

# Research Articles



# Notes on Cold War Historiography

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## Abstract

In this essay, Menand raises historiographical questions about the Cold War, arising mainly from his experience of authoring *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

**Keywords:** Cultural Cold War, historiography, American intellectual and artistic achievements, US Cold War politics

I spent ten years writing a book called *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War*, a history of the period from 1945 to 1965. I was not trained as a historian; my field is English literature, and my book is about art and ideas. But writing history teaches you things about writing history: you run into conceptual and practical problems, and you have to come up with solutions. This paper is an informal look at some of the historiographic issues, as I encountered them, in Cold War studies.

It can seem that the first thing a historian needs to do is establish periodization. When we use the term *Cold War*, what stretch of time are we referring to? But periodization always comes second. It depends on a prior act of interpretation. We need to have already decided what the Cold War was, or was about, before we set before-and-after dates to it. And that decision is a function of point of view.

If we interpret the Cold War as the name for US-Soviet relations (which is how George Kennan interpreted it), the dates would be 1917 to 1991.

Relations warmed and cooled in those years, but at no time did either nation not consider the other to be potentially a threat to its own interests. The customary dates of the Cold War, 1947 (the year of the Truman Doctrine) to 1991 (when the Soviet Union voted itself out of existence), pick out the period when the effects of US-Soviet relations became global, and when the struggle boiled down to what was essentially an arms race.

Ideologically, the Cold War names a much shorter period (in fact, the period of my own book, 1945–1965), and that is the most common use of the term. Phrases like “Cold War liberalism” or “the Cold War university” are usually taken to refer to that period. In domestic politics, the Cold War is associated with McCarthyism and anti-Communist crusades, and that period is even shorter, from 1947, when President Truman initiated a loyalty program for federal employees and Congress launched its investigation of Communists in Hollywood, to 1957, when the Supreme Court handed down a series of decisions restricting the power of government to prosecute individuals for their political beliefs.

After 1957, the Cold War receded as a political issue in the United States, although “international Communism” continued to dominate foreign policy, culminating in the American military intervention in Vietnam in 1965. The (short-term) failure of that intervention reconfigured American foreign policy and removed Communism from the front burner in domestic politics.

These are all US-centric perspectives, however. From a European point of view, the Cold War could be thought of as a civil war, capitalism versus socialism, with roots in the nineteenth century. This “civil war” began a distinctive chapter in 1945, or even 1944, when the Soviet Union’s designs on Eastern Europe became clear. For Eastern Europeans, this Cold War did not end until 1989, the year of the Velvet Revolution and the toppling of the Berlin Wall. For Western Europeans, the threat of Communism was largely over after 1956, when the Red Army suppressed the Hungarian Revolution and the Soviet Union lost support among most Western activists and intellectuals.

My own conclusion after dealing with periodization problems is that useful historical time frames are actually quite short, from three to five years.

Beyond that, you cannot hold circumstances constant sufficiently to permit generalization. When an individual figure, an artist or political actor, becomes iconic, it is almost always because of work accomplished or activities undertaken in a period lasting a few years. There is an intersection of an individual life history and social forces that make a new kind of thing, a book or an artwork or a political movement, possible. Then, forces shift, creating conditions for the possibility of something else, the iconic figure becoming one of those conditions.

I'm not convinced that we should generalize about historical periods at all. About the only thing I found to be consistent in the years 1945 to 1965 is that everyone used the language of freedom (hence the title of my book). But what people used that language to justify and what they meant by "freedom" were so various that the concept reduces only to something like "anti-totalitarian." "Freedom" meant, relative to authoritarian regimes and command economies, a lack of coercion by collectivities—in particular, by the state. But the concept encompassed free markets as well as freedom of speech, states' rights as well as civil rights, and not every proponent of one was a supporter of the other.

