips, gaffers and authorities on maquillage. It was apparently the producers who managed the historical content of the episode, selected the interviewees, did the interviewing, chose the writer (also, I believe, a journalist) and moderator, made the final cut, set the flacks to flacking and picked the "historians." The latter probably played some kind of role. But what, if any, role these historians had remains unclear after two viewings of program one. They are, at least collectively, better than the product

they are associated with. <p> I also judge, I think not incorrectly, that the historians were largely unimportant to the production chiefs because, to the conference on the Cold War Sir Jeremy called in London this September, at Chatham House,[3] among a very large number of other guests, came an wholly different set of historians--different from those who appeared in the television credits, that is. (Sir Jeremy made it clear in advance to those invited that they would have to pay their own way.) <p> One of those who then spoke has written much about the coming of the second war, but from a Western perspective, and from research accomplished in the West some years back. The second of the two allotted a word, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., was invited from the United States, but he was not listed in the program as a historian. In fact, he did play an important role in the early days of the once flaming historical debate with the "revisionists," who wanted to blame the coming of the Cold War on the United States. Almost no one among those early, and passionate, entrants into the discussion had never been in an archive outside the United States, and few of them, indeed, could carry on the debate once the foreign language archives began to open. Professor Schlesinger, to my knowledge, has not recently, in the last twenty-five or so years, done systematic research on the Cold War. My point is that no historians among the many who have recently worked long and hard in the former East Bloc archives, and who actually have much new to add to the history of the Cold War, were programmed for a major segment of time to contribute their up to date information to the discussion. <p> Moreover, again suggestive of the actual role of historians in the minds of the television producers: Sir Jeremy and another person, probably a journalist, in any event, not the Historians-consultants wrote the book launched to accompany the series. In the publicity materials for the book to accompany the "ground-breaking 24 part series," only these two, along with a British actor who narrates the series (the omniscient narrator, Sir Laurence Olivier in

one of Sir Jeremy's earlier productions), were named. The abundant historical flaws in the production, of which I suggest but a few below, help establish the level of their research and understanding. <p> Finally, I contend that the historians are effectively used by the central production group only as supernumeraries because, in addition to the evidence I have produced above, the publicity outfit organized by the producers sent advance review copies of the programs to popular press reviewers, but not, to my knowledge, to the editors of the several journals, like <cite>Film and History</cite>, journals that, unlike media critics in general, purpose dealing systematically and professionally with historical reporting in the audio-visual media. If I remember correctly, the television critic of the <cite>San Francisco Chronicle</cite>, a newspaper no giant in the pygmy world of American daily journalism told readers that he had received thirteen programs in advance. I have suggested above that the producers may want to avoid just the kind of criticism that the "experts" following program one were helped to avoid, had they any in mind. Yet, that criticism is central to the whole enterprise of academic reviewing and the ultimate production of verisimilitudinous history. <p> I also garnered the impression that Ted Turner and Sir Jeremy deputized a production group that likely reflected their own pre-cast views on Cold War history. That was perhaps to be expected. In any case, one might characterize the general political cast of the first program as that deriving from authors who have spent years of reading in the (sometime Manchester) <cite>Guardian</cite>, whose politics nowadays are, of course, not far at all from those that characterize most of the American press and even the BBC itself. Whether because of the political direction set by the producers or their sheer incompetence as historians, some of the oldest historical chestnuts long favored by Soviet propagandists were reheated for viewers' consumption. <p> At the outset, the producers strove to scare the hell out of prospective viewers (just what films, espe-

cially those made for young people and the young in spirit, are supposed to do these days?) with the prospect of atomic annihilation. They then, snidely, U.K. style, blamed only "two super powers, armed to the teeth" for the Cold War conflict. It is as if Winston Churchill (author of the most famous Cold War speech), the leaders of the British Labour Party, HMG of post-war days, and the French government, were not all scared out of their own wits by what they saw as definite Soviet threats to the remaining, non-Sovietized part of the Continent around the time of the Berlin Blockade), so frightened that they were panting to hug Uncle Sam, his arms and his money, apparently forever. (And so NATO was born.) <p> Let me roll a few of the chestnuts: the producers implied to viewers by means of their omniscient narrator that Stalin, before the war, in 1938, was ready to rush to the support of Czechoslovakia against Hitler, had the British and French only done so first. (Do they mean just as Stalin rushed to the support of Poland against the German devil a year later?) In fact, Igor Lukes's 1996 book on that very subject, a text deriving from newly opened archives, makes it obvious that Stalin's only plan in 1938 was to egg the West on into a war with the Germans, the very same kind of war he actually wanted and got in 1939 (when he, Hitler's chum, also directed the domestic Communist parties in the West to sabotage the war effort! Stalin wanted Hitler's war to last as long as possible). Getting this key point utterly wrong, indeed downright backward, and effectively blaming Stalin's "desperate stroke" on Neville Chamberlain and French Premier Daladier, the producers wholly sabotage their own history to follow (that "stroke" being Stalin's infamous Pact with Hitler; him, Stalin told Khrushchev the day after it was dated and signed, he was pleased to have just fleeced completely moreover, it was, in fact, Hitler who was actually desperate). <p> Clearly, if we realize what Stalin was really up to from 1938 to 1941, we will grasp what he had in mind in 1944 and 1945, when the Red Army moved west, and the first conflicts of

