Teaching the Cold War in the 21st Century

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The great Soviet leader once asked his inner circle, “Tell, me comrades, what is America doing these days?” They all replied in unison, “America is on the march, headed over a cliff!” to which the great leader asked, “So tell me, comrades, what is the USSR doing today?” And they all replied, again in great unison, “Sir, the USSR is always ten steps ahead of America!”

Introduction

A quarter century has passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the transformation of China into a commu-capitalist hybrid, and the end of apartheid in South Africa. A new generation has come of age with no direct knowledge of the very different world that existed before these sudden transformations of the late 1980s to early 1990s. Though many would agree that it is important for this generation to understand the history that shaped the contemporary world, most education systems fail to teach modern history because the interpretation of it is still too much in contention.

Perhaps this is so because education systems are designed to function as “systems of enforced ignorance.”[1] Education authorities pay lip service to creativity and the fostering of qualities that come wrapped in the latest jargon, such as “ambiguity tolerance,” but in reality education systems in recent decades have regressed. They have come to place greater emphasis on standardized
testing and the memorization of a database of right and wrong answers, while educators avoid criticism from a polarized community that would be quick to accuse them of “politicizing the classroom.” Education systems themselves have been subjected to the victorious ideology of the Cold War that values efficiency and privatization. As a consequence, the young generation has little knowledge of or analytical tools for the events that shaped the world they have inherited.

One might be tempted to scoff at the ignorance of the younger generation, but they can’t be blamed for it. Educators who bear this fact in mind and make the effort to teach modern history can be rewarded with students who are very receptive to a teacher helping them understand the world they inhabit. In addition, there is an advantage in teaching young learners about this topic. They come to it with a blank slate, without the ideological investments of their elders, so they find it much easier to look at it objectively. Yet the topic is diverse, global and multi-faceted, so there are many challenges in covering its scope within the limitations of a single course. The paper that follows suggests a way of studying the component parts of the Cold War so that they can provide a basis for learning about the topic in more depth. This paper outlines this plan with examples of issues that can be covered in each of the sub-topics listed. The discussion makes no attempt to be a comprehensive treatment of the Cold War. Some of the bigger, more well-known chapters, such as Northeast Asia, the numerous conflicts in the Middle East, the fall of the Eastern Bloc, and the Vietnam War, have been deliberately overlooked in favor of some more obscure topics. What I have attempted is to describe a way to set up a few pillars of understanding that learners can use to build their own houses of knowledge.

The analysis pays more attention to American actions during the Cold War, and some educators might believe that the deeds of the Soviet Union should be covered more thoroughly. One reason I chose to pay more attention to American actions is because I used source materials written in English. Many criticisms of the Soviet system written in English have obvious biases against it. They attempt
to paint it as a supreme evil that America was justified in fighting by whatever means necessary, even if regrettable methods were sometimes necessary.

It would interest me more to read criticisms of the Soviet system written in Russian and other Slavic languages, but this was not possible. This leads to the other reason for this emphasis. As a person who grew up in a country that was an American ally, I went with the dictum that one should look in the mirror. We should most closely examine the deeds of our own countries over which we have some degree of democratic control, especially in this case since the West supposedly “won the Cold War,” imposed its economic and political system on the globe, and has no one else to blame for the consequences. If anyone feels that such treatment amounts to apologism for Soviet crimes, I quote the famous critic of American foreign policy, Noam Chomsky, who in 1985 stated his view that the Soviet system was basically “a dungeon with a certain degree of social services.”

The lesson to be learned from the Cold War is summed up by the Russian joke above. Both systems were and are flawed and prone to collapse under the weight of their own ambitions. The difference may be only in the timing.

(1) The historical roots of the Cold War

The first rule of Cold War studies is that no one should talk just about the Cold War. This is because the period cannot be understood correctly if it seen only as a distinct period that was not a continuation existing historical trends. Furthermore, it didn’t really end definitively in 1991, and claims to victory are dubious. Nonetheless, the label persists as a term of convenience, something that even historians continue to use even though many believe that it is a distracting misnomer. We continue to use the term the way many still refer to Native Americans as “Indians.” It is difficult to discuss this period of history without using the name by which everyone knows it. Furthermore, the term is accurate
as far as it conveys that nuclear arsenals created a new kind of conflict in which direct “hot” war was highly dis-preferred.

If we really want to understand the Cold War in depth, we need to consider its full context, and this leads to the understanding that it was really the outcome of a historical process that goes back to the voyages of Columbus and de Gama in the 1490s. It was entirely logical to predict in the 19th century that the competition between the “great powers” of the time (Great Britain, Spain, Portugal, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Russia, Austro-Hungary, Ottoman, Japan, the United States) would eventually, like a sports tournament, come down to a final between the two strongest left standing. In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville predicted:

There are only two peoples now. Russia is still barbarous, but it is great. The other young nation is America. The future is there between these two great worlds. Some day they will collide, and then we will see struggles of which the past can give no idea.\[^3\]

The early roots of the Cold War are visible in the actions of Czarist Russia and the United States in the 19th century. The Russian Empire expanded as far east as Alaska, into nations that had non-Russian religions, languages and cultures, and the Soviet Union inherited this empire and much of the mentality and bureaucratic structures that had made it.

In the 19th century, the US came to believe that it had to defend its interests beyond its borders. Without carrying out a colonizing mission outside of the continent, the US put the world on notice with the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, claiming that European efforts to colonize or interfere with North or South America would be seen as acts of aggression. Manifest Destiny referred to the United States’ right to expand westward within North America, leading to conflict with Mexico (1846-48) and the “Indian Wars” after the Civil War.
Monroe Doctrine was implemented fully in 1898 in the war with Spain over control of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. The Kingdom of Hawaii was occupied as a strategic necessity in fighting that war, and its later status as a US territory and then a state never resolved the unfinished business which, under international law, to this day leaves Hawaii as a sovereign nation occupied by a foreign power. [4]

The Spanish-American war established the new norm for America: that isolationism was no longer an option, that it was now necessary to aggressively assert America’s sphere of influence throughout the world. As late as 1963, American politicians cited the Monroe Doctrine as self-evident justification for demanding that communism should have no influence in Cuba or elsewhere in the Americas.

This early expansionist policy existed before there was a nuclear arms race and before there was a communist enemy that could be pointed to as the evil which necessitated American involvement in foreign lands. There is an additional reason why the term “Cold War” is inappropriate. The Soviet Union was devastated at the end of WWII, and had been a formidable military force during the war mainly because of American military aid. It was never close to being a threat to American dominance before or after WWII.