If we start our story in 1945, we want to be careful not to oversimplify the ideological situation. As a practical matter, Truman's policy of committing the United States to intervene whenever a democratic government was endangered anywhere in the world was untenable. The United States did nothing to prevent—and, later on, did nothing to undo—the Soviet colonization of Eastern Europe. Kennan's policy of containment was anti-interventionist. It was to keep the Communists in their box. What went on on the other side of the Iron Curtain stayed on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

But, in principle, simply the existence of totalitarian states is an affront to democratic values. Totalitarian governments throw their political opponents into prison and kill them; they pursue genocidal policies toward their own people; they try to dominate their weaker neighbors. If democratic

governments are not committed to the abolition of such regimes—sooner or later, by some means or other—then their foreign policies are not worth much. For twenty years following Truman's speech, every American administration had to deal with this basic imperative. This meant that every public policy, no matter how domestic in scope or intent, was obliged to answer to the question of whether it aided or retarded the goal of ridding the world of totalitarianism.

The target of the Truman Doctrine was not, explicitly, Soviet Communism. It was totalitarianism, and in the first two decades of the Cold War, many people—public officials, intellectuals with an influence on policy, leaders of cultural institutions and private foundations—believed that art and ideas were an important battleground in this struggle. By various means, covert as well as transparent, they supported the production and dissemination of Western, usually American, cultural products of virtually all types.<sup>1</sup> In the beginning, the targets of these efforts were Western European nations and Japan; after 1956, largely because of a consensus that the Cold War in Europe had been won, attention shifted to the decolonizing world.

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1. See Frank A. Ninkovich, *The Diplomacy of Ideas: U.S. Foreign Policy and Cultural Relations, 1938–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Naima Prevots, *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1998); Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press, 1999); David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Volker R. Berghahn, *America and the Intellectual Cold Wars in Europe: Shepard Stone between Philanthropy, Academy, and Diplomacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2003); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Michael L. Krenn, *Fall-out Shelters for the Human Spirit: American Art and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); *Be-Bomb: The Transatlantic War of Images and All That Jazz, 1946–1956* (Barcelona: Museo d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2007); Hugh Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); John B. Hench, *Books as Weapons: Propaganda, Publishing, and the Battle for Global Markets* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010); Greg Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

Because of the superior geopolitical leverage enjoyed by the United States after the war, and because of the economic weakness of Western Europe and Japan and the isolation of Eastern Europe, American involvement sped the development, already underway before the war in parts of Europe, of American-style economies of mass production and consumerism. And American-made cultural products, particularly American entertainment, came to dominate European markets.<sup>2</sup>

This is only half the story, though. The same social forces that were producing changes in American life were producing parallel changes everywhere else. They did not stop or start at any border. Down on the ground, relations between American and non-American art and thought were various, nuanced—above all, dialectical.<sup>3</sup> Japanese and European artists brought

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2. See Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 350–53; Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); William Hitchcock, “The Marshall Plan and the Creation of the West,” in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. 1: *Origins*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 172–73; Volker Berghahn, *The Americanization of West German Industry, 1945–1973* (New York: Berg, 1986); Brian Angus McKenzie, *Remaking France: Americanization, Public Diplomacy, and the Marshall Plan* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005).
  3. See Ralph Willett, *The Americanization of Germany, 1945–1949* (London: Routledge, 1989); Irwin M. Wall, *The United States and the Making of Postwar France, 1945–1954* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 96–126; Richard F. Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); R. Kroes, R. W. Rydell, and D. F. J. Bosscher, eds., *Cultural Transmissions and Receptions: American Mass Culture in Europe* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1993); Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 275–96; Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 37–262; Uta G. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Heide Fehrenbach and Uta G. Poiger, eds., *Transactions, Transgressions, Transformations: American Culture in Western Europe and Japan* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000); Reinhold Wagnleitner and Elaine Tyler May, eds., “Here, There, and Everywhere”: *The Foreign Politics of American Popular Culture* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000), 83–216; Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, “Shame on US? Academics, Cultural Transfer, and the Cold War—A Critical Review,” *Diplomatic History* 24 (2000): 465–94; Alexander Stephan, ed., *The*

the avant-garde to the United States; European thinkers explained American democracy to Americans; anti-colonial leaders in South Asia, the Caribbean, and Africa taught American Blacks how to think about racial discrimination and oppression. American culture did not gain stature after 1945 because the world became Americanized. It gained stature because the world remade America.

