Where does one era end and the other begin? Teaching the Cold War through a Second World War context

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The challenges of teaching Cold War history are manifold. Not only does the period span 40 years, jump seemingly arbitrarily from continent to continent, it also requires an understanding of historical context and abstract concepts. Equally, Cold War history is not 'decided' – historians disagree about its events and outcomes. For example, to say there was a Cold War winner would be frowned upon in some historical quarters nowadays.[17] Similarly, to avoid mentioning that Britain had a decisive and influential role to play in the Cold War is deemed a disappointing omission by contemporary British historians.[18]

Yet, in the exam hall students must make the most of the knowledge gained while studying in the classroom. It would be beyond the scope of the syllabus to introduce additional content that might detract from Cold War specifications. In this essay, I explore how an approach that includes new historiography, original primary sources and historical context can colour Cold War teaching without over-writing the fundamental outcomes dictated by examining boards.

Most historians would agree that historical eras do not start and end at specific junctures, but it's often the case that for lack of space we must bracket them with significant beginnings and endings.[19] In the case of the Cold War, its origins are amorphous and the historical debate rife with opinions about what caused it and when it was established.[20] There is no problem dating a Cold War module from 1945, it is, to an extent, an accurate time to focus it. The issue I have with the year 1945 is that it is perceived as the year that the Second World War *ended*. Of course, it is the year that Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan were defeated, troops lay down arms, governments moved on, and society picked itself up again. But what tends to be underplayed in discussion of the early Cold War is that the Second World War emotionalised post-war memory and materially

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[17] Daniel Deudney, and G. John Ikenberry, 'Who Won the Cold War?' *Foreign Policy*, no. 87 (1992), 123–38

[18] For example see articles in the special issue of *Contemporary British History* journal on *Social and cultural histories of British nuclear mobilisation since 1945*, (Issue 2: Volume 33, 2019).

[19] On Cold War endings see: Silvio Pons and Federico Romero (eds.), *Reinterpreting the End of the Cold War: Issues, Interpretations, Periodizations*, (Routledge, 2004).

[20] An interesting comparative chapter on the pedagogy of Cold War history and national 'origins' can be found here: Robert Thorp, 'Pedagogical Entanglements and the Cold War: A Comparative Study on Opening History Lessons on the Cold War in Sweden and Switzerland' in Barbara Christophe, Peter Gautschi, Robert Thorp (eds), *The Cold War in the Classroom: International Perspectives on Textbooks and Memory Practices*, (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2019), 423-447.

damaged society to the gravest degree. A deep-rooted animosity between East and West re-emerged out of the ashes of the Second World War.

This experiential and temporal transition is dealt with exceptionally well in historian Paul Betts' book *Ruin and Renewal: Civilizing Europe After the Second World War*. Betts uses the lens of 'civilization' to organise his history of post-war Europe and its colonies, arguing that 'the post-war understanding of civilisation was shaped by insecurity, anxiety, defeat and the daunting task of starting over'.[21] He writes, 'The Cold War – whose beginning is usually attributed to the 1947 Truman Doctrine or the Berlin Airlift of 1948-1949 – was already assuming form in the Displaced People camps'. He continues, the foreign aid workers of post-war Europe were 'confronted by ruins, refugees and what was commonly called the crisis of civilisation.'[22] The task of foreign aid workers, he argues, was 'central to the moral and material reconstruction of the continent'.[23] By any other name – the Cold War project.

While teaching the concept of civilization is beyond the remit of the SQA Cold War specification the themes that Betts embraces to describe it in the post-war context serve as useful hooks on which to hang the standard lesson of Cold War 'origins'. Emotional and material destitution, accompanied by novel arms developments, spurred Cold War developments in light of Second World War trauma. Indeed, we need not look any further than British history to find evidence as to why civilians and politicians were wary of another war: war-ravaged, financially unstable, militarily wiped out, yet deeply attached to the notion of British military victory and national pride. Historian Anne Deighton, whose work transformed historiography on Britain's Cold War has described how a 'mentality' swept across the nation and 'successfully internalised' Cold War ideas throughout society.[24]

To visualise this argument, below I've described three sources. The combination of these – rather than each one alone – conjure an impression of the emotional and physical context in which Cold War tensions (or misapprehensions) emerged.