In an interview in which Noam Chomsky discussed Indonesia’s control of East Timor and West Papua, he was asked whether it was related to the Cold War. Looking somewhat weary of talk about the Cold War, he answered:

It didn’t have much to do with the Cold War… the Cold War is always a pretext for everything that happened, but it would have been pretty much the same if Russia didn’t exist. It [Russia] was devastated, demolished. Politics really has yet to recover in any serious way. I’m sure that in West Papua, and East Timor, the other case that falls right within that, there were no Russians. [5]
In the conclusion of his history of the Cold War, O.A. Westad also suggests that America’s actions on the global stage would have been much the same without the Soviet nemesis present:

It is unlikely that historians of the future will date the emergence of the United States as a hyperpower to the beginning of the 1990s; indeed, it is likely that many will see America as entering this phase at the beginning rather than the end of the last [20th] century… the Cold War never saw two equal superpowers—one was distinctly more ‘super’ than the other, even though its power was never limitless. America just had more of everything: power, growth, ideas, modernity. [6]

If Chomsky is right that it would have been the same if Russia didn’t exist, this implies that America’s enemy in the Cold War may not have been a country but an idea—simply the idea that there was an alternative to what America had to offer.

(2) The genesis of the Cold War

The Cold War may be a misnomer, but there were definitely some unique features of the post-WWII world that made people want to coin a new word for it. One common reference point for the start of the Cold War is in the late 1940s—in Winston Churchill’s coining of the term “iron curtain” in 1946, followed by the detonation of the first Soviet atomic weapon in 1949. However, one could look further back and say that the era really began when the US entered WWII in late 1941. As soon as it became obvious that Japan and Germany were going to lose, planning began for the post-war world, and it was clear that America was going to emerge from the ruins as the predominant world power.
There were alternative views at the time of what the post-war world should be like because the Soviet-British-American alliance had been so successful. The Americans provided materiel to the Soviets through the lend-lease program while the Soviets sacrificed lives to fight Germany on the European eastern front. American and British soldiers of course made significant contributions, but the scale of Soviet losses is seen as the decisive factor that defeated Germany. The Soviet entry into the war against Japan in August 1945 was also a major factor in provoking Japan’s surrender shortly thereafter.

In light of so much co-operation between the US and the USSR, it seemed likely that there would be improved East-West relations, with more economic and cultural integration. There was even a school of thought called “convergence theory” that saw both of the superpowers as materialistic, bureaucratic and technocratic state capitalist economies which would eventually come to resemble each other and form closer relations. [7]

In 1945, it was reasonable to expect that the anti-communist animosities that had followed the Bolshevik Revolution might be forgotten and ideological differences wouldn’t be taken so seriously. After all, Roosevelt’s New Deal and the wartime economy had shown that the state had a positive role to play in the economy, one which greatly benefitted private corporations. One might say that this is exactly what happened with China a few decades later. After President Nixon visited in 1972, China eventually became an undemocratic hybrid of communism and capitalism, integrated with Western markets. It is also similar to the relationship between Russia and America that emerged in the 1990s. Communist ideology was no longer a factor. There remained just two oligarchies with their competing claims on spheres of influence.

In the early 1940s, the American War Department support for its Soviet ally was so enthusiastic that it produced a glowing view of Russian history in a documentary series called *Why We Fight*. The installment called *The Battle of Russia* [8] contains a level of pro-Soviet propaganda that is stunning to see
in contrast with the reversal of support after the war. In the same *Why We Fight* series, Japan was utterly demonized and dehumanized, but here too the viewpoint reversed completely after the war.

By late 1945, the US had no interest in continuing the alliance to help the USSR recover. Western leaders were quick to blame Stalin for the Cold War because of his determination to draw an “iron curtain” across Eastern Europe in the immediate aftermath of WWII, but Stalin was dismayed that the West wouldn’t recognize this as a natural claim to a zone of influence that Soviet forces had fought and died for. He was equally dismayed that no Western aid was offered as a sign of appreciation for Soviet sacrifices on the eastern front, and shocked that the atom bombs had been used on civilian populations in Japan. He had known for a couple of years (ironically, long before President Truman knew) that the bombs were being built, but it came as a shock to see America use them on an enemy nation that was soon to be beaten by conventional means. The Soviets interpreted the atomic bombings as a message directed at them, and this fear drove the Stalin to recklessly destroy lives and the Southern Urals ecology in order to carry out a crash program of plutonium production using prisoners of war, forced labor and gulag inmates. [9]

The physicist Leo Szilard, one of the lead scientists of the Manhattan Project, was consumed by guilt for his role in building the atomic bombs. He had the same opinion as many in the late days of WWII: the US and the USSR should continue to cooperate, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons should be put under international control. In June 1945, he tried to meet President Truman, but could only get as far as a meeting with a member of Truman’s inner circle, James Byrnes. Little did he know then that Byrnes was the person least likely to sympathize. He was one of the architects of Truman’s post-war policy, a member of the secretive interim committee that was laying plans to take full advantage of the Soviet Union in its moment of weakness. Szilard wrote afterwards, “How much better off the world might be had I been born in America and become
influential in American politics, and had Byrnes been born in Hungary and studied physics.” [10]

(3) Ideology and Religion

The foundational ideas of the superpower conflict must be examined, though they are easy to ignore because policies, personalities and historical events can captivate most of the attention. The US and the USSR eventually evolved into two different versions of state capitalism with their own geographical spheres of domination, and the ideological differences could be easily dismissed as an excuse, or a mask for the real motivations for the conflict, but ideology was originally a sincere motivation and for many important actors, such as President Reagan who, in the 1980s, sincerely believed America was in a battle with an evil, atheistic empire determined to conquer the world.

The superpower conflict has always been debated in popular discourse by referring to the various “isms” and ideologies. One side demonized the atheistic ideology of its opponent, while the other called religion an “opiate of the masses.” American commentators often said the opposite of communism was democracy, not capitalism, and instead of taking Marxism seriously as a rigorous critique of capitalism, they confounded it with Stalinism and Maoism, the totalitarian distortions of Marxism and socialist theory. They also greatly exaggerated the extent to which the USSR wanted to, or was able to erase nationalism, ethnic identities, or religion, either Christianity in Russia or Islam in the republics.

The notion that communism was tossed in the dustbin of history has become well established. Even students born after 1990 have internalized the interpretation of Cold War ideology that is standard in the West. I have often heard them preface their criticisms of the contemporary world with comments such as, “I’m not a communist, but…” This indicates that they themselves
have undergone some very subtle indoctrination, even though they may believe
themselves to be living in free and open societies. They have internalized the
notion that Marxism has been thoroughly discredited, so they now have some
fear of saying something that lies outside the acceptable norms of thought.

It is a challenge to enter into a discussion of Marxism in order to distinguish
it from the totalitarian systems that claimed to be Marxist. The educational
effort requires students to learn, for example, that the nationalization of industry
actually undertaken by socialist revolutions was something Marx would have
dismissed as merely “state capitalism.” Unfortunately, the profound impact
of Marxism in the late 19th and 20th centuries vanished in the post-Cold War
years in educational programs dominated by neoliberal economics and Western
triumphalism. Yet the 21st century crises of capitalism (financialization,
derivatives, the boom and bust cycle, central bank quantitative easing, the rentier
economy, speculation on non-productive assets, unrepayable government and
private debt, etc…[11]), which were predicted by Marx as the logical end game
of capitalism, have led to a renewed interest in Marxism throughout the world.
Arthur Knight explains how Marx, influenced by many ideas that existed during
his time, predicted the present crises of capitalism:

I propose the End of Capitalism Theory to suggest that at this moment in
history, no great new sources of wealth remain to be conquered… the planet
is having increased difficulty sustaining the ecological damage produced by
capitalist production and waste. These ecological limits are joined by the
social limits to growth, manifest in people’s resistance to capitalism all over
the world… It is natural to try to make sense of the extremely broad and
deep crisis we are living through. As the crisis has dragged on over the last
few years, sales of Marx’s Capital have skyrocketed. I suspect people are
looking for an explanation for why capitalism has failed.[12]
(4) Eras of the Cold War

One obvious way to study the Cold War is to break it into specific incidents, decades or periods defined by the terms of Soviet or American presidents. A detailed discussion of every possible period is not possible here, but a few examples can be described generally.

