

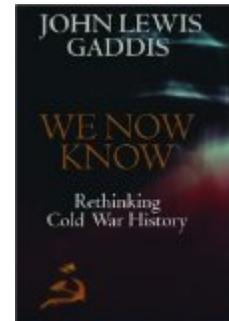
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Lewis Gaddis. *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. x + 425 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-878070-0.

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Published on H-Teachpol (February, 1998)



New Cold War History

When to write history? When do we know? Not many years ago, someone said that it was too soon to grasp the meaning of the French Revolution. Historians continue to debate the causes of World War I. Still, the end of a recognizable era provides an appropriate point for taking stock, assessing new evidence, and setting forth some tentative conclusions. The end of the Cold War brought a widely-acknowledged era to an end. New evidence has continued to be uncovered in the United States; but the opening of the Soviet archives especially has offered a trove of materials. This has given rise to a “new Cold War history” as younger scholars have mined Soviet documents to write the studies produced by the Cold War International History Project (CWIHP).[1]

John Lewis Gaddis, the preeminent American diplomatic historian of the period, employs the new findings and admirably addresses these matters in this excellent narrative and analysis of the early Cold War. Despite the awkward title that requires “deconstruction” by the author in his Preface, Gaddis has effectively drawn on the new materials to present a treatment of the contest between the United States and the Soviet Union through the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 that is detailed and nuanced yet thematic. Perhaps not surprising because of the new evidence available, the author places great emphasis on Stalin in providing an explanation for the dynamics that launched and sustained the Cold War, but he does not ignore U.S. mistakes.

His fundamental explanation for the Cold War re-

lies upon the concept of a power vacuum that existed in Europe at the end of World War II. His thesis, stemming from the new Cold War history, holds that both the United States and the Soviet Union established empires after 1945, the former’s one of consent and the latter’s one of coercion. Gaddis declares, “The resulting asymmetry would account, more than anything else, for the origins, escalation, and ultimate outcome of the cold war.”[2] I will challenge this thesis below.

Historians of course wrote about the Cold War throughout its unfolding. In doing so, they generated many controversies, particularly about the origins of the conflict. Gaddis covers all of these contentious matters. Despite the ideological differences between Russia and the West dating from the 1917 Bolshevik takeover of the Russian Revolution, he notes that no material conflict occurred between the United States and the Soviet Union in the interval from World War I to World War II. He argues that Roosevelt’s death did not make a difference, for the dictator Stalin was innately disposed to conflict with the West. In picking dates, Gaddis acknowledges that U.S. isolationism ended at Pearl Harbor, when Americans perceived the external danger to their national security; but he insists that the Cold War began only in 1947 when it became clear that the Soviets would not participate in a cooperative, multilateral global order envisioned and led by the United States. In that formulation may lie a clue to a potential revised interpretation of the Cold War period.

This study provides lots of new information. Among

the tidbits is the revelation that it was President Truman who began the air surveillance of the Soviet Union that ended so badly under Eisenhower in 1960 when an American U-2 spy plane was downed by a Soviet missile. Among the fascinating minor themes that Gaddis drives home, one of the most intriguing is his portrayal of "Potemkinism," the presentation of a false front before an empty or weak background, particularly as practiced by the boastful and sometimes reckless Premier Khrushchev.

Mr. Gaddis provides a new interpretation of the Cuban missile crisis, in which he reasons that Khrushchev placed the missiles in Cuba to protect Castro and the Cuban Revolution from U.S. threats; and he assesses the outcome as a compromise rather than a victory. He argues that President Kennedy demonstrated his courage not by aggressiveness but through his wish to compromise. Among the "tough" New Frontiersmen, in Gaddis' view, Kennedy proved to be a peacemaker. In the classroom, this assessment, put up against a gendered-approach view that compromise and consideration of the other belong to the category of female traits, ought to provoke quite an interesting discussion.

