



## **We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History**

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Did the Soviet Union want world revolution? Why did the USSR send missiles to Cuba? What made the Cold War last as long as it did? The end of the Cold War makes it possible, for the first time, to begin writing its history from a truly international perspective. Based on the latest findings of Cold War historians and extensive research in American archives as well as the recently opened archives in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and China, *We Now Know* provides a vividly written, eye-opening account of the Cold War during the years from the end of World War II to its most dangerous moment, the Cuban missile crisis. *We Now Know* stands as a powerful vindication of US policy throughout the period, and as a thought-provoking reassessment of the Cold War by one of its most distinguished historians.

## **We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History Details**

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### Barron says

Overrated.

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### Ian says

First published in 1997, *We Now Know* is widely accepted as the first serious post-Cold War treatment of the topic. As such it faces the daunting task of placing the global conflict into a historical context as a discrete event. Gaddis argues that decades of scholarship on the Cold War produced between 1945 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 were published by historians who had the unusually ahistorical task of “working within their chosen period rather than after it” and was therefore “an abnormal way of writing history itself” (282-83). The opening of Eastern European, Russian, and Chinese archives after 1991 provided Cold War historians with access to new materials that Gaddis employed to provide greater context to the origins and escalation of the Cold War conflict, and to update and validate certain perspectives and arguments employed by both orthodox and revisionist scholars of the Cold War.

Gaddis endorses a post-revisionist viewpoint of the origins of the Cold War, arguing that the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States inevitably developed out of the power vacuum that was created by the conclusion of the second world war. The distinct personality of Josef Stalin exacerbating the conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States in the immediate aftermath of World War II is another major theme in the origins of the Cold War according to Gaddis. These orthodox arguments are supplemented by a recognition that ideology was a fundamental motivating factor in the behavior of the protagonists in this conflict, and therefore a true history of the Cold War will necessarily be internationalist in scope, employing analysis of documentary archives from Soviet as well as third world actors in the conflict in addition to the traditional analysis of United States diplomatic archives. A fundamental conclusion based on this approach is that ideas matter, and the success of the United States in the conflict was due largely to a loss of legitimacy by the Marxist-Leninist ideology, and the contradicting attractiveness of democratic liberalism.

Gaddis's argument is in many ways a logical evolution in the historiography of the Cold War. Historians emphasizing an orthodox school of thought were themselves experiencing the origins of the conflict. Having witnessed the rise of fascism and the destruction of the second World War firsthand, many concluded that a Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States was inevitable due to the aggressive expansionist tendencies of the Soviet Union and the Marxist-Leninist ideology of social reform through violent revolution. There was a natural reactionary tendency to vilify the Soviet Union due to the ideological incompatibility of democratic liberalism and communism. Revisionists in the 1960s and 1970s were just as much a product of their own time as the orthodox historians of the previous generation. Experiencing the social unrest of the Vietnam War and civil rights movement, there was extreme disillusionment with American conservatism which manifested as criticism of American empire. Thus revisionist historians of the Cold War tended to emphasize the negative aspects of American economic and military influence in the geopolitics of the day. When Gaddis is writing *We Now Know* in the 1990s the Soviet Union has collapsed and the superiority of the American system has in many ways been vindicated. This enables Gaddis to take a more objective stance. In many ways, historians of the orthodox and revisionist schools were writing propaganda as well as history due to the political convictions which they were endorsing. Gaddis has the leisure of reconciling the reactionary orthodox and sometimes shrill revisionist perspectives by incorporating the valid aspects of both viewpoints into a situational awareness that is only available from a post-Cold War perspective.

### **Rachel says**

A well written history of the Cold War, but purely on the basis of the US - Stalin conflict. A bit narrow in focus for the Cold War, but well written.

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### **Jeff says**

Well researched and has some genuinely big new insights into the personalities and mindset of the communist nations. The major issue I take with the work is how lightly it treats the NATO forces actions during the German occupation and in the 3rd world.

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### **Eric says**

Interesting take on the ideas of changing patters of history with a long view in mind. Worth looking at.

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### **Mickey Schulz says**

Ugh. Seriously full of cold warrior rhetoric and Reagan idolatry. Bleah.

Some of my favorite parts talk about how those dastardly Russkies had SPIES in America, SPIES I TELL YOU. Completely ignoring the fact that we had spies over there too. Too ridiculous for words, or to be taken seriously as anything other than a portrait of the kind of thinking that kept the Cold War going as long as it did.

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### **Mehlka Mustansir says**

I read this to prepare for my A level History. Gaddis is known as the 'Dean of Cold Historians' and I can see why. This book is exceptionally detailed and is a great insight into the debate of the origins of the Cold War.

The only issue that I had was the overemphasis on Stalin's role. He described Stalin as the most important agent in the beginning of the Cold War (Stalin sought the Cold War as a fish seeks water). Stalin was definitely an important factor but all the blame could not be put on one personality. Certainly Stalin's paranoia contributed a lot to the atmosphere but some of Stalin's actions were cautious (for instance, how he backed out of Iran or didn't support the French and the Greek communists).

Historians always differ in opinions. However, this is still a fantastic read. Gaddis' theory about the different American and Soviet empires was a new insight into analyzing the power struggle. This is one of the best post-revisionist Cold War history books!

## AskHistorians says

n older but equally as important book by Gaddis, this time with material from the recently opened archives in Eastern Europe.

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## Marie says

I read this book for a history class on the Cold War, and I found Gaddis' analysis quite often one-sided. His United States is always right and wins all interpretation of the Cold War became very tiring, when we are constantly faced with evidence to the contrary.