The early period of 1945-49 can be seen as a preliminary phase when the iron curtain was drawn across Europe, but one in which America still enjoyed its material advantages and monopoly on nuclear weapons. The 1950s was the period of nuclear paranoia, and domestic witch hunts, when both nations created an overkill of hydrogen bomb arsenals and recklessly polluted the planet with nuclear fallout from bomb tests. This was also the time of de-colonization when the Cold War went global and the US and the USSR began to stake out claims on the de-colonizing nations of Africa and Asia.

After the Cuban Missile Crisis, the 1960s could be seen as a time when leaders on both sides staggered like a couple waking up on Sunday after hosting a drunken orgy the night before. It was time to tacitly admit that some pretty weird stuff had gone down. It was time to check up on the children and evict the unseemly guests sprawled on the floor. They now seemed ready to sober up and resolve some issues that would leave them both with a chance of survival.

After coming close to all-out nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis, atmospheric testing ended, both sides improved communications, and they were careful afterwards not to get into such a situation again. Disarmament talks began in a long process called détente, and the mutual interest in making it work also played a role in turning down the heat in regional conflicts. For example, when Cuba was eager to take its Soviet-made weapons to Africa to assist in anti-colonial wars of independence, the USSR was less enthusiastic because it worried about the American reaction and the effect on détente. When Cuba acted alone, the US could see it only as a Soviet betrayal of the détente process.
US officials admitted later that they were slow to understand that it was the tail wagging the dog. [13] Cuba acted alone and only made the USSR reluctantly support the effort through the long Angolan war because Cuba knew it had too much strategic value as a communist nation just off American shores.

In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan seemed to be reversing the progress of détente by declaring the Soviet Union an “evil empire” bent on global domination. [14] This was shocking news to the Soviet leadership because by that time global domination was the farthest thing from their minds. They were struggling to deal with economic crises, the war in Afghanistan, internal dissent, and American military and economic superiority. The entire Soviet system was viewed as aging and discredited by its own people, a condition symbolized by the leadership which saw three elderly leaders die between 1982 and 1985: Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko.[15]

Interestingly, during his evil empire speech, Reagan referred to an incident that was “during the time of the Cold War,” as if he was not still in the thick of it and provoking one of its most dangerous moments. When Gorbachev came to power, openly admitting to the need for openness and reform (glasnost and perestroika), Reagan unexpectedly became the only president who was able to negotiate significant reductions in nuclear stockpiles and achieve an enduring friendship with a Soviet leader. For Reagan it was a combination of good timing, Gorbachev’s willingness to work on the relationship over four summit meetings between 1985 and 1988, and the fact that Reagan had no opposition to the right of him. A Democratic president never could have risked the political backlash involved in warming up to a Soviet leader and making deep cuts to the nuclear arsenal. The Americans were also playing hardball behind the scenes—outspending the Soviets, frightening them with space-based weapons programs, and supplying Muslim fighters in Afghanistan with stinger missiles. It was also very convenient that OPEC kept world oil prices low because as a result the USSR’s export revenue dropped. The Chernobyl catastrophe came as a crippling
blow that destroyed all illusions about the Soviet system. Gorbachev later pointed to it as the event that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union:

The nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl … even more than my launch of *perestroika*, was perhaps the real cause of the collapse of the Soviet Union five years later. Indeed, the Chernobyl catastrophe was an historic turning point: there was the era before the disaster, and there is the very different era that has followed.\(^{[16]}\)

(5) Colonialism, De-colonization and Independence:

*Two American soldiers on a transport plane heading for Central America:*

1st soldier: Any word on where we’re heading?

2nd soldier: I hear it’s San Marcos.

1st soldier: For or against the government?

2nd soldier: The CIA is not taking any chances. Some of us are for it and some of us are going to be against it.

*from Woody Allen’s film Bananas, 1971*

For the historian O.A. Westad, author of *The Global Cold War*, the global impact of the Cold War was its defining feature. Many analysts of the time tended to focus on the iron curtain in Europe and the fear of a hot war, and thus a nuclear war, erupting over Germany or other territory in Eastern Europe. However, it was precisely the dread of such a conflict that forced the superpowers to exert their influence in other parts of the world. Westad concludes his book by stating:

… the dual process of de-colonization and Third World radicalization were not in themselves products of the Cold War, [but] they were influenced by it
in ways that became critically important and that formed a large part of the world as we know it today… they formed a pattern that has had disastrous consequences for today’s relationship between the pan-European states and other parts of the world. [17]

Westad’s book provides excellent coverage of the diverse regions of the world that were disrupted and often devastated by superpower rivalries, some of which were scarcely reported on at the time such as the civil wars in Yemen and Ethiopia. What stands out in his descriptions is the extent to which popular perceptions in the West, among the public and high-level officials, so badly misunderstood the complexities of these conflicts. They tended to exaggerate the ambitions and the strengths of their rival, not always for propaganda purposes but often out of sheer ignorance. The historian Greg Gandin wrote of Henry Kissinger’s foreign policy record:

Kissinger was absolutely blind to the fundamental feebleness and inevitable collapse of the Soviet Union… none of the lives Kissinger sacrificed in Cambodia, Laos, Angola, Mozambique, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, East Timor, and Bangladesh made one bit of difference in the outcome of the Cold War. Similarly, each of Kissinger’s Middle East initiatives has been disastrous in the long run. [18]

The thinking of Soviet planners was still shaped by Marxist theory that saw revolution as evolution, so they were hesitant to export revolution to parts of the world that were culturally unprepared for it. Cuba made a disastrous error in this regard when it sent Che Guevara to the Congo in the 1960s. When the Cuban soldiers tried to train rebel forces according to European military traditions, they realized that the African soldiers had no political education or awareness of what the struggle was about. They brought relatives with them on military campaigns,
as well as phonograph players that they played within earshot of the enemy. They refused to crouch in trenches because the ground was a place only for the dead. [19] The Cubans had to withdraw and reassess their plans for fostering anti-imperialist resistance in Africa.