Any treatment of the Cold War necessarily deals with a range of matters, including the division of Germany, the role of ideology, designs as well as tactics, and the part played by nuclear weapons in the "the long peace." [3] The narrative in this work presents Germany's division as a tangled story in which the actors were often confused. But at bottom, Stalin's aim to unite Germany by attracting West Germans proved to be out of phase with his tactics of repression, including the tolerance of extensive rape of German women by Soviet troops, in the eastern zone of occupation. Furthermore, Gaddis avers that the critical Western decisions regarding Germany's responses to Stalin's moves, were suggested by allies and accepted by the United States. The author declares forthrightly, "Washington had no 'grand design.'" [4]

In considering very broad themes of the Cold War, Professor Gaddis employs the Marxist category of contradictions in assessing the decline of the Soviet Union, extending the category to claim that the inconsistency between Soviet politics and economics amounted to a "fatal flaw." [5] Stating another broad theme, the author notes, "'democratization' proved to be such an effective method of 'stabilization,'" that "the most successful of all U.S. initiatives" turned out to be the policies that brought democratic culture and practices to Germany and Japan. [6] In the author's view, little was at stake

in the Third World despite the superpowers' nightmares stemming from conditions there and from the possibilities for intervention by the other.

Gaddis offers many interesting observations about the place of nuclear weapons in the Cold War. For example, he explains how Khrushchev took the offensive in escalating the Cold War in the late 1950s and early 1960s from a position of inferiority. His most challenging conclusion may be that nuclear weapons actually prolonged the conflict while at the same time they prevented World War III: "... nuclear weapons exchanged destructiveness for duration." [7]

The author uses counterfactual analysis to effective ends, but he also displays his judiciousness by leaving plenty of room for confusion, ambivalence, inadvertence, and so forth. In the last chapter, Gaddis presents what I prefer to call "relaxed" hypotheses. They are likely to prove quite useful for engendering discussion around systematic themes. At the same time, they may prove maddening for rigorous political scientists or those who take positivism and empirical theory seriously. For historians who teach courses on the Cold War, this work should prove indispensable. Teachers of international relations who wish to provide a historical background to contemporary affairs are likely to find the book very, very useful. It covers controversies and presents themes, while offering complex, interesting narratives of people and events.

Despite my great respect for the author and the other new Cold War historians on whom he draws and my admiration for this book, I wish to conclude with a dissent from the tome's central thesis. As metaphors, the empire of consent and the empire of coercion may to some extent provide useful tools for exploring what happened over the course of the past fifty years. However, the post-Cold War arrangements in international politics do not appear to fit the metaphor, which is drawn from the whole course of human history. At the present moment, a broad coalition of great complexity supports a security structure underwritten by the United States and a liberal international political economy with many ramifications worldwide. Current arrangements grew out of the events and decisions of the past fifty years. The term empire does not capture the main features or the implications of this present condition. If the present did emerge from the immediate past, then perhaps empire may offer an inapt term for conveying what was involved in the Cold War. Thus, it seems that there is a good chance that we do NOT now know and that it is still too soon to grasp

the meaning of the post-1945 period of history.

Notes:

[1]. See Cold War International History Project *Bulletin*, Issues 1-9, ed. James H. Hershberg, and other publications. The CWIHP is sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. The Web site is: <http://www.seas.gwu.edu/nsarchive/cwihp>.

[2]. John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (hereafter *We Now Know*) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[3]. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford Univer-

sity Press, 1987). On p. 279 of *We Now Know*, Gaddis comments that the view of the Cold War as a long peace “was not so much wrong as short-sighted.”

[4]. *We Now Know*, p. 125.

[5]. *We Now Know*, p. 191.

[6]. *We Now Know*, p. 199.

[7]. *We Now Know*, p. 291.

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Citation: Howard H. Lentner. Review of Gaddis, John Lewis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*. H-Net Teachpol, H-Net Reviews. February, 1998.

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