History in the Cold War and the Cold War in the Present

Aunesluoma, Juhano

Department of Social Science History, University of Helsinki & Edita
2008

The Cold War and the Politics of History

http://hdl.handle.net/10224/4688

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.
This is an electronic reprint of the original article.
This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.
Please cite the original version.
History in the Cold War and the Cold War in the Present

PAULI KETTUNEN AND JUHANA AUNESLUOMA

This book is on the Cold War and the politics of history. It is a multidimensional subject. On one hand, it concerns the different roles of history in the confrontations called the Cold War. The topic includes, on the other hand, the many-faceted presence of Cold War experiences, interpretations and conclusions in post-Cold-War politics.

The very concept of the Cold War should be seen as a historical interpretation that has varied and changed over time. The way in which it has been periodized in post-1990 historical research obviously differs from the ways people between the late 1940s and the late 1980s conceived of their experiences and expectations.

For many of them, ‘the Cold War’ was a concept referring to certain phases of the East-West confrontation rather than to this confrontation itself. The Cold War proper had started with the breakdown of the wartime Grand Alliance in the mid-1940s, reached its high point during the Korean War 1950–53, and ended in the so-called first détente in the mid-1950s. As people saw it, the crises of 1958–62 from Berlin to Cuba had brought the world on the brink of an actual war. Then there were phases in which one spoke about a return to the Cold War, or ‘the Second Cold War’, as Fred Halliday provocatively entitled his book in 1982 on the increased tensions in the late 1970s and early 1980s between the United States and the Soviet Union.1

For many contemporaries, the East-West confrontation, as such, gradually came to represent a mode of existence of the present and future world that was, more or less, taken for granted. The term ‘war’ in ‘the Cold War’, with its inherent notion of temporal emergency condition, does not meet such an experience of normalcy in the bipolar world. On the other hand, the metaphorical ‘war’ in the current usage of the concept of ‘the Cold War’ may ignore the unique fatality that was associated with the next world war, nuclear war, in people’s minds and fears during the so-called ‘balance of terror’ and ‘mutually assured destruction’.

Further, there have appeared historical interpretations about the epochal change around 1990 for which the ‘the end of the Cold War’ is far too limited an expression. In the aftermath of the revolutionary upheaval in East and Central Europe in 1989 the historian Tony Judt, highlighting the resurgence of populism, nationalism, anti-Semitism and other counter-Enlightenment movements in the post-communist societies, declared 1989 not only the end of the Cold War, but also as the end of the Enlightenment era.2

In a similar vein, the theses on ‘the end of history’ have suggested that the epoch then reaching its end was much longer than just the one of the post-Second World War international confrontation. Two main variants of the end of history interpretation exist. The most famous one is the Hegelian thesis that Francis Fukuyama developed with support from Alexandre Kojève, claiming that through the victory of liberal capitalism and political democracy in the Cold War, history had reached its goal.3 Another variant, drawing from the anti-Hegelian critique of ‘historicism’ by Karl Popper, argues that as the outcome of Cold War, the ideologies based on the view on History with capital H, i.e. history as a supra-personal power oriented to certain direction, suffered a decisive defeat. Thus, no one could any longer claim to be the true agent of a law-like historical process.4

history thesis have linkages with post-modernist theses on the end of ‘grand narratives’.

One does not need to delve very deeply into these discussions to find that while all these different notions of ‘end’ are dubious, they, at the same time, imply the significance of history as a dimension of Cold War confrontations. We may distinguish between three levels of conflict. At each level, history played crucial although divergent roles as an aspect of the conflict.