Although the de-colonizing nations may not have been ready for Marxist revolution, they were poor and emerging from long oppression by European capitalist states, so the American model looked like more of the same while Marxism and the Soviet model had obvious appeal as an alternative. Furthermore, with the CIA actively working to establish pro-American regimes, people who wanted an alternative had no choice but to seek Soviet support. It was often the case of the tail wagging the dog. Many of the leaders in newly independent nations had a very thin commitment to, or even an understanding of ideology, and they were happy to play both sides off each other to get the highest level of support possible. They also insisted on not being bossed around by Moscow or Washington, as they wanted to find the type of socialism or market economy that suited their needs best. The Soviets came into many Third World conflicts reluctantly, wary of the costs, the likelihood of failure, and the consequences of upsetting ongoing negotiations with the US over arms reduction or conflicts in other regions. In contrast, it was the Americans who often came with ideological zeal and blinders on, convinced that the entire world was ready for the American model of capitalism and democracy. Such enthusiasm didn’t end when the USSR collapsed.

One of the largest and most tragic failed interventions was Afghanistan in the 1980s, where competing communist factions abused Soviet aid to engage in petty power struggles while they bungled the struggle in the countryside where foreign-born Islamic radicals were gaining strength. Early in the Soviet involvement, some Soviet planners advised withdrawal because of the obvious lack of popular support and understanding of communism, and because of the tragi-comic incompetence of the Afghan communist factions that were vying for
power. But bureaucratic inertia, as well as worries about religious fundamentalist revolution spilling from Iran north and east into Soviet republics, kept the project moving until it was too late to get out of it unscathed. All this time, Americans demonized the Soviets as eager aggressors, while the Soviets perceived their quagmire as something they had been dragged into reluctantly.

Another facet of the regional conflicts that is badly misunderstood is that they were usually very slow to escalate to a full level of commitment by either the US or the USSR. During the 1950s, the Cuban regime of Battista was decried as a puppet of Washington, but many in Washington, including Senator John F. Kennedy, were eager to see him replaced by a moderate reformer, and thus Cuba was under sanctions before Castro seized power. Many people who defected from Castro’s Cuba had fought in the struggle against the old regime.

It was a similar situation in Indonesia throughout the 1950s where Sukarno was seen as a moderate whom the US could work with, the only leader who could hold the diverse and fractious nation together. Sukarno hosted the first meeting of the moderate Non-Aligned Movement in 1955, which was a coalition of African and Asian nations that wanted to pursue independence without an exclusive reliance on the superpowers. Sukarno’s relationship with the US deteriorated slowly over many years as the US became worried about the “domino effect” of one nation after another falling to communism. As a reaction, Sukarno became frustrated with American intolerance of any policy that had a trace of socialism in it, so he began to look elsewhere for support. After he was deposed in a coup, and after the anti-communist genocide in Indonesia, he was erroneously remembered only as the anti-American foe he had been in the final years.

(6) The Domestic Impact of the Nuclear Arms Race and the Cold War

Noam Chomsky wrote in 2014, “If some extraterrestrial species were
compiling a history of Homo sapiens, they might well break their calendar into two eras: BNW (before nuclear weapons) and NWE (the nuclear weapons era).” [20] This quote stresses what was profoundly unique about the historical period that began in 1945. One facet of the Cold War was regional conflicts, ideology, and the comings and goings of particular leaders—all the familiar aspects of politics as they had always been. Another facet was the emergence of this new era when humanity held in its hand the capacity to destroy itself in the span of a single day.

The impact of this change is often underestimated because its effects have become normalized and pervasive. Nuclear technology is the air we breathe, figuratively and literally in the sense that plutonium, a substance that didn’t exist before the 1940s, can now be detected in all animal tissue. A thorough study of the social effects of the nuclear era can be found in Joseph Masco’s 2006 book *Nuclear Borderlands*. A segment of the epilog appears below. While it refers to American society, one can assume the same description applies to every nation that built nuclear weapons:

… the Manhattan Project put in motion a revolution in American society, creating the concept of the nuclear superpower, making technoscience one of the key US national projects of the twentieth century, installing a new system of secrecy within American democracy, and beginning a new kind of nation-building built on nuclear fear. Consequently, the Manhattan Project is now best thought of as a multigenerational social mutation, one that has not only transformed the earth’s surface into a biosocial experiment, but that has also provided the core structures for organizing both American society and the international order. In the twentieth century, the United States did not just build the bomb; it built itself through the bomb. The sheer scale of the technoscientific infrastructure, the institutional collaborations, the economic investment, and the environmental effects of that ongoing project now link
every citizen directly to the Manhattan Project, marking them as national subjects, as members of a military-industrial economy, as residents of the United States, and as biological beings.\[21]\[10]

Specifically, what did it mean to be involved in “a new kind of nation-building built on nuclear fear”? For example, in the US it led to the McCarthy witch hunts of the 1950s in which education, the mass media and the entertainment industry were purged of anyone who had the an association with leftist political beliefs. The population learned to censor itself and implicitly understand the new boundaries of permissible thought. New national security institutions were created. The population had to be treated with suspicion in order to keep it safe. These institutions were so well-rooted by the time the Soviet threat vanished that they simply could not cease to exist. They found a new raison d’être after 2001 when terrorism was substituted for communism.

The possession of nuclear weapons made nations anti-democratic, less free, and obsessed with security. This trend was observed in any nation that wanted nuclear weapons. In the USSR, Stalin’s repressive regime and gulag already existed before WWII, so the necessary system already existed when the nuclear project began.

In France, the nuclear weapons program and the nuclear energy program were enacted without public debate or votes in the National Assembly. French territories outside the Hexagone (France proper) were subjected to the ecological damage of nuclear weapons tests. In 1985, the French secret service sank the Greenpeace ship Rainbow Warrior, killing one crew member. It was a state-sponsored act of terrorism on the territory of New Zealand, a Western ally, conducted in order to stop the group from protesting nuclear weapons testing. Margaret Pope, the wife of David Lange (New Zealand prime minister at the time) said about the incident, “I think it settled him [Lange] in his view of what nuclear politics did to people, especially countries like France. It made them
utterly unprincipled.”[22]

The international community has always expressed great satisfaction that since August 9, 1945, nuclear weapons have never been used during wartime against an enemy, but this pride has overshadowed the disastrous effects, and the eternal toxic legacy of nuclear weapons manufacture and testing. The US and USSR, and other nuclear powers, subjected minority and marginal groups to nuclear tests in remote locations that put the tests beyond the awareness of voters. [23] If international law could be applied to the nuclear powers (all of them members of the UN Security Council), these testing programs would be deemed as war crimes, or “Cold War crimes,” but instead they hardly register in the popular consciousness of the nations that conducted them.