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## Diane says

Well-written history of the Cold War. Covers the period from World War II through the Cuban Missile Crisis. Also discusses antecedents to the Cold War, such as de Tocqueville's 19th century prophecy that America and Russia would be rivals in the next century.

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## Alexander Van Leadam says

Objective and balanced account of a conflict between quite different empires, unfortunately elliptical in a few respects. Interesting points: (1) inconsistencies in policy, strategy and control on both sides; (2) the issue of contradictions: how one survives by balancing them rather than resolving them; (3) the narrowing of cold war competition following the Cuban missile crisis: shocked by their vulnerability the US tacitly agree with the USSR to restrict competition to the one area where the Soviets hadn't failed yet, nuclear armaments - a focus that curiously facilitated Soviet decay until the implosion of the USSR thirty years later.

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## Kevin says

To begin with . . . the book is roughly 290 pages of analysis of what "we now know" (as of 1997) with 130 pages of extensive notes.

Gaddis' work, appearing merely six years after the end of the Cold War, only examines the first twenty years or so of events following the end of World War II, focusing primarily on decisions and actions of the United States and Josef Stalin; Gaddis, for the most part, avoids touching on Vietnam even though that situation clearly begins during the period covered in this volume. The overarching theme of the book appears to be an attempt to answer the question, "could the Cold War have ended much sooner?"

Despite the title of the book, much of what appears in *We Now Know* is conjecture mostly in the form of questions that Gaddis tries to answer based on information released since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Very much an academic book, Gaddis provides plenty of details to support his many hypotheses, making some of the reading laborious. *We Now Know* is well organized around the major areas of the world that were affected by the fight between communism and democracy/capitalism.

Gaddis does present some bias in favor of the West but this can be attributed to the fact that he is a Westerner and the United States won the Cold War. The author does balance this bias though by showing many mistakes made by the Americans (Soviets too) when it came to handling worldwide confrontations. The key players in the Cold War are often presented as being pushed around and manipulated by not just the "third world" countries as is well known now, but also by the nations of throughout Europe, especially Germany.

One must *really* want to read about the Cold War before picking up *We Now Know* and much of what is presented will be well-known to anyone with a cursory knowledge of the Cold War, though the chapter on Germany does provide some insight as to how country survived as a divided nation and how well the leaders of East and West Germany managed to manipulate the Americans, Soviets, and each of their allies in those first couple of decades after Hitler's demise.

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### **Brandy says**

Read this for a grad class.

Very good read, very interesting to finally read the book that laid the the groundwork for so many of the other books I've read.

I don't have much else to say that hasn't been said already.  
Thanks for getting the field rolling, Gaddis!

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### **Baris says**

This is a book on Cold-War with lots of pro-American Cold War clichés. Reads like a Reaganite fairy tale than a serious academic book.

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### **Mscout says**

The Cold War has hung like a spectre over the latter half of the twentieth century. John Lewis Gaddis is one of the foremost historians of the Cold War and has written extensively on the subject. Prior works specific to the Cold War include *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War* (1972), *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (1987) and 2005's *The Cold War: A New History*. Though all of his works were very well-received, *We Now Know* is an important work in its own right for a variety of reasons. This work from 1997 was the first of his Cold War histories to be written after the end of the Cold War. Most importantly, the closing of the Cold War led to the opening of previously unassailable archives behind the Iron Curtain. Gaddis utilized those archives and the sources within give a depth to his analysis that was not available when he wrote his earlier works.

One of the examples of this depth and benefits of the greater access is that it afforded Lewis the opportunity to tell the story of the conflict through the thoughts and actions of individual leaders of the time. He paid

particular attention to Stalin in this regard. Indeed, Gaddis' conclusion was that if blame for the outbreak of the Cold War were to be laid at anyone's feet, that blame would have to go to Josef Stalin, "as long as Stalin was running the Soviet Union a cold war was unavoidable." Gaddis argued that it was Stalin's own personality and paranoia that made it so.

Additionally, Gaddis used the personalities not only of the leaders, but of the lands they governed to show that the conflict was as much, if not more, about ideology as it was about global power and territory. He contrasted the bombastic demands of Stalin with the quiet behind-the-scenes pressure that United States President Harry S. Truman was exerting on Western Allies to quit their empires and grant independence to India and Indonesia, as the United States was doing in the Philippines. He characterized this as the "authoritarian romanticism" of the Communist Bloc as opposed to the "democratic realism" of the West. For Gaddis, Stalin spoke, while Truman listened.

This is not to say that Gaddis finds no fault with the United States' actions during the period. Indeed, he criticizes the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and its involvement in Latin American regime change. Likewise, he levels criticism at American policy designed to prevent Communist influence in the modernizing economies of third world countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

While very well researched and argued, there are a few issues one could take with Gaddis' work. Chief among these is insisting on choosing where to lay blame. While he certainly made a compelling case for Stalin's culpability in the conflict, it is also possible that in so doing, he perhaps missed some other angles. By doing so, Gaddis chose to forego the opportunity to step completely outside of the event, and instead continued the same path he had laid down in other books. If he were to truly "rethinking" the era, one might think that this work would have been less about blame for the inception and more about analysis of the outcome. This, in turn leads to a second, minor fault, that being that the book only covers through the early 1960s, or roughly, through the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, by CIA-paid defectors and operatives. It would certainly have benefitted the scholarship had he looked at the Cold War in its entirety, which one could reasonably expect from the subtitle.

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