Cold War Crucible

THE KOREAN CONFLICT AND THE POSTWAR WORLD

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Introduction

What Was the Cold War?

"If any one thing more than another could advance the cause to which the western nations are bending their efforts, it would be to stop describing it as the 'cold war.'" So argued the cover article in the British newsweekly the Economist on May 27, 1950, maintaining that, whatever the term had meant when first coined, it had the effect in the public mind of making the Western powers appear to be aggressors. The article continued: "It is time the western peoples dropped the term entirely from their political vocabulary and used instead a phrase ... that genuinely expresses their firm but pacific purposes." Following the outbreak of the Korean War on June 25, 1950, however, critiques of this kind disappeared within a few years, if not months. The manner of spelling out the phenomenon changed as well; the situation that had been described as "a cold war" or "the so-called cold war" in lower case in the late 1940s came to be commonly known as "the Cold War" in capital letters by the mid-1950s. This transition from lower to upper case implies that the bipolar confrontation no longer represented one of a number of disputable perspectives, but one that was now widely accepted as a substantial, irrefutable actuality.
INTRODUCTION

Such a gradual revelation of the Cold War, however, also suggests the constructed nature of a conflict that became "reality," as opposed to something that existed as an objective situation immediately following World War II. What made the Cold War different from other wars, such as the two world wars or the Korean War, was that it did not exist at a particular time and place. Rather, it existed not because it was there but because people thought that it existed. It was, in this way, an imagined reality that came to be shared and solidified in the postwar era, particularly during the Korean War, which many feared was the beginning of World War III. During the decades that followed, the Cold War appeared to be the "reality" of the world, and, thus, questions tended to focus on how it came about and who created it—a manner of research characterized by looking back on the "origins" of the conflict from a viewpoint accepting its actuality. Today, the Cold War seems to be an event of a past long gone, and the nature of inquiry cannot be the same. We now ask: How did millions of people worldwide come to believe in such an imagined reality, and why? How did such a "reality" become solidified in the early postwar era, particularly during the Korean War? And, after all, what truly was the Cold War?

This book is an attempt to rewrite the formation of the Cold War through synthesizing social and diplomatic history and local and global history. It examines the crucial moment of the Korean conflict, around 1950, and investigates the ways in which actors around the world—from elite policymakers to ordinary people—interpreted the meaning of the Korean War through the lenses of their own local contexts and participated in a multi-layered politics of knowledge production in their hometowns, eventually paving the way toward maintaining a particular Cold War world. My principal concern is not when the Cold War began or who initiated it but how the "reality" of the Cold War was produced and consolidated, and why numerous people joined in. Therefore, I look into not only policy-making processes during this period but the integral roles of popular imagination and participation that framed and conventionalized this "reality." My hope is to delineate how such an imagined reality, fueled by fear, antagonism, memories of war, and concerns about disorder at home, eventually became the irrefutable actuality of the postwar era. In brief, this is not a Cold War history that presupposes the existence of the Cold War. To be more precise, it is a history of a fantasy of the Cold War, focusing on its imagined and constructed nature as well as the social need for such an imagined reality.

In examining the post–World War II period, however, there is one obstacle: our ingrained habit of looking at this historical moment as a prelude to the Cold War and explaining all conceivable events and phenomena in terms of the Cold War reality. Here, in looking at the postwar years, we need to make a distinction between the Cold War as discourse, on the one hand, and as a "reality" of the world, on the other. The former was engaged in by policymakers and intellectuals in terms of expressing a set of opinions, often seen as provocative and perceptive. One could easily think of, for instance, Walter Lippmann’s series of newspaper articles published in 1947, George F. Kennan’s "Long Telegram" in 1946, or, perhaps, George Orwell’s 1945 general description of the nuclear age as a "cold war." Actually, one could trace such Cold War discourse back to Herbert Hoover’s warnings during World War II or even Woodrow Wilson’s concerns following the 1917 Russian Revolution. It is not difficult, indeed, to further trace a prototype of such discourse to the nineteenth-century writings of Alexis de Tocqueville, in which he forecast a future Russian-American rivalry (on the grounds that both had observed rapid population growth in their vast territories). In short, a discourse of this kind, predicting an eventual and inevitable competition between the Soviet Union (Russia) and the United States had existed all along. Yet not all of the time since the age of Tocqueville and Wilson has normally been considered an epoch of East-West confrontation. After all, their opinions were simply their opinions.