Nuclear powers also subjected their nuclear workforces to contamination and risks that resulted in a largely unquantified, but undoubtedly huge toll of disease and shortened lives. In this regard, it is likely that the Manhattan Project took more American lives in slow motion than it took in the two explosions in Japan. Stalin’s crash program to build a bomb in the late 1940s was a callous, reckless project that created, through both routine operations and accidents, a public health and environmental catastrophe in the Southern Urals that was arguably equal to, or worse than, the Chernobyl catastrophe, depending on how one decides to qualify the damage. [24]

The historian Kate Brown has described in detail the human cost of the atomic bomb programs of the US and USSR by comparing the two towns in each country—the two “plutopias”—where plutonium was made. She noted that life in the American town where plutonium was made from the 1940s to 1960s, (Richland, Washington), “epitomizes a lot of shifts we find in American society in the post-war years… making these kinds of exchange of body rights, rights over one’s body [submitting to the risk of workplace contamination with plutonium], and civil rights and freedoms for consumer rights and financial security, and national security made sense to a lot of Americans, not just people
in Richland.” [25]

Kate Brown’s book on this topic [26] pointed out the many uncanny similarities that evolved between the social structures of the US and the USSR in the towns where plutonium was made, similarities that contradicted ideology and popular national self-conceptions. The similarities are outlined in Tables 1 and 2 below. In essence, American workers gave up rights and freedoms, while Soviet managers adopted a policy of inequality and elite privilege in order to foster a loyal workforce that would keep secrets and accept the risks of working with nuclear materials. These effects spread to some degree outside of these plutopias to all aspects of society, a phenomenon which supports the convergence theory mentioned above. Both nations were transforming themselves into versions of state capitalism. America’s bombs and weapons were built by private corporations, but the flow of profits depended on the state directing resources to them. Soviet state-owned industries just lacked a stock market where private investors could access the profits of military production.

Nonetheless, the USSR developed an interest in competing with America to provide “the good life” to its workers, if not to stockholders. On a visit to Moscow in 1959, Vice President Richard Nixon challenged Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev to provide more and better consumer goods for the masses, and he took the bait. From then on, both countries implicitly acknowledged the importance of providing citizens with material comforts, while politics, sacrifice and the struggle to build a just society took a back seat.
Table 1

Ideals of American Capitalism and Soviet Communism

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<td>private</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Individual Outcomes</td>
<td>unequal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>free market</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>free</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Individual Motivation</td>
<td>enlightened self-interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Value of the Individual</td>
<td>primary</td>
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Table 2

The actual values adopted in both of the superpowers’ plutonium cities: Richland, USA and Ozersk, USSR

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Ozersk-Richland Hybrid Economic and Social Order</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Property</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Individual Outcomes</td>
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<td>Individual Motivation</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Value of the Individual</td>
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(7) Aid and Trade

The study of history is often dominated by the drama of war, so it is easy to overlook the fact that non-military attempts to control markets and resources were the motivations that sometimes required the use of force. After the USSR established a buffer zone called the Eastern Bloc between itself and Western Europe, staking out its right to have this sphere of influence, it preferred to get involved in regional conflicts only when regions sought an alternative to Western
economic hegemony or seemed ripe for socialist transformation. The USSR had all the natural resources it needed, and had no corporations demanding profit from overseas mines and plantations. The USSR did its colonizing and exploitation in the republics within the union. Kazakhstan, for example, was inflicted with the Aral Sea ecological catastrophe and the fallout from 340 underground and 116 atmospheric nuclear tests.

In Latin America, Africa and Asia, 19th century Western colonialism, and later 20th century capitalism, were the aggressive forces imposed on the Third World, while communism was something new—an alternative that could be turned to as away to fight against imperialist aggression. American officials and some historians might have often described Soviet actions as “naked aggression” and other such terms, but such double-speak should not be surprising. The sight of the natives defending themselves has often been labeled “aggression.”

Western economists have always argued that capitalism lifted more people out of poverty than communism, with Taiwan, South Korea and Japan held up as the model pupils. Yet from these successes it doesn’t follow logically that they could have been duplicated everywhere. Nor does it follow that the USSR had ever promised that it could lift the world out of poverty while being opposed on every front, especially in the timeframe implied by the people making these comparisons. Furthermore, a few decades of prosperity proves little about the ability of the “Asian Tigers” to create long-lasting prosperity.

Anyone who sees the USSR as having been the supreme threat forgets that it was Marx himself who predicted correctly that the United States would become the main revolutionary power of the 20th century. The US defeated Germany, Japan and the USSR and established a global US dollar-based economic system. This victory does not mean it was benign or morally good in all the places it touched. While it is common to accuse communists of being naïve about how much human nature could bend to its ideals, the American mission has been blind to its own naiveté regarding how much the Third World would welcome
or adapt to the American model of capitalism and democracy. Hindsight on the 21st century American interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria are cases in point. For many nations, the economic medicine prescribed by America failed, guaranteeing that they would turn to fundamentalist religion, nationalism or communism as alternatives. The disaster didn’t end when the USSR collapsed in 1991.

Perhaps the most drastic period of American economic intervention was in the 1980s. In a chapter called *Aid, Trade and Ideology*, Westad describes the role of Reagan’s economic policy in fighting the last decade of the Cold War:

> From the outset the Reagan administration was much more intent than any previous government had been in using economic warfare against its enemies through hitting at their trade, currency and credit… As a key survey of the international economy since 1945 notes, Reagan’s policies were not only “predetermined and ideological,” but “aggressively selfish.” The model of development that the Washington Consensus prescribed to Third World countries—and which its emissaries forced the implementation of with near religious zeal—was considerably less flexible than the policies the United States allowed itself. In addition to budget austerity and devaluation, it consisted of price and trade liberalization, privatization, and—in some cases—the wholesale abolishment of public services… These countries saw a massive increase in poverty which had or are now having disastrous effects on their political stability or even national cohesion. [27]

Descriptions such as this underscore the importance of looking beyond military conflicts in order to understand the Cold War.
(8) Specific Incidents

Cold War history can be approached through the study of specific incidents in which several of the sub-topics covered above all come together. However, it can be difficult to discuss these with students if they are not aware of the context and background. A few examples of incidents that could be studied are the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Reagan-Gorbachev summit meetings, the launch of Sputnik and the space race, the Berlin Blockade, and the fall of the Berlin Wall, to mention only a few. The Cuban Missile Crisis is discussed below in order to outline how one incident highlighted the fundamental aspects of the Cold War.

The Cuban Revolution portrayed how the failure of American economic and political models led an impoverished nation to communist revolution. The unlikely victory of Fidel Castro’s outgunned and inexperienced forces showed that both East and West were not in control and were unprepared for such unexpected turns. The Soviets, following Marxist theory, were looking elsewhere for nations that might be on a Marxist “natural path” toward revolution. It was supposed to happen in a society with an industrial proletariat, not in an economy based on sugar cane and casinos ninety miles from American shores. For the Soviet leadership, it was a complete surprise, but one which they took full advantage of to get a strategic foothold in the Americas.

The American reaction revealed a policy, in fact an implicit popular belief, that international law need not be a concern when America felt its strategic interests were threatened. It invaded Cuba in the failed Bay of Pigs attack, and it made numerous covert attempts on Castro’s life. Most American interventions elsewhere consisted of a faltering pro-American regime allowing or asking for American assistance, or America giving assistance to one side in a civil war. But Cuba was a sovereign nation that posed no threat to America. No stretched interpretation of international law could have provided an excuse for military aggression against it, but within America the “right” to invade or topple the
Castro regime was an uncontroverisal notion.