At the first level, the period defined from the post-1990 perspective as the Cold War was characterised by the political-military confrontation between the East and West blocs, dominated by the Soviet Union and the United States, respectively. At this level, some space also existed for neutrality recognised by both parties. One might say that, at this level, history as an aspect of the conflict was actualised, in the first place, from a realist perspective of international politics. For the actors of international power politics, e.g. Henry Kissinger who is examined by Jussi Hanhimäki in this book, history appeared as *magistra vitae*, i.e. as a store of lessons and the knowledge on previous similar cases to be utilised in decision-making. The tendency to view history, for example the case of democratization of West Germany, as a guide for current policy-making, has not disappeared, as is shown by Heinrich August Winkler in the book’s finale.

Other Cold War era statesmen, such as Finnish presidents J. K. Paasikivi and Urho Kekkonen, rooted their statecraft too on long historical continuities, external necessities and immutable geopolitical realities – as they perceived them – and as are analysed by Dörte Putensen, Raimo Väyrynen, Timo Soikkalan and Kimmo Rentola in the last section of the book.

According to the school of thought represented by Kissinger and other realists, the Cold War was not a unique phenomenon in itself, but only another phase in the *longue durée* in the history of international politics and great power conflicts. If this was the case, then ancient principles in the uses and usefulness of diplomacy, deterrence and military force, were still relevant, irrespective what the geopolitical particularities of the Cold War international system were. For others, however, the Cold War, with the dual appearance of previously unseen weapons of mass destruction and ideologies as driving forces of foreign policy, meant that the conflict was not just another cold war, but a Cold War with capital letters.
This leads us to the second level of the Cold War, which included the conflict between rivalling socio-economic systems, socialism and capitalism. Of course, the notion of inter-systemic conflict, namely the conflict between capitalism and socialism, was a political reality long before the Cold War. Moreover, it is reasonable to question whether the East-West conflict ever managed to encapsulate the rivalry between socialism and capitalism. Nevertheless, such an effort, based on the authority of history, was a crucial part of the Cold War as this inter-systemic conflict was in the core of the legitimation of Soviet communism.

It may be useful to recall that in his book Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy from 1942, Joseph A. Schumpeter asked whether capitalism can survive and answered: ‘No, I don’t think it can’. On the subsequent question, ‘Can socialism work?’, his answer was unambiguous: ‘Of course it can.’ Far from being any advocate of socialism, Schumpeter found in the dynamics and achievements of Western capitalism an inherent tendency towards socialism that had been accelerated by the First World War, the Great Depression and the Second World War. According to his prefaces to the second edition in 1946 and the third edition in 1949, post-war developments, notably in Britain and the United States, had provided further support for his argument.5

While highly original in his analysis, Schumpeter was but one of the intellectuals that during the wartime and the immediate post-war years constructed images of a future society within a framework dominated by the confrontation between capitalism and socialism. Most notably, his analysis is an example of the fact that in 1946 or even in 1949, it was far from self-evident to identify this confrontation with the conflict between the West and the East. The socialism Schumpeter foresaw winning in Britain and the United States did not result from an expansion of the Soviet power sphere and a subsequent implementation of the Soviet model. Actually, the Soviet Union and communism represented for Schumpeter a ‘non-orthodox’ form of socialism which, though, might later evolve towards Western socialism, including the Western ways in which socialism and democracy would be combined together.

Two influential interpretations of the Cold War conflict have made it easy to reduce the conflict between socialism and capitalism to the

East-West conflict. First, an integral ideological ingredient of the East-West confrontation was the Marxist-Leninist theory on two confronting camps that represented two historically successive social formations, capitalism being the lower and socialism the higher stage of world history. This theoretical view also preconditioned the role and orientation of historical research, as appears from Manfred Menger’s account of the institutionalisation of academic history in the German Democratic Republic in this book, as well as from Seppo Hentilä’s numerous works on historical research in the divided Germany.6

Second, also the neo-liberalist view on historical progress that became highly influential after the collapse of the Soviet Union tended to identify the conflict between socialism and capitalism with the Cold War conflict. According to the latter interpretation, the solution of the Cold War had universally liberated the natural and, consequently, right mode of economic and social dynamics and wealth creation. Reverberations of this vision of capitalism having passed the test of ‘war’ against its binary opponent have not only been felt in the United States and the Western democracies7, but also in the ex-socialist countries of Central and East Central Europe. As Katalin Miklóssy shows in her study of the identity reformation of the Hungarian left after 1989, the successor party of the old regime had to adapt to neo-liberal ideals and individualism, and also


Pauli Kettunen and Juhana Aunelsuoma

to face the difficulties involved in making a distinction between pre-1989 reformist socialism and post-1989 social democracy.