the Cold War were engaged. Indeed, we can infer some of Stalin's pre-war plans for all of Europe by reading what he accomplished by way of Sovietizing its eastern half from 1944 on. And that insight will clarify who caused the Cold War. More fusty chestnuts to the taste of the producers: (1) They say that Hitler did not hide his ambitions to dominate Europe (which Stalin's cooperation with him in the notorious Pact, by the way, helped make possible though that's not in the script), and the world. It is true that, on occasion, the unlamented German Fhrer seemed to want to recover some of the German colonies lost at Versailles, and take over some others in Africa from the Belgians and French. So we can say that Hitler, at least some of the time, wanted to dominate Europe, and part of Africa, too. But where did he write, or say, that he wanted to dominate the world, as the producers contend? Can anyone suggest to me where Hitler wrote, or said, that? But I'll bet almost every antique television series on the second war or Third Reich has. Sir Jeremy and crew like the flavor of that one, too. Maybe they read it in the *Guardian*. (2) A British witness (to be sure) tells us that Roosevelt foolishly tried to ingratiate himself with Stalin. That is true. But are we to believe Churchill did not do the same, or is that fact not relevant to the London crew? Read, for just one awful example, the records of the Moscow conference of Churchill and Stalin in 1944, where Winston browbeat the helpless Polish premier right in front of Stalin, along Winston's way to selling out Britain's first, and most loyal, ally. Anyone who knows of the Cold War tragedy in Poland that follows knows that Stalin drew the proper conclusion from that episode. (3) Stalin (after Hitler's attack) "cried out," says the narrator, for more aid! "Poor Joe!" He, who had, until 22 June 1941, invested himself wholly in supplying Hitler with the raw materials he needed to conduct the war; he, who, in cahoots with Hitler, had invaded, looted and deliberately depopulated from his own ethnic intent, Britain's Polish ally, and a few other innocent nations; he, who had

supplied the Nazis with a Russian base to attack British ships; he, who was then negotiating unbeknownst to Churchill to make peace with Hitler, had suddenly brought down on himself the tragic situation he had long hoped to bring, and succeeded in bringing, down on others, now wanted Western help desperately. Churchill, at the time, in the fall of 1941, recalled to others, but not to Stalin, the latter's past record of aiding Britain's enemy when the Brits were desperate and almost alone and "Poor Joe," more elegantly put, was just about what Churchill then sardonically expressed. But our series producers do not recall that for viewers. It is history probably unknown to them. In fact, at this point, as well as through much of program one, they twist words or avoid facts even they must know, seeming to want to support as positive a view of Stalin as possible (at the very least we can suggest that they seem innocent of an interest in reading professional history, their hired professional hands being just, as it appears, screen dressing). For examples: they say Stalin told Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, in 1941 (already!) that he wanted as war booty "part" of Poland. Indeed he said he wanted more than 50 percent, that very part of it he had gotten making war on Poland in cahoots with infamous Adolf. Moreover, we are told that Stalin afterward took over in eastern Poland provinces once dominated by the Russian tsars (reading between the words: tsarist conquests justify Stalin's). In fact, a vast amount of the swag Stalin got in his war on the Poles in 1939 had formerly, before 1918, been parts of the Austro-Hungarian (not the Russian!) Empire; and so had part of the territorial loot he took from Romania in 1940; and the part of Czechoslovakia (about the size, by the way, of the part Hitler took, almost bringing on a major European war, in 1938) he seized and kept in 1945. Finally, just one more example of our producers, early on in their "history" of the war, dealing Stalin in a good hand out of range of the camera: they tell us that Poland got a "slice" of Germany at the Teheran Conference. In fact that "slice" was a big

one: about one-fourth of Germany in its 1937 borders and they do not tell us that the Poles got this treat to compensate them for the vast territory Stalin took from them. That one fourth, by the way, includes the "slice" of Germany (no tsarist armies had ever ruled there either, except as invaders) Stalin also took, claiming it as a "trophy" of war. And that is just the way the old pirate thought, though you will learn nothing about that from these producers. <p> And the above report suggests but a "slice" of the errors, misinformation, disinformation and reportorial jumble you got from BBC News from just this one program. What the series holds may just be more of the same. Of that institution, BBC News obviously seriously permeated by the kind of historical and production standards we have just witnessed: sic transit gloria mundi. <p> Notes: <p> [1]. Actually the choice of those dates to suggest the Cold War's beginnings puts the producers right into the middle of one of the greatest, and most ancient, squabbles of Cold War historiography, but they are likely aware of those professional issues. <p> [2]. Underscoring the picture of disorganization I paint of the first episode: the producers put at the top of their would-be descriptive blurb in the booklet presumably sent to reviewers the following quotation from George F. Kennan ("from Moscow"): "There can be no possible middle ground or compromise.... The two systems cannot even exist in the same world unless an economic cordon is put around one or the other of them." I am fairly familiar with the work of George F. Kennan, but have no idea of the context to which he meant to apply that remark, or even when he wrote it. In any case, it does not seem to relate in the slightest to "Comrades, 1917-1945" perhaps just authoritative underpinning to substandard construction? I suggest that the proper quotation from Kennan that pinpoints Stalin's aims both before and during the war is the following (I cite it from my 1995 book, *Stalin's Drive to the West, 1938-1945*. The original source, archival, is given there.): "Soviet political aims in Europe," he wrote in 1945, "are ...

not consistent with the happiness, prosperity or stability of international life on the rest of the Continent." To obtain Europe's weakness and disunity, "There is no misery, and no evil, I am afraid, which they would not be prepared to inflict, if they could, on European peoples." I wonder if other viewers of program one also noted that even its title is inappropriate, for the Soviet Union and the Western nations were usually in a state of estrangement (scarcely "comrades"), from 1917 to 1941. <p> [3]. Chatham House, by the way, is seat of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, which, ironically, authored some of the most misleading policy papers produced for the Foreign Office's use during World War II. <p>

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at [#uninitialized#](#)

Citation: Richard C. Raack. Review of *The Cold War. A Television History. "Program 1: Comrades, 1917-1945"*, H-Net Reviews. October, 1997.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14912>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.