During the missile crisis, when America had clearly announced to the world that it was preparing an aerial invasion, Cuba shot down an American reconnaissance plane flying over Cuban territory. In an American documentary about the crisis, made over forty years later, an advisor to President Kennedy interviewed in the film still described this defensive action as an “act of war, by the Russians” and a dangerous escalation of the crisis. [29]

The most striking feature of the crisis was the speed with which it arrived at the brink of total nuclear war, which everyone at the time understood to mean there would be no winner. Civilization would be gone, the environment would be destroyed, and survivors would be living in the Stone Age. People within Kennedy’s cabinet during the thirteen days of the crisis told each other one evening to enjoy the sunset because they were aware it might be the last one they would see. Yet even though everyone understood this situation, Kennedy, Khrushchev and Castro let it get to this point before offering each other ways out or suggesting points they would compromise on.

While the technology enabling long-distance phone calls had been around for a while, there wasn’t even any means for the leaders of the two most powerful nations on earth to speak directly with each other. Each side was left to wonder if the head of state was really in charge or whether military leaders might be in charge and planning to do something reckless. This was three years after Nixon and Khrushchev had had their friendly “kitchen debate” in Moscow. They were able to talk then about the quality of kitchen appliances in their respective countries, but now in the midst of an existential crisis, lines of communication didn’t exist. Communiqués had to move with costly delays through telegraph messages passed via the respective embassies in Washington and Moscow. A hotline was established only after the crisis.

During the crisis, the American Joint Chiefs of Staff were recommending that Kennedy launch a massive air assault on the Soviet missiles that had been
installed in Cuba, assuming hopefully (and wrongly, as it turned out) that none of the missiles were ready to launch and loaded with nuclear warheads. In many tellings of the story, one aspect of this plan still receives scant mention: although the plan was to destroy the estimated forty missiles without causing nuclear detonations (and before a single one could be launched in retaliation), even if it had succeeded, there would have been a vast contamination of Cuba, the Southeast US, and the Caribbean. The conventional bombing and subsequent fires would have broken the warheads and released plutonium and uranium into the wind. There were also 100 tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba at the time which the Americans didn’t know about. In 1966, a B-52 bomber crashed over Spain and deposited just one hydrogen bomb near the town of Palomares. The cleanup cost millions of dollars yet a sacrifice zone still remains. Everyone involved in the Cuban Missile Crisis had had their thinking shaped by fighting WWII, so they were not even aware of these extreme hazards of nuclear materials. Curtis Le May, the general planning the attack, was still thinking in terms of the WWII air raids he had led twenty years earlier.

The Soviets were equally reckless merely by the decision to let a good part of their nuclear arsenal go to the opposite side of the world to be left with a government they had very little experience with. They sent nuclear-armed submarines, designed for Arctic waters, to distant tropical waters where they lost contact with Moscow. Once the missiles and bombs were in Cuba, any independent action by Castro could have upset the fragile agreements that the superpowers were trying to come to. After the crisis, Castro was furious that the Soviets had backed down and agreed to remove the missiles. As compensation, he wanted to keep the 100 tactical nuclear weapons which the Americans didn’t know about. The Soviets considered it for a time, but soon realized they could not risk having any of their arsenal outside of their direct control. They insisted on taking them all back. [30]

What Castro may not have understood about his ally was that the missiles
sent to Cuba were primarily to be a bargaining chip to get American missiles out of Turkey. Castro saw possession of nuclear weapons as the only way to deter further American aggression, and he had thought the Soviets were committed to providing this shield. The Americans could have avoided the crisis before it ever happened by recognizing that the missiles in Turkey were too close to Moscow for the Soviets to tolerate. They were, by American admission before the crisis, outdated and in need of removal. But still, even though Kennedy is portrayed as the cool, steady hand who guided America out of the crisis, he showed a willingness to go deeper into it when there was this way out in the early stages. By the time the Americans offered to remove the missiles in Turkey, the Soviets were just as terrified as anyone and eager to back out of the crisis. They even agreed to make the withdrawal of the Turkish missiles a secret that wouldn’t be revealed to the public in either country. Kennedy also promised to stop aggression against Cuba, another gesture that could have been made long before the crisis developed, seeing as how it went against international law and the UN Charter to make war on sovereign nations. Thus, even on the eve of the planned massive air raid on Cuba that had a 50-50 chance of resulting in global nuclear war, Kennedy was worried about the political fallout more than the real fallout.

At the approximate mid-point of the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis may be the best single episode for highlighting many of the era’s important characteristics. The willingness of the superpowers to risk nuclear holocaust revealed their ugly priorities and the sorts of lesser damage that they would tolerate to pursue their goals. As humanity faced up to the real possibility of nuclear war for the first time, it was a stark revelation of the new frontier in human awareness that the nuclear age ushered in. By 1968, an entire generation of youth in Chicago, Paris and Prague would be on the streets protesting this world that their elders had created for them.

Throughout the crisis, and after facing the threat of total destruction, the two superpowers never recognized their own fundamental hypocrisy. By claiming
the right to have thousands of nuclear weapons for their own security, they could not recognize that smaller nations like Cuba would want them too for the same deterrent purposes. In fact, with a disadvantage in conventional weapons, smaller nations had more reason to want a nuclear deterrent. The crisis could have been avoided if America had simply accepted Cuba’s nuclear arsenal for the time being and then begun leading the world out of the arms race—through the example of unilateral reductions if necessary. That was always an option, if one was truly interested in avoiding the risk of accidentally stumbling into a nuclear conflict. The crisis could be traced back precisely to America’s refusal to follow Leo Szilard’s advice to put nuclear weapons under a system of international control. It is always worth bearing in mind that this option was inconceivable for the president who is remembered as the sage statesman who saved the world.

The Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrates this recklessness, and it also shows how the superpowers used small nations as strategic pawns. On the other hand, it showed how the weaker nations, like Cuba in this case, could take their masters on a wild ride that they were utterly unprepared for. The superpowers were often undermined and redirected by allies who had divergent agendas, or by others who aspired to achieve or retrieve their own great nation status. Ultimately, some of them ended up only wanting to break free. The 1979 revolution in Iran led to the rise of Third World rejection of the “evil empires” that both had, after all, common roots in European Christian culture.

(9) Beyond the Two Superpowers

This influence of smaller nations on the Cold War illustrates that late 20th century world history wasn’t only the story of the superpower rivalry. China was an obvious power to contend with during the Cold War, and when it went communist in 1949, Americans feared that all of Southeast Asia would fall like dominoes. But a rift formed between the USSR and China, and China was beset
internally by famine and the Cultural Revolution through the 1950s and 1960s. Furthermore, its nuclear arsenal numbered in the hundreds, not in the tens of thousands, as was the case in both the US and USSR. After Nixon visited in 1972, China faded in American perceptions as a threat.

Israel and France present the most peculiar examples of American allies which might be best understood as “frenemies.” They often acted like high ranking members of a criminal gang. They usually made outward displays of loyalty to the boss, but they often pursued side-agendas which conflicted with the boss’s interests. Both France and Israel were motivated by the memory of being disempowered during WWII, so much of their behavior after the war can be understood as a desire to never again be dependent on others for security.

