

Interview with Benjamin Ziemann

Third Part of Interview Series: Taking Stock of Cold War Research

Interview by Christoph Nübel

The Cold War was a global conflict and Cold War scholars are among the most international of academic communities - research on this time period is a collaborative effort of scholars from all over the world. Our interview series [Taking Stock of Cold War Research](#) probes the past and present evolution of this field – but also looks ahead, trying to decipher future trends and developments in this highly diverse research landscape. This seven-part series is a cooperation of the [Berlin Center for Cold War Studies](#) and the Military History Portal. The interviews were conducted by Dr. Christoph Nübel (Humboldt University of Berlin) and Dr. Klaas Voß (Hamburg Institute for Social Research).

Today: Benjamin Ziemann, Professor of Modern German History, University of Sheffield, UK.

Part I: Origins and Evolution of Cold War Studies

Q: “Are we currently experiencing a new Cold War”? This question has recently been discussed in the media. Would you agree?

A: No. Increasing tensions and some bellicose rhetoric between Russia and the West do not make for a new Cold War, given the fact that the Cold War has had a global dimension from start to finish, whereas diplomatic tussles are mostly confined to Europe and the Near East these days. Recent events in the Ukraine, on the other hand, showed a new type of low-level military engagement that is closer to a hot war. At any rate, there is a mismatch between the inflationary recourse to the Cold War in media coverage, and the at this point still rather limited nature of diplomatic conflicts between Russia and the USA.

Q: What have been the most important trends and developments in Cold War research since 1990? Which new areas were explored in the last 25 years?

A: Research has moved away from a discussion of the underlying causes and the early years of the Cold War to consider its implications and its reach. One key development was the use of multi-archival research by Odd Arne Westad to produce 'The Global Cold War', a book that decisively placed developments at the geographical periphery at the centre of scholarly interest and demonstrated how the conflict between anti-colonialism and attempts to build new empires was a key battleground of the Cold War. More generally, this has also led to a renewed interest in blueprints for and concrete projects of 'development' in the 'Third World', from Africa to Vietnam, during the Cold War era. I think the second major development was that we now have a much better sense of the intersections between grand strategy and high-level politics on the one hand, and the perspectives of different types of political actors (parties, NGOs, grassroots movements) and societal fields on the other hand. In many ways, this is the normal process of differentiation in historical scholarship, in which compact notions of 'politics' are broken up and investigated in their constituent parts, which at some point poses the task of putting the pieces back into the larger frame.

Part II: The Status Quo

Q: How much has Cold War research been influenced by recent "turns" in the humanities and social sciences? Was there a "culturalization" of Cold War Studies? How important are buzz words like "space", "emotions", "transnationalism", "negotiation", etc.?

A: Technically speaking, the 'Cold War' is nothing but a metaphor that has been instrumental in charging ideological, and more importantly political and military-strategical conflict with meaning. That was the anticipation of George Orwell when he coined the metaphor in 1945 even before the Cold War had properly commenced. And it is still an important insight that needs to be considered. A number of literary scholars have made important contributions to an understanding of this metaphorical nature of the Cold War. But their books have not always found the attention among

historians that they do deserve, and have not shaped their research agenda. In a short piece published in 1990, Michael Geyer had suggested that the Cold War could be understood as an ‘imaginary war’, as a war of simulations, war games and calculations of the outcomes of nuclear war. The notion of the imaginary may seem opaque, but I think it suggests an interesting line of inquiry. In collaboration with Matthew Grant (Essex) and a number of other colleagues I have tried to explore this further in a forthcoming edited collection on ‘Understanding the Imaginary War’. We look at the ways in which the framework of the nuclear confrontation required and produced different fictitious representations of nuclear annihilation in order to make the unimaginable imaginable. We contend that the imagination of nuclear destruction was another important battlefield of the Cold War. Such an approach is obviously indebted to the pioneering work by Paul Boyer on the atomic bomb in US collective imagination and popular culture, and tries to open up avenues for comparison with other key countries, including the Soviet Union. This increasing interest in ‘nuclear culture’ is one example for the ways in which the metaphorical nature of the Cold War can be taken seriously and cultural theory be used for a historical understanding of the period.

