

The Cold War in the Classroom Week 6

Cold War Fellowship Report

Ben Walsh, 13th March 2017

Was it possible to opt out of the Cold War?

There was another shift in content focus in week 6, to an area which was discussed in the residential back in January and which was new to many of us. The key issue was whether, or to what extent, states were able to stay out of the Cold War, or even to use Cold War rivalries to their own benefit by playing off one side against the other. Using the 1961 Declaration of the Non-Aligned Movement along with extracts from Best et al's chapter on neutralism and Goff's article on Tito's tour of Africa (see references below) the teachers examined these generally under-represented states and issues. We asked them to respond to the view that 'The only figures students need to know about are US Presidents and Soviet leaders'. Predictably this sparked some lively responses!

Key points emerging in the discussion about the history were...

The multifaceted nature of the Cold War, both in the forms the conflict took and the locations in which it was played out

- "I think there is a point to be made about the difference between the 'NAM' and 'non-involvement'; after all, whilst countries like Yugoslavia tried to distance themselves from either side, they were heavily involved in the 'big event' – like it or not. Berger's article confirmed my belief that nationalism, in particular pan-Latin Americanism, played into the hands of the Super Powers – so, while many countries were attempting to 'do their own thing' they were still often being toyed with by USA/USSR. Best et al taught me lots about Yugoslavia, Finland and Austria's attempts to remain neutral – if I'm honest, I didn't know Austria was 'neutral' until this moment (and wrongly assumed Finland was under Soviet yoke)!"
- "Students need to understand that there is no such thing as non-involvement in the Cold War; every leader of a country across the world, and every subject within those nations had their own perspectives about the events which were taking place – and they all contributed in some way. The Cold War is a perfect opportunity to teach students about the impact of ordinary people on a major event and the vice-versa effects of a larger event on a personal scale too. For example, no one would try to

tell the story of the First World War without explaining the actions of a group of Serbian teenagers, or of the experiences of the ordinary soldier. Similarly, the Cold War is best understood through the eyes and experiences of those people who were affected by the American and Soviet leaders. The best examples are the leaders of Eastern European countries (from Tito to Krenz) – who provide an array of opportunities to better comprehend the Cold War. Students should learn to understand that some of those leaders were self-serving autocrats while others were keen to challenge Soviet authority and the style of communism which existed within their countries. And most importantly, all of those leaders had their own ideas – none of them were drones who always did as they were ordered. Students flourish when they gain the full picture; therefore, if they are taught about the aims of Dubcek, the worries of Gomulka, and the callousness of Rakosi then they will better understand how the Cold War played-out the way it did.”

- “The Cold War away from the bipolar conflict of America and Soviet Union reveals a complex inter-web of relationships and motivations. The NAM [Non-Aligned Movement] almost seems like a contradiction in itself, an alignment supposedly to each other rather than one of the superpowers. Their role is crucial, speaking on behalf of the southern hemisphere which otherwise would be largely used as puppets (a term worth debating) in the power play of the Cold War. Interestingly this movement allows them almost to choose sides, should their ‘conditions’ need them too, Cuba being a good example given here. The case of Finland is a fascinating case study of a western state establishing a ‘neutral’ relationship with the USSR, something which Best describes as a luxury in the post war world. This is a powerful example to demonstrate to students (in a different way to Yugoslavia, as a former socialist state) that Europe was not simply a battlefield divided into two by the Cold War. However, the character of Tito is a brilliant one for students to grapple with and his strive for importance in the NAM in the 1950s and 1960s. The exhibition of photographs of Tito in Africa is a fascinating example of showmanship and the power of personality in gaining ‘influence’ globally. As Best, says the concept of neutrality as actually existing during the context of the Cold War is important, particularly as it resulted in a severe reaction from the superpowers, John Foster Dulles ‘morally corrupt concept.’ Whether you could apply this quote to Tito would be a fascinating study.”
- “Even before India gained independence in 1947 Nehru had set out his position. India would ‘follow an independent policy, keeping away from the power politics of groups aligned one against another’. (Best et al.)