On the third level, the Cold War was a conflict of political regimes, including the dimensions of democracy, citizenship and human rights. Here, the role of history was associated with the rivalry between conflicting visions on human agency and the relationships between the individual, society and the state.

After the end of Cold War, the so-called history-political debates concerning the period have very much focused on this particular level of the conflict, and the other levels of confrontation – those of the political-military conflict and the conflict of socio-economic systems – are discussed from the point of view of the third level. Thus, the history-political controversies analysed in many chapters of this book include not only accounts of the repression people faced in the countries of communist rule, but also debates in which politics and politicians of the Cold War era in non-communist countries like Denmark or Finland are criticised for having ignored the evilness of the communist system, as shown by Poul Villaume in his article on the Danish case.

This means, that the frame in which individuals and individual acts and decisions are often seen in the post-Cold War world, is through the prism of this ‘master conflict’ between two different political regimes. The pertinent question of the 1940s, in time of alliance and bloc building about ‘whose side were you on’, became again increasingly relevant after 1990. Irrespective of what the individuals’ views and positions on the first and second dimensions of the conflict had been, their actions in subsequent analysis could judged using the yardstick of the final outcome of the conflict between the two political regimes.

Henry Kissinger and other realists could be criticised for having engaged in negotiations with a lethal enemy and President Urho Kekkonen – at least momentarily – for assessing socialism’s inner strengths too high over US-style capitalism, or promoting a positive image of Lenin as a guarantee of Finland’s independence, the phenomenon investigated by Joni Krekola in this book. Lesser politicians and individuals could be accused for having become fellow travellers, finlandized, soft on issues such as German reunification and NATO-policies, or guilty of undue impartiality in the general portrayal of the two competing systems in popular histories, television programs, newspaper articles and school books, the latter of which are scrutinized here by Sirkka Ahonen. As the
defeated side appeared as an oppressive regime, it became easy to take for granted that the victorious side must stand for liberty. The call from the US in the 1940s for Europeans ‘to stand up and be counted’ in the struggle against communism, echoed in the 1990s as a call for Cold War contemporaries to exclaim where they had exactly stood at the time. This call has applied as much for historians as for anyone else in a public position during the ‘war’, whether they at the time realised that they were players in it or not.

In this history political reassessment of Cold War experiences historians have been involved in several different ways. The currents of the Cold War itself influenced general historical interpretations of it, and most famously on its origins. Traditionalist, revisionist and post-revisionist interpretations emerged as the conflict matured. As Western authors were preoccupied in figuring out the sequence of events that had dissolved the wartime alliance, in the Soviet Union and in the other socialist countries, correct views of history played an even more important role, as Aappo Kähönen shows in his article on the linkages between legitimacy, reforms and Soviet history politics. In post-war Germanies, discussed by Wilfried Loth and Hannes Saarinen, history perhaps more than anywhere in the Cold War world concerned the future and the present, and maybe not so much the past at all. In countries such as Finland not only Cold War history, but any type of national or international history could be viewed through the prism of Cold War ideological rivalry, as seen in controversies on national history and commemoration, analysed by Tauno Saarela and Heino Nyyssönen in this book.

After the Cold War a twofold task and challenge for historians emerged. As the main intellectual currents among the profession led away from the aim of establishing final truths about the past, especially on issues of the magnitude and complexity as the Cold War was, a public call was made for historians – and by some historians – now to tell what the Cold War really had been about. Some heeded the call, starting from the premise that only after events had taken their full course from 1941 (or 1917) to 1991, could a final judgement of the conflict be given. In


spite the criticism levelled against this approach to what ‘the New Cold War history’ is and should be concerned with, this may in the end not have been the most problematic challenge historians faced in the post-Cold War world.

