

The Cold War in the Classroom Week 1

Cold War Fellowship Report

Ben Walsh, 30th January 2017

Origins of the Cold War

Well, the HA Teacher Fellowship Programme on the Cold War is now well and truly underway. After an intensive opening weekend residential at Birkbeck University the fellows have been working away most diligently and impressively on the online course.

What is really striking is the level of engagement and enthusiasm which these full time working teachers are able to bring to the project. In the first week we asked to them to listen to some of the podcasts on the HA website, particularly [Dr Elena Hore's piece on Ideology and the Cold War](#). However, as our teachers will confirm, you should approach these podcasts with care. There is so much good material in the [HA's podcast offering](#) that they can become addictive!

In addition to the podcasts the teachers have also been reading articles by leading academics in the field. The wonderfully titled 'How (Not) to Study the Origins of the Cold War' by Geir Lundestad generated a lot of interest and discussion about the Origins of the Cold War but also about current school curricula.

Key points emerging about the history were...

The origins of the Cold War has long been dominated by a bipolar approach and the aim to apportion blame. There are different waves of interpretation that blame one side or the other, or both, as historians writing about the Cold War reassess the world they live in. But in school curricula this blame discourse is often studied as a static, fixed phenomenon that ended with 1989/1991. As our teachers are realising, the debate between different schools of interpretation by academic historians is very much ongoing.

There is a definite revisionist tendency emerging, as our teachers immerse themselves more deeply in the material. One teacher commented:

- "There was an attempt to explain this in the podcast and I liked how Dr Hore polarised the two ideologies so clearly around the concept of private poverty and freedom. She made it clear that the two ideologies were inextricably opposed without overlap and both had expansionism at their core. I found it interesting that both ideologies hold the individual so centrally and each believed fundamentally in the interests of the individual."

But they are also realising that there are many ways to be a ‘revisionist’. As one teacher explained:

- “In terms of using this within lessons, I feel it will play directly into my Year 10 lessons within the new OCR Explaining the Modern World specification, as students had been very confused about why post-revisionism seemed to be broadly about recognising blame on both sides, but then confused by how Gaddis seemed to be predominantly blaming the USSR. I now feel equipped to blow apart the myth I’d perpetuated that post-revisionism was a unified school of thought.”

Another important feature emerging was the way in which the Cold War played out and was presented to populations back home. As another teacher commented:

- "This therefore suggests that ideological differences were not the insurmountable obstacle that they are sometimes portrayed to be, and perhaps that they were instead used as a *post hoc* justification by the leaders of the two sides to convince their reluctant populations to continue their wartime sacrifices against a new ‘implacable’ foe (see the quotes in Reinisch’s UNRRA article about the British portrayal of the Polish elections) against whom the real struggle was more about advantage than survival. In this context then the Marshall Plan should perhaps be viewed not as a demonstration of American commitment to free-market economics, but instead the form of US intervention in Europe most acceptable to the general US population, but which still enabled the government to secure US interests there.”

So what about the impact back in the classroom?

In the midst of all the erudite scholarly comments, it was clear that the teachers were getting excited about this new found scholarly expertise and wanted to expose their students to it in the classroom. Here are some teacher comments so far:

“The debate around the origins of the Cold War has left me with several questions that I might consider tacking in the classroom. One question comes from reading the Lundestad article and an answer to it might challenge the traditionalist view of the origins: ‘Why did both sides in the Cold War see it as a struggle between good and evil?’ I found Hore’s podcast really thought provoking in terms of how the conflicting ideologies in the conflict were founded on the ideas of ‘Freedom’ and ‘Democracy’ and I think this would be a really good way to begin challenge the idea of ‘blame’. A consideration of how each ideology held important but different views of ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ could result in the USSR and USA starting out on an equal footing, which would allow us to think more objectively about the events that follow.”

“I feel my subject knowledge has increased a lot this week, particularly the differing opinions on why the Cold War began. I found the article by Lundstadt particularly interesting, and it has made me re-evaluate the way I teach the origins of the Cold War to my Year 13s. The role of ideology and how both parties used it for their own means was of particular interest, and I think I know consider it to have a lesser role in the origins of the Cold War. The article has helped me think about what I really believe caused the CW, which I have now focused down to a series of actions and reactions shaped by each countries own views. Rather than teaching the origins in a simple chronological approach which I have found appropriate previously, I will certainly be adding in more elements of historiography.”

“I have very much re-examined my teaching of origins. I think, especially at A-level, students will be capable of looking at origins in its broader context. The ‘geography of the Cold War’ content session was particularly useful in developing a more global view of the subject and I feel empire, as a factor, could be introduced immediately as a narrative which is returned to throughout each stage of the Cold War. The residential had an immediate impact on my teaching.”

“Zubok’s ‘A Failed Empire’ was particularly useful in deepening my understanding of the post war atmosphere in the Soviet Union and their hopes for peace and a continuation of the war time alliance. My study of the Soviet Union has always abruptly ended in 1941 and therefore I see now that my understanding of the origins of the Cold War has been very Western centric and ‘orthodox’. Viewing events without a real understanding of how the West were perceived by the Soviets. I found a study of the Kennan and Novikov telegram’s fascinating and do intend to use these with my Year 10 students who at present are studying the historiography of the origins of the Cold War.”

If you like the look of what is going on in the Fellowship, we hope to run more programmes of a similar nature on a range of different periods of history. Keep visiting the HA web site for more details.

References

- [HA podcast: Elena Hore, “Ideology and the Cold War”](#)
- Geir Lundestad, ‘How (Not) to Study the Origins of the Cold War’, Odd Arne Westad (ed.), *Reviewing the Cold War: Approaches, Interpretations, Theory* (2013, 1st 2000]), pp. 64-87.
- Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill, 2007), pp.1-28