A "reality" is somewhat different from such discourse. In order for something to be considered an irrefutable reality and a distinctive historical epoch, there should be one more ingredient: social acceptance and participation. The distinction between discourse and reality lies not in terms of its essence but the number of its adherents. To put it plainly, a majority of the population had to believe in and propagate the discourse of the Cold War as a reality of the world, rather than simply viewing it as someone’s opinion. As we will see below, such a situation evolved along with the outbreak and development of the Korean War in 1950, which was feared in many (but not all) places in the world as the start of World War III. In the late 1940s, however, the Cold War did not really exist in this way as a reality of the world, even though it surely existed as one of many discourses about world situations. In fact, commentators still described it differently as "a cold war" or "the so-called cold war," written in lower case, rather than taking for granted that they were living in the age of the Cold War, in capital letters.
Nonetheless, because we tend to mix up these two processes, a couple of historiographical problems arise. First, because we have viewed policymakers’ and intellectuals’ Cold War discourse as explanations for the reality of the Cold War, we have not paid much attention to why numerous people came to accept and participate in the reality of the Cold War and what dynamics existed behind such social acceptance. To be sure, while there has been an upsurge in literature that explores the impacts of the conflict on ordinary people’s daily lives, much of it has described the Cold War as a given phenomenon—like the weather—rather than a constructed reality, and has not set out to examine the roles of ordinary people in shaping such a reality. In other words, while recent studies have gone far beyond investigating the “origins” of the Cold War in terms of the conduct of Harry S. Truman or Joseph Stalin, the stories of the numerous “adherents” at the grassroots level who ultimately made up the Cold War world have not yet been properly told. What were the choices of ordinary people? How did they participate in or, in some cases, even take advantage of, the Cold War world? What are we exploring here, as the historian John Lewis Gaddis and political scientist Stuart Kaufman have advocated, has less to do with people’s “objective” interests than the attitudes, beliefs, and myths that influenced these interests. Therefore, this book does not treat popular myths, rumors, and emotions among everyday people merely as effects of the Cold War; rather, it casts light on them as factors creating the “reality” of the conflict. As such, we will see that ordinary people were hardly passive in terms of the practice of Cold War politics and that the “reality” of the Cold War during this period was, in fact, maintained and propagated at the people’s initiative, parallel to the intentions of high-ranking policymakers.

Another focal point involves more closely delineating the social and historical background of that particular moment: legacies of World War II and colonialism as well as people’s experiences and memories of them. While we might assume that the years of the late 1940s and early 1950s were the prelude to the Cold War era, for many, they were above all the days following years of cruel wars—a postwar era. Yet, because we know what happened later, we have tended retroactively to apply the Cold War paradigm to the preceding era, when the Cold War was not yet a reality of the world. As a result, a wide range of events and phenomena has been viewed as parts, or even origins, of the Cold War, even though these might have had far more diverse local and historical roots. As we shall see in the cases of American, Chinese, Japanese, and other societies, many were, indeed, living with memories of World War II and observed contemporary events, like the Korean War, through that particular lens, contributing to intensifying fear of World War III, which, in turn, solidified a fantasy Cold War world. This point will become much clearer when we look at the fact that the Cold War was not a universal phenomenon at that time. As we will see below, the Cold War “reality” attained its highest level of verisimilitude in this early postwar period in Europe, East Asia, and the United States—that is, areas that were most fiercely involved in the world war—but did not achieve such a degree of plausibility, at least at this point, in other places, such as Africa and Latin America, which were not principal battlefields of the world war.

This was because many people in these (post)colonial societies were living with memories of colonialism and observing postwar situations differently. By examining a dividing line in terms of whether to believe in the “reality” of the Cold War, this book reveals the imagined and constructed nature of the Cold War world.

Keeping these points in mind, what we will attempt here is to strip away Cold War imaginings, shedding light on locally specific realities and, in doing so, destabilize our understanding of the Cold War as a single, global conflict that divided the world in two, between the Eastern and Western camps. In this way, my effort to explicate social and historical contexts underlying the Cold War world is in line with a number of other ongoing endeavors, notably the historian Matthew Connelly’s advocacy of “Taking Off the Cold War Lens,” and the anthropologist Heonik Kwon’s encouragement for “Decomposition of the Cold War.” It is also in line with the social historian Lizabeth Cohen’s observation that much of importance in America’s postwar history happened outside the Cold War framework and that applying that framework exclusively can obscure other crucial developments. This observation, in turn, has resonance with the historian Immanuel Wallerstein’s recent warning about the danger of looking at the second half of the twentieth century using the Cold War narrative, which he views as “largely a fantasy.”