Q: In terms of actors, geography, and time periods, what are the present “gravity wells” in Cold War Studies?

A: I am not competent to talk about Africa, Asia or Latin America, but within Europe I see one region to which scholarly attention is now finally, and belatedly, turning: the Southern European flank of NATO. Spain, Portugal and Greece returned back to the democratic frame after years, in the case of the two former countries long years of dictatorship. These cases are suggesting all sorts of interesting questions: what was their place in the NATO framework of security during this period? What was the contribution that Cold War ideology made in sustaining these dictatorships in the first place? And when these countries returned to democracy, what was the role of collective protests in the transition to democracy and in their subsequent relation to NATO and US hegemony? These are relevant questions, and as far as Greece is concerned, they also require a look at the Cold War trajectory of another NATO member in the region, Turkey.

Q: In your opinion, where do German universities and research institutes stand vis-à-vis the international research landscape with regard to Cold War history? In comparison, how important is Cold War research in the UK?

A: The Federal Republic certainly is, as Lutz Niethammer has quipped a couple of years ago, the country with the highest density of contemporary historians per capita of the population. Thus, the Cold War is a field at the forefront of scholarly debates in Germany, as contemporary historians there have quickly moved on to conduct empirical research on the 1960s, 1970s, and lately also the 1980s. But the Cold War of German historians is very much a German Cold War: Research is focused on the ways in which the two German states were affected by and responded to the policies that were imposed by the two superpowers. Research into the cultural history of the Cold War in the Federal Republic takes a broader European view. But the international dimension of the Cold War is still largely absent in Germany. To a large extent, that is a product of the limited standing particularly of US post-war history in German history departments. There are very few chairs for US history in Germany, hence the number of scholars working on the American Cold War is very small. In my own department alone, on the other hand, I have two colleagues who are working on aspects of US Cold War history, Sarah Miller-Davenport and Simon Toner, and there is strong coverage of this period in many other UK history departments, too. While British historians have yet to explore the social and cultural dimensions of the Cold War in the UK during the 1960s and 1970s in full depth, the international history of the Cold War continues to be a burgeoning field in the United Kingdom. Established centres such as the Cold War Studies Project at LSE London, or recent initiatives such as the 'Cultures of the Cold War' network that is organised by colleagues in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities here at Sheffield, are indicative of the situation. In a larger frame, there is an apparent mismatch between the enduring presence of US Cold War mass culture in the Federal Republic and the lack of sustained interest in US scholarship on Cold War America. Every other book by US or UK historians on the 'Third Reich' is immediately translated into German. Yet what was the last important book by a US historian on Cold War America that made its way into German bookstores?

Part III: Looking Ahead

Q: With regard to more recent trends in academia, are you concerned that the Cold War might increasingly turn into a “catch-all-term”, i.e. an attractive label for everything of interest to scholars of contemporary history? Where do you see the limitations of the concept?

A: Indeed, the inflationary use of ‘Cold War’ as a term that can encompass all political, social and cultural developments during the decades from 1945 to 1990 is a development that has been registered repeatedly in recent years. Matthew Connelly acknowledged it as such more than fifteen years ago when he urged historians to ‘take off the Cold War lens’ and appreciate aspects of the reconfiguration of the Global South during the decolonization process that would not neatly align with the conflict between the two superpowers. Nowadays, when seemingly every fridge, every movie and every car that was produced between 1945 and 1990 is immediate to the Cold War, there is even more reason to be wary of any inflationary use of the concept. It makes much more sense to see the nuclear confrontation as the military core of the Cold War, and to delineate both the diplomatic and power-political as well as the cultural contours of this confrontation from this core.

Q: Assuming there is a “culturalization” of Cold War Studies: Does this correspond to a decline of classic political, diplomatic and military history of the Cold War? In which (new?) forms might these fields be revitalized in the future?