France could have lived under America’s nuclear umbrella, but it chose to develop its own nuclear arsenal, and later an extensive nuclear energy infrastructure. While doing so, it secretly helped Israel build its own nuclear weapons in the 1950s and it accepted Iran (during the regime of the Shah) as a major creditor for a one billion-dollar loan for the Eurodif uranium enrichment plant. Iran was hoping to develop its own nuclear power plants and was looking forward to using the enriched uranium. It was promised 10% of production in exchange for providing the loan. However, after the Iranian revolution, it became unthinkable for any Western nation to supply enriched uranium to Iran. Iran insisted on repayment of its investment in the enrichment facility, but France refused to recognize the commitment that was made to the previous regime. A wave of terror attacks in France followed throughout the 1980s. Though they could never be definitively linked to Iran, the French security services may have known something they didn’t want to share. The attacks were simply explained to the public as “Islamic terror,” but they ended in 1991 as soon as a deal was negotiated and France paid back the loan. [31]

Israel behaved in a similar way toward its American protector and benefactor: don’t ask permission; act first, then apologize later when what’s done
cannot be undone. America didn’t want any nation in the Middle East to have nuclear weapons, but by the time Israel had obtained its weapons (the existence of which it still won’t confirm or deny), they had to be accepted as a fait accompli. During the writing of this paper (September 2015), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) General Conference rejected a resolution (61 to 43) that would have required IAEA inspection of Israel’s nuclear facilities. The resolution was rejected thanks to Israel’s traditional allies such as the US, various EU members, Australia, Japan, South Korea and Canada. [32] The rejection of the resolution went unreported in the New York Times during a month when it published several stories on actions taken to end Iran’s nuclear program—one which never produced a single bomb.

In order to build a nuclear arsenal and reclaim its standing as a pre-eminent nation, France had to secure supplies of uranium and oil, and to do this it needed to re-establish its control of its former colonies. In this it succeeded quite well, during a time when the popular conception of the world was that only two superpowers were contending for every region of the Third World. Roger Lokongo notes the importance and the scale of the French arrangement in Africa:

West and Central Africa are the constituents of the so-called “Françafrique,” meaning that since independence they have kept close ties with France, the former colonial power, with which they are bound not only by defense agreements but also by a common currency, the CFA franc, which was pegged to the French franc, and therefore to the French Treasury, but is now pegged to the euro… former President Jacques Chirac acknowledged in 2008 that “without Africa, France will slide down into the rank of a third [world] power.” Chirac’s predecessor François Mitterand already prophesied in 1957 that “Without Africa, France will have no history in the 21st century.” [33]
A further striking reminder of France’s impact on Africa was the Rwandan genocide of 1994. The “superpower” conflict preceding the genocide was between France and the US, as France feared that African nations were showing an interest in adopting English as an official language and joining the American sphere of influence on the continent. France had been backing the Hutu-led government (who became the perpetrators of the genocide) for a long time in the Hutu-Tutsi conflict, which had also spilled over into countries surrounding Rwanda, while America had been assisting the Tutsi rebels. France maintained its support for the Hutus throughout the genocide and arranged for safe passage out of Rwanda when the tide turned against the Hutus. In all of this, the Soviet empire was long gone, and there were no Russians anywhere to be seen.\(^{[34]}\) This shameful rivalry between two NATO allies was a major underlying cause of the genocide, yet Western discourse on the subject has shown a tendency to dwell more on the notion that President Clinton was merely too distracted in early 1994 to organize a timely American-led intervention to stop the genocide just before it started.

(10) Cold War II

In 2012, John Wiener published his book\(^ {\text{[35]}}\) How We Forgot the Cold War in which he followed up on the efforts of conservative American politicians in the 1990s to commemorate “American victory” in the Cold War. Across the country numerous museums and memorials were set up to patriotically commemorate events of the era. He found to his surprise that these sites were ignored by both local people and visitors. America no longer had any interest in the Cold War, nor was it interested in the patriotic narrative that these initiatives had wanted to convey.

The end of the Cold War also created complacency about the risk of nuclear war, while American interventions continued and terrorism became an easy
substitute for communism in the national security apparatus.

The combined nuclear arsenals of the two superpowers have decreased from a 1985 peak of about 60,000 warheads to about 16,000 in 2013. The total of the arsenals of the other eight nations that possess nuclear weapons remained unchanged and now amounts to a little over 1,000. 

Russia’s economic weakness in the 1990s and its lack of hostility toward the US caused people to feel that the threat of nuclear Armageddon was a danger that had passed. Yet 60,000 warheads and 16,000 warheads are both figures that represent redundant overkill—both are enough to create a game-over situation for humanity. Hundreds of the weapons in each country have always remained on ready-to-launch status, which means that the world is still vulnerable to sabotage, command and control failures, theft of nuclear weapons and their use by rogue actors, and misunderstandings about whether the enemy has launched a first strike.

Additionally, the public seemed to not notice that all the nuclear powers stopped talking about further reductions after the 1990s, and in fact they have committed themselves to the tremendous expense of renewing nuclear weapons, claiming they are essential for national security. The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (1996) includes a loophole that renders it effectively meaningless. It would allow America to resume tests if US scientists ever “lost confidence” that bombs would function. In retrospect, one might wonder if the arms reductions of the early 1990s were a cynical deal worked out by the technoscientific managers in both countries to create the illusion of safety and progress. In addition to the strategic issues, the financial incentives are enormous. In effect, the apparent progress functioned to keep the global nuclear enterprise alive while disarming the disarmament movement.

It was understandable that Americans would become complacent while Russia was weak, but this situation didn’t last. Ironically, the year when How We Forgot the Cold War was published was about the same time that Americans
started to remember it all too well. Russia and America supported opposite sides of the Syrian civil war, then in 2014 America backed a coup in Ukraine in a continuing effort to expand NATO eastward. Suddenly the Western media was full of anti-Russia and anti-Putin messages. It was just like the old days. Russia acted to hold onto its bases in Crimea, which it claimed a right to under existing treaties. There was also raging debate about whether Russia had acted in a responsible way to protect ethnically Russian populations in Eastern Ukraine, or whether it had launched an aggression there and “annexed” Crimea. America enacted economic sanctions on Russia for being upset with the encroachment of NATO on its traditional sphere of influence. All of this has happened at a time when America and Russia need to cooperate in order to resolve crises in other parts of the world. It seems the prediction made by de Tocqueville in 1835, which had no definitive end date, still holds true. I finish this section with the following quote by American historian Stephen F. Cohen because it illustrates why it is essential for the new generation to appreciate the Cold War roots of the present conflict:

The new Cold War has been deepened and institutionalized by transforming what began, in February last year, as essentially a Ukrainian civil war into a US/NATO-Russian proxy war; by a torrent of inflammatory misinformation out of Washington, Moscow, Kiev and Brussels; and by Western economic sanctions that are compelling Russia to retreat politically, as it did in the late 1940s, from the West. Still worse, both sides are again aggressively deploying their conventional and nuclear weapons and probing the other’s defenses in the air and at sea. Diplomacy between Washington and Moscow is being displaced by resurgent militarized thinking, while cooperative relationships nurtured over many decades, from trade, education, and science to arms control, are being shredded. [38]
One of the best ways to approach teaching Cold War history is through arts and literature. Once one looks for a Cold War setting in works of fiction, it is easy to find. Sometimes the setting is explicit, sometimes implicit because the environment made by the Cold War is essentially the air we breathe. Comic books and science fiction B-movies offer many examples of how nuclear danger couldn’t be confronted consciously—it appeared subconsciously as mutant monsters, blobs and aliens. In other cases, it was an explicit element of the story. Whereas traditionally children’s stories resorted to magic and spells to give characters special powers, the progress of rational science now provided the transformational power, and, ironically, the superstitious nonsense. A rich comic book and movie franchise was established by the bite of a radioactive spider. Spy novels and popular music are other genres that offer thousands of works with Cold War and nuclear-age themes.