Arguably Nehru's determination to remain non-aligned eventually forced the US to change their approach, offering aid in 1958 to try to win sympathy, an approach extended under Kennedy. Nehru's independent stance was then compromised following the Sino-Indian border war of 1962, following which he accepted military aid from the US and Britain. It is clear that despite this desire for independence each of these leaders were of course responding to an agenda that had already been set by the conflict between the two superpowers. The need for economic assistance and development ultimately compromised the moral and political decisions that each of these leaders took, leading to some degree of alignment with one or both of the superpowers at some point. So perhaps it was not possible to opt out of the Cold War for economic reasons but the attempts too are worth consideration and a move away from an over focus upon US and Soviet leaders can only enrich our understanding of the complexities of this period of history."

Impact on teaching?

The discussions were very satisfying in the sense that the teachers were beginning to think about their practice and how the up to date academic work they had been looking at might shape future practice. Most of the teachers also now have a broad area of focus for their planned resource, which will of course be shared on the HA website.

- "I agree with this statement in terms of where students should start their studies of the Cold War. The beliefs, actions and reactions of the leaders of the two superpowers are of first importance when seeking to understand the Cold War as a phenomenon and series of events. ... However, that is not to say that other nations around the world are unimportant, but that we are on dangerous ground, and repeating the mistakes of leading powers, if we just view them through the lens of the Cold War. Therefore a better enquiry would perhaps be to ask 'Did the USA and USSR interpret the 'Third World' accurately?'. This would allow students to explore the interaction of post-colonialism (by far the most important concern for the NAM), its manifestations in Korea and Vietnam (which were catastrophically misinterpreted by the USA), the Non-Aligned Movement and their chief concerns. This could lead on to addressing the ways in which the superpowers tried to force the post-colonial developments into the paradigm of the Cold War and how this frequently backfired on them. It could also lead to an investigation into the argument presented by Best et al who argue that even though the NAM attempted to pursue their own aims during this period, they were limited by Cold War politics and western resistance."

- “Towards the middle of the Cold War, as the attention of the superpowers shifted towards South-East Asia and the Middle East, it would be necessary to teach of Nehru, Mao, Syngman Ree, Kim Il-Sung, and Nasser. Without these figures, the Non-Alignment Movement remains a faceless and homogenous group, without direction or motive. Only by comparing and contrasting the attitudes of Tito, Nasser, Nehru, Nkrumah, and Sukarno is it possible to see what made the Non-Alignment Movement work as a bloc, and see where the faultlines lay for its later fracture ... most teachers would not have the time needed to cover these leaders in sufficient detail. Unfortunately, I have no silver bullet to this issue, and my only suggestion is to carefully map out which characters will be included within your narrative of the Cold War and either invest in covering some of the context earlier in your curriculum (e.g. KS3 Indian Independence, before KS4 GCSE International Relations study, could introduce Nehru) or provide ample opportunity for students to carry out further research, potentially as homework. Easier said than done!”

If you like the look of what is going on in the Fellowship, we hope to run more programmes on this and other periods of history. Look out for announcements on the HA website.

References

- [Declaration of the first Summit of the Heads of State or Government of the Member Countries of the Non-Aligned Movement, 1961](#), pp.1-6
Anthony Best, Jussi Hanhimaki, Joseph Maiolo and Kirsten Schulze, *International History of the Twentieth Century and Beyond* (London, 1st ed. 2004, new ed. 2008), Chapter 13: Neutralism, development and the rise of the Third World, 1945-2007, 315-334.
- Samuel Goff, “Waiting for Tito: Unofficial scenes from a presidential tour of Africa”, [The Calvert Journal](#)[undated, but it accompanies an exhibition that opened in February 2016] (And see Julia Lovell's review of the exhibition in [The Economist, 23 February 2016](#))