As the opening contributions of the book show, history, and by implication historians, became closely involved in a public process of reassessing the ‘burdens of the past’, and the ways in which the public would become aware and eventually get rid of them. These attempts at ‘managing the past’ have been closely entwined with contemporary power struggles, as shown by Pilvi Torsti in her chapter on the Bronze Soldier dispute in Estonia. In the post-communist countries physical and symbolic relics of the ancient regime became a field of heated debate and political contest. However, and somewhat surprisingly, the calls for truth commissions, official inquiries and commissioned histories of Cold War events and experiences, found resonance in the victorious West as well as in the East, where Cold War history could also be brushed aside altogether, as has happened in present day Russia. In this situation professional historians faced a difficult task to combine their public duties as important actors in Vergangenheitsbewältigung, i.e. collective dealing with the past, but also as individual scholars tasked to understand, sometimes explain, and not to judge.

Maybe Cold War history always was and still is too important a subject to be left for historians alone. But historians cannot leave it alone, for reasons we hope will become clear in the chapters that follow.
I

The Cold War in the Present
Why do History Politics Matter?
The Case of the Estonian Bronze Soldier

PILVI TORSTI

In my earlier work I have developed the various concepts and phenomena related to the presence of history. In this article I attempt to analyse the Estonian Bronze Soldier dispute in spring 2007 as an example of history politics and other phenomena related to the presence of history. Finally I shall close with a discussion of the significance of history politics through analysing the consequences of history politics in Estonia and elsewhere.

THE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS IN THE ESTONIAN BRONZE SOLDIER CASE

In 1947, a statue of a bronze soldier was erected in the capital of Estonia, three years after the arrival of Soviet troops and defeat of the Nazis. It was a Soviet war memorial, ‘a Monument to the Liberators of Tallinn’. It was located in a park in central Tallinn above a burial site of Soviet soldiers’ remains, which had been reburied on the site in 1945. In 1964 an eternal flame was placed in front of the monument.

When Estonia re-established its independence in 1991, the theme of liberation, which formed the core of the Soviet approach to history in the Baltic states, was rejected. In this connection, the bronze statue was re-named ‘For Those Fallen in the Second World War’. The eternal flame was put out at the same time and the name of the square was changed from ‘Liberators’ Square’ to Tõnismägi.  

Preparations for relocating the memorial started after clashes at the monument in 2006. In February 2007, the Law on Forbidden Structures (which would have banned the public display of monuments glorifying the Soviet Union or Estonia’s fifty years of Bolshevism, and aimed specifically at the Bronze Soldier) was vetoed by the Estonian President, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, who argued that the bill did not comply with the Estonian constitution. Estonian Russians and Russia voiced their disagreement with the bill when it was being discussed in the Parliament.

According to the latest census (2000) ethnic Russians form 26 per cent of the Estonian population. Based on a 2006 estimation, about one third of Estonia’s Russian speakers are Estonian citizens, another third have Russian citizenship, and around nine per cent are of undefined citizenship. The Estonian population, which made up 82 per cent of the country in 1934, had decreased to 62 per cent by 1991 as a result of mass deportations of ethnic Estonians during the Soviet era, together with migration into Estonia from other parts of the Soviet Union. In the 2000 census the figure was 68 per cent.

The job of relocating the statue and the remains of the buried soldiers in the Defence Forces Cemetery of Tallinn finally started in April 2007,

2 *Helsingin Sanomat (HS)*, Aljosan lähtöä Tallinnasta edelsi vuoden kestänyt riita. 28 Apr. 2007.


5 After the Russian population the biggest ex-Soviet single groups in 2000 were Ukrainians (2%) and Belorussians (1%).