There is no space here to list all the possibilities. With a page left for just one example to finish with, I choose the American writers of the 1940s who grasped how the world had changed and were the first to raise the rebel yell. William S. Burroughs, who by odd coincidence attended a high school that was later converted to the Los Alamos Laboratory, wrote post-apocalyptic stories in his famous cut-up technique—a fitting style for the social fragmentation of the nuclear age. He was a friend of Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. These artists lived on both sides of 1945, so they were well positioned to witness how the atom bomb had transformed society. In the Ginsberg biography American Scream, Jonah Raskin wrote:

“Nineteen forty-eight was the crucial postwar year,” Ginsberg explained. “It was the turning point. Of course the atom bomb had already gone off in 1945, and Kerouac and Burroughs and I had talked about it, but the
psychological fallout from the bomb—the consciousness—didn’t really hit until 1948. There was the splitting of the atom and the splitting of the old structures of society and also a sense of the inner world splitting up and coming apart.” Like many other writers around the world, Ginsberg turned the atom bomb into an all-inclusive metaphor. Everywhere he looked he saw apocalypse and atomization. [39]

Ginsberg believed the bomb had caused a “psychic disturbance” among his friends, fueling their despair and subsequent drug use. In his journals, Kerouac labeled the spiritual crisis the “atomic disease.” [40] In his writing and his actions, Kerouac showed no interest in politics, or protests and petitions of any kind. Some said his intent was never to save America but to praise its joys and eulogize it, as if the existence of the atom bomb had doomed it. However, William Burroughs said about his influence, “By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their disclaimers.” He believed that Kerouac had inspired a worldwide movement that took his work to the next logical step, which was an activism which aimed to better the world, not merely fatalistically eulogize it. [41]

Kerouac described his writing as a holy calling, a command from God to “go moan for man” and be “as minute as a seed in the pod” in doing so. [42] Indeed, he may have been one of many humble seeds, for the more powerful forces in the disarmament movement arose later, some secular, some religious such as Plowshares (still spilling blood on nuclear installations in the 21st century) and evangelical Christian groups. It is impossible to know what the alternate history would have been, but it is plausible that nuclear annihilation was averted only because of the resistance of millions of citizens who forced political leaders to step back from the brink. As I write this (September 2015), the beat goes on. Speaking at the United Nations General Assembly in New York, Pope Francis declared:
An ethics and a law based on the threat of mutual destruction—and possibly the destruction of all mankind—are self-contradictory and an affront to the entire framework of the United Nations, which would end up as “nations united by fear and distrust”. There is urgent need to work for a world free of nuclear weapons, in full application of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, in letter and spirit, with the goal of a complete prohibition of these weapons. [43]

Even in Kerouac’s final year, when his talent and his relevance were said to have been drowned in terminal stage alcoholism, he could show flashes of wit and a flair for bringing attention to the existential problem that the chattering classes preferred to ignore. In an appearance on William F. Buckley’s show Firing Line in 1968, [44] he joined a panel discussion seeking a definition of “the hippie movement.” Kerouac was said to be pathetic in this appearance, offending everyone and at times incapable of speech. But even drunk and diminished as he was, he could still play the holy fool. He may have been aware of what was going on but just couldn’t stomach political discourse and the inanity of the questions about hippies and beatniks.

Buckley asked him if the hippie movement was “Adamite” (aspiring to a state of purity like Adam in the Garden,) but Kerouac was confused by this flaunting of obscure vocabulary. He asked with puzzlement, “Adamite? You mean Adam and Eve, or atom? What? Adam and Eve? What’s Adamite? They wear their hair long, in layers? Live in caves?”

“Yeah, sort of, and back to nature and...”

“Well, that’s alright. We might have to in due time—after the atomite bomb! Haha!”

Buckley flashed a smile, “That was good. Give that man a drink.”

So here, even at the end of his road, Kerouac was harkening back to what he had felt in the 1940s on a journey to Mexico City. His evocation of the atom bomb in the final pages of On the Road reveals the reason the characters
have refused to chase the post-war prosperity on offer in mid-century America. All the preceding delinquency and mad wanderings of these “best minds of a generation” now seem to be explained by a painful consciousness of the destiny of the world. This is also the moment of the story when the narrator becomes conscious of the failure within. They have rebelled against their society, but they are also the flawed products of it now carousing through a foreign land. The search for freedom and God has gone hand in hand with utter irresponsibility. Behind them lies a trail of abandoned wives and children, not to mention a few stolen cars. To the natives coming down from the hills, and the pimps and the women in the whorehouse they visit, they are just yanquis with dollars in their pockets. I finish with this excerpt because it brings this discussion of the Cold War back to its proper perspective. Kerouac shifts our attention back to where it needs to be, to the aboriginal peoples of the world who have endured and paid the costs of Western civilization’s suicidal rivalries:

Strange crossroad towns on top of the world rolled by, with shawled Indians watching us from under hatbrims and rebozos. All had their hands outstretched. They had come down from the backmountains and higher places to hold forth their hands for something they thought civilization could offer and they never dreamed the sadness and poor broken delusion of it. They didn’t know that a bomb had come that could crack all our bridges and banks and reduce them to jumbles like the avalanche heap, and we would be as poor as them someday and stretching out our hands in the same same way. [45]
Notes

8. Frank Capra (director), *Why We Fight: The Battle of Russia*, (1943, United States War Department), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONxRYd28u7s&index=5&list=PLue4rhsHxp6-h5AO9Az-gdo7sq_m5roBm.
11. See “The Keiser Report,” Episode 723, *Russia Today*, February 24, 2015. http://rt.com/shows/keiser-report/235067-episode-723-max-keiser/. Anthropologist David Graeber commented that such aspects of Western economies can be considered the “Sovietization” of capitalism because they have arisen from a system that consists of a stifling hybrid of private and public bureaucracies functioning with
common goals and interchangeable management, to the detriment of the general population.


15. There is no single term that can refer to all the heads of state of the USSR. At various times, the role of head of state was determined variously as “Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars,” “General Secretary,” “First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party” or finally “President” at the time the union dissolved.


17. Westad, 396.


26. Kate Brown, 133-149.

27. Westad, 360.