Cultural history presents its own periodization problems. When we are trying to understand a work of art or a philosophical movement, we think of it as belonging in a chain with other works or movements, and that chain can run backward for decades. How do you limit the scope of the backstory? After I finished writing *The Free World*, I ended up cutting tens of thousands of words of backstory.

There is also the problem that the arts develop (if that is the right word) at different rates. Changes in the art world (painting and sculpture) between 1945 and 1965 were dramatic; changes in literary fiction and the publishing world were not. Those changes were just starting around 1965. Changes in Hollywood movies (though not in European cinema) begin even later. We can describe the trajectories of specific artistic media, but it's hard to generalize about culture as a whole.

In political history, interpretations of the Cold War have gone through three phases. In the beginning, American historians explained the Cold War as a product of Soviet actions, and specifically of the behavior of Josef Stalin. Starting in 1959, with the publication of William Appleman Williams's *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, Cold War history entered a revisionist phase. The Cold War was explained as a product of deliberate American policy, and specifically as an instrument of American business. The revisionist view was succeeded by what is called the post-revisionist view, beginning

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*Americanization of Europe: Culture, Diplomacy, and Anti-Americanism after 1945* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006); Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, "Culture and the Cold War in Europe," in *Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. 1, 398–419; Howard L. Malchow, *Special Relations: The Americanization of Britain?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

with John Lewis Gaddis's *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War*, in 1972. Post-revisionism sees the Cold War as the consequence of actions on both sides. Although this interpretation appears to allow for the possibility that things might have turned out differently, in effect, post-revisionism tends to see the Cold War as inevitable.

I think that cultural history was stuck for a long time in a revisionist phase. To generalize, a little unfairly, cultural history was affected by an anti-Cold War politics that regarded the promotion of a neoliberal, pro-business ideology as more dangerous than the prevention of the emergence of totalitarian regimes in the rest of the world. Like, probably, most historians, I think the United States militarized the conflict with the Soviet Union unnecessarily, that it exaggerated the existential threat, and that it allowed a paranoid anti-Communist rhetoric to suffuse public life. But the policy of containment, as originally conceived, was not mistaken. It just turned out to be inadequate in Southeast Asia.

The United States also, of course, interfered with the internal politics of other countries and engaged in covert funding of ostensibly nongovernmental organizations, compromising their members and activities. (This, too, was a policy extrapolated from the theory of containment.) But “covert” does not mean underhanded. The CIA is part of the executive branch. Funding covertly through the agency enabled the government to support artists and organizations that taxpaying voters might have disapproved of. The failure of the *Advancing American Art* exhibition in 1946–1947, mounted by the State Department, convinced officials that the government had to funnel support for some kinds of cultural diplomacy through other conduits. So it did.

Because any government effort, covert or official, has tended to be regarded by some cultural historians as hegemonic, some tendentiousness can creep into Cold War histories. Frances Stonor Saunders's *The Cultural Cold War* was published in 1999 and is frequently cited. Her book is chiefly about the role the CIA played in cultural diplomacy. I read the book when it came out and was excited by it. I expected when I started writing my own book

that I would duplicate many of Saunders's findings. Instead, I found her book to be surprisingly unreliable.

