

# H-Net Reviews

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Joel Isaac, Duncan Bell, eds. *Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. x + 302 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-982612-4; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-982614-8.

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The field of Cold War studies is too amorphous, too vague, and too big. In their introduction to *Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War*, editors Joel Isaac and Duncan Bell voice a need for a clarification and reconceptualization of “the Cold War.” The idea of “the Cold War” has become a ubiquitous concept about which scholars make far too many assumptions. The Cold War is utilized as an adjective and in this way, can be placed in front of any methodological or thematic approach to history—Cold War feminism, Cold War diplomacy, Cold War globalization, Cold War experience—the list goes on. This usage ignores the genealogy of the idea of the Cold War. The contributors of this volume encourage readers to examine the potential of the Cold War and to recognize that clarifying the definition of the Cold War is something “with which we must grapple” (p. 6).

More specifically, Isaac and Bell want to open up the possibilities of Cold War research and knowledge in a way similar to how scholars critiqued the fields of Renaissance and Industrial Revolution history. Jan de Vries, in claiming the Industrial Revolution as more aptly labeled “industrious revolution,” questioned assumptions made in that historical field, leading to increased academic discourse and further research possibilities. Such historicizing of the period and the term used to describe it would lead to similar debate and augment the potential avenues of research for Cold War historians. The twelve contributors to this collection endeavor to restore contingency to the events of the Cold War and the conception of the period itself. The overall goal behind this volume is to create a “heightened self-consciousness” of how the idea of the Cold War influences the study of American history and how to approach this time period more appropriately.

Part 1, the first four chapters of the volume, represents experimentation with historiographical and methodological approaches to the Cold War. Anders Stephanson’s “Cold War Degree Zero,” is the most controversial of the chapters. In it, Stephanson questions the use of “the Cold War” to describe the time period in question, saying that the wording and capitalization leads to the assumption that the Cold War was a singular episode and a discrete concept. Stephanson claims that the Cold War was an entirely American project to rationalize and legitimize American international and domestic policies. Stephanson furthermore critiques the current periodization, with the Cold War beginning shortly after WWII and continuing until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, as an inept one. Rather, he feels the Cold War ended in 1963 and Ronald Reagan reinvented it in the 1980s. Historian Odd Arne Westad argues for a different perspective in “Exploring the Histories of the Cold War: A Pluralist Approach.” He criticizes Stephanson’s view of the Cold War as an entirely American project in favor of a pluralistic approach utilizing different perspectives. This approach takes into account the “dispersion and adaption of rival American and Soviet models of development during the second half of the twentieth century” (p. 10). His argument supports his global view of the Cold War as expressed in his book *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (2007).

Part 2, a further eight chapters, is the application of the approaches the first four contributors discuss. John A. Thompson focuses on the “myth of an outmatched USA” in order to utilize both Stephanson’s and Westad’s approaches. Thompson wishes to understand why, in the wake of WWII and at the apex of its power,

the United States felt it was in danger of being over-run by communism despite superior American arms and a still recovering Soviet Union. The “outmatched USA” myth found its basis in the concept that America’s own welfare depended on a balance of power in Europe, which Thompson traces to an early twentieth-century anti-isolationism lobby. Despite its origins in anti-isolationism rather than anticommunism, this concept drew greater support in the Cold War period as America became fearful of communist influence in Europe. Thompson demonstrates the power of Cold War myths and narratives over American policy, even when the myth originates in different circumstances. He shows the malleability and the messiness of the “outmatched USA” myth, which in turn underlines the messiness and malleability of the Cold War in general.

In “War Envy and Amnesia: American Cold War Rewrites of Russia’s War,” Ann Douglas explores how the history of WWII influenced Cold War relations. American envy of the Soviet Union’s military conduct led to the creation of a postwar narrative in which a WWII role of sacrifice and success for the Soviet Union did not fit. Douglas furthermore argues that the “amnesia” about the Soviet role in WWII was not created by the Cold War but was “also one of that war’s constitutive goals, preconditions, and motives, both geopolitical and psychological; ‘war envy,’ as I call it, predated and partly determined the Cold War” (p. 117). Douglas calls for greater attention to the reality of the Soviet WWII experience and to the fact that “war envy” influenced political and cultural expression during the Cold War.

Religion is the focus of two of *Uncertain Empire’s* chapters. In “The Spirit of Democracy,” Andrew Pre-

ston argues that Cold War events and policies should be viewed in conjunction with American religious movements and rhetoric. Christianity in particular played a role in American diplomacy during the Cold War and Christians like Chiang Kai-Shek and Syngman Rhee received corresponding support in American foreign policy. Preston also highlights the influence of religion on the Cold War with regard to how religious leaders viewed the use of nuclear weapons. He identifies religious figures who formed a “subversive opposition to the dominant Cold War narrative, challenging the moralistic presumptions of official versions of America’s global mission” (p. 167). By questioning America’s motives and willingness to use nuclear weapons, religious figures escaped the larger Cold War narrative and complicate our view of American beliefs and support during the Cold War.

The other chapters take on diverse topics, including blues music, anthropology, memory, and cognitive and perceptual training. The contributors utilize the “heightened consciousness” the editors espouse in their introduction and are able to question traditional assumptions in the approach to Cold War studies. However, while the contributors to *Uncertain Empires* certainly give Cold War scholars the impetus to question the concept of “the Cold War,” given the diversity and the brevity of each chapter, they do not necessarily add order to the amorphous field of Cold War studies. Isaac and Bell desire a reevaluation of the field as experienced by scholars of the Industrial Revolution and Renaissance. Though the authors of part 2 refer briefly to the methodological approaches put forth in part 1, this does not represent a cohesive, complete reevaluation of the field but instead a more pluralistic approach.

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