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21 Paul Betts, *Ruin and Renewal: Civilizing Europe After the Second World* War, (Profile Books, London; 2020), 10.
22 Ibid. 32
23 Ibid. 32
24 Anne Deighton, 'Britain and the Cold War, 1945-55', in Melvyn P. Leffler & Odd A. Westad (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Volume I, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 131. See also, Anne Deighton, (ed.), *Britain and the First Cold War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1990); Anne Deighton, *The impossible peace: Britain, the division of Germany and the origins of the Cold War*, (OUP; Oxford: Clarendon; 1990).

SOURCE 1 - The ruins of a bombed town in post-war Europe (location unknown, circa 1946). Screenshot taken from a film produced by NATO titled 'Europe – Two Decades', 1969.

This North Atlantic Treaty Organisation film can be played via the IWM online collections.[25] As a primary source it is a useful tool for considering the process by which the wartime alliance broke down and the task of rebuilding Europe which resulted in the Marshall Plan. Of course, it was produced by NATO – its perspective on communism and the Soviet Union is distinctly biased. However, the narrator describes the condition of post-war Europe at great length and for this reason I've included it here as an example of the sheer scale of human degradation experienced as a result of the Second World War in Europe. The Cold War was rooted in this atmosphere of insecurity. The film's narrator eulogises:

> 'As neighbours [European countries] had seemingly little in common. And now they have not only little in common but little enough anyway, all very well for Winston Churchill to make speeches on unity in 1947. He had self-respect, enough to eat and a place in which to live. Unity was well down on the list of priorities. Anyway, it was supposed to stem from the United Nations. There, where delegates from East and West sat down together, even they were cynical about the chances. For though each side talked of a settled world they were talking about neither the same thing, nor the same means of achieving it.'

Solving the many problems created by the Second World War was a distinct cause for Cold War enmity. What tends to be less profiled is that Second World War memory was also one of the reasons why such enmity did not turn to aggression.

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[25] NATO Film, 'Europe – Two Decades', IWM NAT2056,
https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060049907

SOURCE 2 - Photograph depicting British, American and French doctors from the Allied Commission examining a malnourished schoolboy in Hamburg, August 1946. From an archive collected by publisher Victor Gollancz for his 1947 book on post-war conditions, *In Darkest Germany.*[26]

Nowhere was concern for public health, economic recovery and political unrest more concerning than in post-war Germany. The rapid move by American and British allies to restore German life was one of the issues that divided the West from Stalin's policies in the East. Conveying how quickly Germany went from being outright enemy to beneficiary of aid and regeneration takes much explanation and is far too convoluted for a one-hour classroom topic. But it is important to convey the history of both hope and despair that defined this era – on both East and Western flanks. This image of a malnourished child is a relic of the moment that Western allies moved away from a punitive approach to Germany and recognised the need for material restoration as a means to moral and political stability in Europe.

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[26] University of Warwick, Modern Records Centre, document reference: MSS.157/12/GE/1/129. Available online < https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/studying/docs/germany/>

SOURCE 3 - United Nations for Freedom from Fear poster. Taken from a series depicting all four UN 'freedoms' Circa 1945.

The vision of a happy child playing on a beach depicted in this UN poster bears a striking contrast to that of malnourished and impoverished German children.[27] The notion of 'freedom from fear' was originally articulated as a reduction in military arms by Franklin Roosevelt (the forebearer for what became the UN's founding principles[28]), in the post-war period the happy, domestic scene depicted here epitomised a *conflict for peace*. The arms race and conventional military strategies did not diminish to reduce fear of direct confrontation, but dividing lines based on the image of a perfect and harmonious society worked to limit freedom to war and idolise two versions of peace.

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[27] The poster is available in the IWM collections, reference number Art.IWM PST 15701:
https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/38005
[28] 6 January 1941, President Roosevelt's Annual Message to Congress, Paramount newsreel footage available to watch on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrNDwyj4u1w&t=99s

To conclude I'd like to review one of the most used primary sources of all Cold War textbooks – this cartoon of Winston Churchill 'peeping under the Iron Curtain', published in 1947 after his infamous Fulton Speech set the tone for Cold War hostility and distrust. With hindsight the division represented by the curtain of iron drawn in this cartoon appears indelible and impermeable. Yet, in 1947, as discussed above, Europe was both emotionally and materially bereft, and hopeful for peace and reconciliation – all in light of the Second World War. Without acknowledging that context, this primary source becomes a trope of the Cold War binaries so easily misused. However, the curtain in the cartoon is soft – made from fabric – indicating the pliable, moveable nature of Cold War anxieties and antagonism in post-war Europe. This in itself must be a crucial discussion point in any lesson on the origins of the Cold War.

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