For example, here is a passage from the book on George Kennan:

In a speech to the National War College in December 1947, it was Kennan who introduced the concept of "the necessary lie" as a vital constituent of American post-war diplomacy. The Communists, he said, had won a "strong position in Europe, so immensely superior to our own . . . through unabashed and skillful use of lies. They have fought us with unreality, with irrationalism. Can we combat this unreality successfully with rationalism, with truth, with honest, well-meant economic assistance?" he asked. No. America needed to embrace a new era of covert warfare to advance her democratic objective against Soviet deceit.<sup>4</sup>

Saunders provides the following citation for the quotation from Kennan: George Kennan, National War College Address, December 1947, quoted in *International Herald Tribune*, 28 May 1997.<sup>5</sup>

There is no quotation from Kennan in the *International Herald Tribune* for May 28, 1997, or in any other issue of that paper. And although Kennan did speak at the National War College in December 1947, he did not say the words she quoted. He *did* say this, in a talk at the National War College on June 18, 1947:

[The Communists'] strong position in Europe, so immensely superior to our own . . . not by economic means . . . [but] through unabashed and skillful use of lies. They have fought us with unreality, with irrationalism. Can we combat this unreality successfully with rationalism, with truth, with honest, well-meant economic assistance? Perhaps not. But these are

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4. Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Art and Letters* (New York: New Press, 1999), 38–39.

5. Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, 433n13.

the only weapons we possess, short of war. We hope that at least these weapons will serve to strengthen the resistance of other people to the lure of unreality.<sup>6</sup>

This is the opposite of what Saunders said Kennan said. Kennan never used the words “necessary lie” in his talks to the National War College. So far as I can discover, he never used the phrase anywhere.

There are a number of similar misinterpretations and misattributions in *The Cultural Cold War*. Some have to do with what has become, since the early 1970s, the central case for revisionism, abstract expressionism.<sup>7</sup> The argument is that the CIA and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) weaponized abstract expressionism in a propaganda war. But a lot of this argument depends on guilt by association (that is, ties between museum officials and the intelligence community, which certainly existed) and faulty evidence. Saunders claims, for example, that Alfred Barr, the founding director of the MoMA, referred to abstract expressionism as “benevolent propaganda for foreign intelligentsia.” That phrase was actually used by a *critic* of the museum’s policies, Max Kozloff, in an article published in 1973.<sup>8</sup> Kozloff was a revisionist.

It is not the case that abstract expressionism swamped Europe in the 1950s. In 1958, there was not a single painting by Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, or Mark Rothko in a European museum. No European museum purchased a Pollock until 1961. Mark Rothko did not have a solo exhibition in Europe until 1961; Willem de Kooning did not have one

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6. George F. Kennan, *Measures Short of War: The George F. Kennan Lectures at the National War College, 1946–47*, ed. Giles D. Harlow and George C. Maerz (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1991), 212.

7. See Max Kozloff, “American Painting during the Cold War,” *Artforum*, May 1973, 43–54; Eva Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War,” *Artforum*, June 1974, 39–41; David and Cecile Shapiro, “Abstract Expressionism: The Politics of Apolitical Painting,” *Prospects* 3 (1977): 175–214; Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 168–74; Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, 255–78.

8. Kozloff, “American Painting,” 44.

until 1967. By then, Andy Warhol had had ten European exhibitions and Robert Rauschenberg had had fifteen. The American art that “conquered the world” was Pop Art, not abstract expressionism. The music was rock ’n’ roll, not jazz. The literature was Beat literature, not modernist poetry. The American government was not involved with any of those agents of change.<sup>9</sup>

We may get some perspective by comparing American culture in the early Cold War period to British culture in the nineteenth century. In nineteenth-century Britain, you would expect to find evidence of the fact that Britain was an imperial state everywhere you looked—in art, in poetry, in philosophy, in the culture of everyday life. You can’t subtract the British empire from British culture, and, similarly, you can’t subtract the Cold War from postwar American culture. The historical problem is to explain the difference it made. How did the Cold War shape art and ideas in the postwar period, and how was it a factor in changing those things?

My thesis is that the questions artists and writers raised (What is a painting? What is a poem?) seemed urgent, and the answers mattered, for Cold War reasons. The government’s message was that in the Free World, unlike under Communist rule, the state does not tell you what to write or how to paint. But the effectiveness of this message obviously depended on the quality of cultural goods. If the paintings and music produced by a “free society” were inferior, immature, somehow “not art,” then they were a bad advertisement for liberal democracy.