This kind of scholarship, which raises fundamental questions about the Cold War framework, has, indeed, been increasing in recent years, in particular, among scholars outside the circles of Cold War specialists. Kuan-Hsing Chen, a prominent Taiwanese scholar of postcolonial and cultural studies, for instance, has argued for the need to “De–Cold War” in order to
analyze and promote the ongoing task of decolonization and deimperialization in Asia. Jodi Kim, a scholar of Asian-American literature, similarly, has conducted critical analysis of what she calls “Cold War compositions” in order to problematize the imperial and gendered racial logic of the Cold War. Also, in an anthology titled *De-Centering Cold War History*, Jadwiga Pieper Mooney and Fabio Lanza, Latin America and China specialists, respectively, have shed light on local, street-level experiences and initiatives that, they argue, were crucial to shaping the Cold War world.

The book takes these viewpoints seriously, and its ultimate goal, certainly, is to think about what the Cold War really was. However, we will not approach this question directly, assuming that the Cold War was a single, global confrontation, shaped through the conduct of elite policymakers and experienced in the same way across the world. Rather, *Cold War Crucible* makes a deliberate detour and approaches it by breaking down and delving deeply into local events usually conceived of as “Cold War” experiences, and, through analysis of local and micro-level events, we will inspect the imagined and constructed nature of the Cold War world as well as the social needs of such a reality on the ground. Below, we look into a number of post–World War II societies, in particular those of China and the United States, and examine the ways in which many events indeed developed outside the Cold War framework, though they came to be seen as part of the Cold War world. Following this detour, we return to our core question concerning the nature of the Cold War.

Readers might ask: if we want to prove these points, don’t we need more extensive research on all societies around the world? Ideally speaking, yes, but one book can only do so much. I sincerely hope that this book will spark new interest and research in the areas that I cannot cover here, including the Soviet Union and Germany. I do not provide extensive and detailed narratives on Korea, even though some discussion is provided where necessary. Korea is always at the center of our story, but this is not a book about the Korean War itself. Rather, it explores how the war, which was often interpreted as the beginning of World War III, functioned as a catalyst in the crucible of the post-war world and contributed to the materialization of the Cold War world.

The book has three parts, divided roughly chronologically and thematically. Part I examines the years between 1945 and 1950. Focusing on Ameri-
part of the engine, a core component, of the Cold War, contributing to the realization of a gigantic social construction, with the participation of ordinary people in their own domestic "wars" fought for the sake of order in each society.

In sum, Cold War Crucible revisits the immediate postwar period and reappraises what was really going on within the seemingly coherent Cold War paradigm by delving deeper into local histories in a number of postwar and postcolonial societies and listening to ordinary people's whispers and rumors. In this sense, this is a book about the social history of the global postwar world, with an emphasis on American and Chinese societies. In addition, by incorporating such social and local histories with an analysis of Washington's and Beijing's policy-making processes concerning the Korean conflict, this book provides a new mode of diplomatic history for these countries, which explicates interactive relationships between foreign and domestic politics, between state and society, and among policymakers and everyday people.

Exploring the crossroads of such social and diplomatic history, the book also includes a political history of grassroots conservative movements, defined broadly. It chronicles the inceptive moments of social conservative backlash, which functioned primarily to restore and maintain domestic tranquility, regardless of political regime and ideology, in many parts of the world in the chaotic postwar period. To put it differently, this is a story about how grassroots conservatives fought and suppressed various kinds of postwar change under the name of the global Cold War confrontation, and how power operated in such contexts, not just from the top down, but from the bottom up.

By integrating such social, diplomatic, and political histories with local and global history approaches, Cold War Crucible, above all, aims to destabilize and challenge the standard narrative of the Cold War, commonly believed to have been a global, geopolitical, and ideological confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States, orchestrated primarily by the elite policymakers of these states. Instead, by tracing the social construction of a fantasy of the Cold War world, it reveals that the actual divides of the Cold War existed not necessarily between Eastern and Western camps but within each society, with each, in turn, requiring the perpetuation of the imagined reality of the Cold War to restore and maintain order and harmony at home. 

It was such an acceleration of domestic needs and beliefs in the imagined reality of global confrontation that made the heterogeneity of local realities invisible and functioned internally to maintain and perpetuate the "real" Cold War for decades. Re-examining the Cold War in this way, Cold War Crucible hopes to open up discussion as to why such an imagined reality materialized during the Korean War period, why millions of people throughout the world participated in its formulation, and, finally, what the Cold War truly was.