A: I am actually coming from a military history background, having worked on the German army during World War One in my PhD, and am thus familiar with this kind of Cassandra call that portrays the ways in which allegedly ‘hard’ approaches such as military or diplomatic history have been superseded by cultural approaches as a demise. This perception is based on a misunderstanding, as if one could still write a diplomatic history of the Cold War in the traditional fashion, without taking insights about the discursive significance of metaphors or the role of rituals in high-level politics into account. But once the genie is out of the bottle, it is difficult to get it back in there. For Cold War studies, Frank Costigliola’s famous article from 1997 on the gendered rhetoric of George F. Kennan’s ‘Long Telegram’ was a real eye-opener in

this respect, and I cannot imagine why anyone would want to go back behind the level of insight that was accomplished there. Ultimately, approaches in cultural history contribute to refining our reading and interpretation of the primary source materials, as in this case, and a 'traditional' performance, i.e. a linear reading of the primary sources based on an uncomplicated understanding of 'reality', is bound to look stale in comparison.

Q: The Berlin Center of Cold War Studies emphasized in its research agenda the permeability of the Iron Curtain and the limits of the Cold War's defining power. In 2004, György Péteri even coined the term of the "nylon curtain" to highlight this flexibility and permeability. Would you confirm this premise based on your own research on, for example, pacifism and the peace movement during the Cold War?

A: Yes and no. We have important studies that demonstrate the role that non-aligned peace movement activists played in making the Iron Curtain more permeable during the 1970s and 1980s, such as the books by Lawrence Wittner, Matthew Evangelista and Beatrice de Graaf. But there were also problems and pitfalls. Some of them are detailed in the book by Thomas Klein on the independent peace movement in the GDR during the 1980s (2006). This book deserves special mentioning also for the substantial nature of its archival research, which only few historians have picked up upon so far. Klein shows how emissaries of the West German Green Party often left the peace activists in the GDR speechless, as the enthusiasm of the Greens for connecting with - in their perspective - like-minded activists was not always met with a comparable eagerness to understand the specific predicament of their counterparts. Václav Havel expressed similar concerns in his 'Anatomy of a Reticence'. At any rate, peace movements during the Cold War era operated to large extent in a national frame of mind. They were as much a contribution to repairing problematic aspects of their respective national identity as they were attempts to establish transnational links. Martin Niemöller, the subject of my current book project, demonstrates this well. He emerged as an anti-nuclear pacifist during the 1950s not precisely because he fully abandoned the nationalism that was the key element of his political endeavours from 1914 onwards. His main concern was rather that the first result of any nuclear confrontation would be the destruction of the German nation.

Q: Which new impulses for historical research and for other disciplines could be emitted by Cold War Studies in the next few years? And in which direction(s) might Cold War Studies evolve?

A: An important trend that is already well under way is a renewed intellectual history of the Cold War that takes a careful look at the long distances which ideas often travelled, and at the reinterpretation of European intellectual thinking on law and democracy in the context of US post-war policy. The recent book by Udi Greenberg is an important example for the insights that such an approach can yield. I am also very much looking forward to seeing the forthcoming monograph by Jason Dawsey on the work of Günther Anders (1902-1992) in print. Anders is in many respects a crucial figure for Cold War intellectual history, not only because he was also shaped by the experience of emigration, like the émigré political scientists discussed by Greenberg, and because Anders' interventions span the whole period from the 1950s to the end of the bloc confrontation in 1989/90. After an initial period of reflection, Anders focused on grappling with the anthropological consequences and conceptual implications of the 'Bomb', using the categorical apparatus of dialectical thinking in which he was educated during the 1920s. Thus, his work directly speaks to core implications of the Cold War as a nuclear conflict, such as the prospect for 'omnicide'. German scholars have started to rediscover Günther Anders more than 15 years ago. But he has yet to find his legitimate place in the wider framework of Cold War intellectual history. Finally, there is a new religious history of the Cold War emerging, for which the work by Uta Balbier on Billy Graham's 'crusades' is a very interesting example, not least due to the transatlantic framework of Graham's missionary work. Historians of nineteenth century Europe and America have learned to appreciate the relevance of religion for an understanding of their period. The religious underpinnings of the 'culture wars' of the twentieth century for Cold War history have yet to find the systematic attention that they do deserve.