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9. See Michael Kimmelman, “Revisiting the Revisionists: The Modern, Its Critics, and the Cold War,” *Studies in Modern Art* 4 (1994): 39–55; Robert Burstow, “The Limits of Modernist Art as a ‘Weapon in the Cold War’: Reassessing the Unknown Patron of the Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner,” *Oxford Art Journal* 20 (1997): 68–80; David Cauter, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 539–67; Irving Sandler, “Abstract Expressionism and the Cold War,” *Art in America*, June/July 2008, 65–74; Kathryn Anne Boyer, “Political Promotion and Institutional Patronage: How New York Displaced Paris as the Center of Contemporary Art, ca. 1935–1968” (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 1994); Hiroko Ikegami, *The Great Migrator: Robert Rauschenberg and the Global Rise of American Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010); and Catherine Dossin, *The Rise and Fall of American Art, 1940s–1980s: The Geopolitics of Western Art Worlds* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015).

In this respect, the Cold War charged the cultural atmosphere. It raised the stakes. The more artistic and intellectual expression became unfettered, by changes in style, in the audience, and in the legal environment, the more important it was that the art be genuine art. On this dimension, the aestheticism of the period did have a politics. Who was thinking through those politics at any given time is another question. I doubt that Jackson Pollock asked himself whether his paintings were good advertisements for the American way of life.

When you subtitle a book *Art and Thought in the Cold War*, you are singling out one variable—the geopolitical situation—in what should be a multivariable analysis. I found that other factors were generally more determinative of cultural developments than superpower relations. The crucial event was the rise of Hitler. That set in motion a period of European out-migration that lasted until the United States entered the war, in 1941. Some of those emigrants ended up in the United Kingdom and the British Commonwealth. Many came to the United States and had a significant impact on intellectual life and arts practice. Almost none of them would have emigrated if Hitler had not become chancellor in 1933. Most of them had no prior interest in or much respect for the United States as a civilization. They did admire the official policy of freedom of expression, and they benefited from it.

A second powerful social movement was decolonization. That is, really, the big story: between 1945 and 1970, most former European colonies became independent sovereign states governed by nonwhite people. Decolonization redrew the international map. It changed the way social scientists conceived of human difference. It also put pressure on the American government to redress racial injustice in the United States.<sup>10</sup>

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10. See Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). See also John David Skrentny, “The Effect of the Cold War on African American Civil Rights: America and the World Audience, 1945–1968,” *Theory and Society* 27 (1998): 237–85; Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black*

Migration, decolonization, demographic change, and economic conditions are all long-term factors in cultural history. From the point of view of the individual actor, they are intangibles. Less intangible are changes in the culture industries, changes caused by legal, financial, and technological developments. Between 1945 and 1965, the American culture industries grew dramatically, building infrastructure that enabled the production and dissemination of new kinds of cultural goods, both fine art and popular entertainment: the music industry, the art world, book publishing, the magazine business, museums, universities. These had more to do with the rate and direction of cultural change than the Cold War did.

Was there a *Zeitgeist*? I'm not sure I believe in the *Zeitgeist*. What I do believe in is individuals trying to make something—a poem, a song, a painting. When we get inside that process, we see that the ingredients are individual talent, opportunity, a fluctuating conceptual framework, intention, and accident. When you're trying to make sense of an idea or a creative work, you can't ignore any of these elements.

In writing history: everything is potentially relevant, from the ownership of the means of production down to the color the artist painted their toenails. You try to see it all. And the method is the method of the hermeneutic circle. Each fresh detail alters, by a tiny increment, the big picture; the now-altered big picture affects the understanding of every detail. You go back and forth until you think you have got it right. And you historicize—always reminding yourself that you are, as a subjectivity, a product of the history that you are trying to write.

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*Americans and U. S. Foreign Affairs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 167–297; Plummer, *In Search of Power: African Americans in the Era of Decolonization, 1956–1974* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and Paul Gordon Lauren, “Seen from the Outside: The International Perspective on America’s Dilemma,” in *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs, 1945–1988*, ed. Brenda Gayle Plummer (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 21–43.