The political rhetoric of the summer of 2008 reminded commentators of the Cold War period. During the conflict about south Ossetia, both the USA and Russia struck a tone that seemed familiar from the second half of the twentieth century. A brief glance at the books by John Lewis Gaddis and Bernd Stöver, however, is enough to reveal that this short flare-up of rivalry cannot be compared with the systemic conflict of capitalism versus Communism, which had incomparably more victims and was much more embittered. The Cold War is history, once and for all, and deserves a proper survey.

The two books under review here take fundamentally different approaches. For Gaddis, the doyen of Cold War research, it is mostly men, with the exception of Margaret Thatcher, who make history. Apart from the Iron Lady, the only other women mentioned in passing are the US actor Jodie Foster (Ronald Reagan’s would-be assassin, John W. Hinckley, wanted to impress the movie star with his murder attempt) and Condoleezza Rice as US President George H. Bush’s adviser on the Soviet Union. Thus Gaddis, whose aim, in his own words, is to ‘cover more years with fewer words’ (p. viii) reveals his political history approach to understanding the Cold War. He sees the outstanding politicians and other influential actors of this period as having an important influence on the course of events which, to Gaddis, often seems more interesting than the impact of historical determinants.

In seven essay-like chapters, Gaddis provides a successful and mostly original survey of the Cold War directed mostly at young readers and students who have not experienced this period themselves. He thus mostly presents familiar material, while there is little that is really new and goes beyond what historical research today knows. This is probably why the British edition dispenses with the promising subtitle of the first edition, released in the USA: A New History. But even the spies of the title cannot be found, with the exception of Soviet super-spy Kim Philby. In this account we find
neither Oleg Penkovsky—‘The Spy who Saved the World’\(^1\)—nor the top CIA source in Soviet military intelligence, General Dimitri Polyakov, who supplied the US secret service with a great deal of internal Soviet material for more than twenty years.

Nonetheless, Gaddis presents a logical and, for large sections, excitingly written history of the Cold War. In the first chapter the author recapitulates the genesis of the conflict. He sees its origins as lying in the wartime coalitions of the Second World War and the problems of a post-war order to which they gave rise. The struggle for spheres of influence which finally peaked in the Berlin blockade, Mao’s victory in China, and the Korean War necessarily led to antagonism between the two main political systems of the twentieth century: capitalism and Communism. The fact that it did not result in open conflict can be attributed to the existence of nuclear weapons.

In his second chapter, Gaddis traces how politicians’ opinions changed after the atom bomb was dropped in Japan, as they came to the realization that nuclear weapons could not, in principle, be used in the case of a conflict. Nonetheless, he suggests that on both sides of the Iron Curtain, the risk of nuclear escalation and an annihilating war was real for a long time. High-ranking generals in East and West not only believed that such a war could be fought, but planned the mass deployment of nuclear weapons all over the world. Politicians such as Nikita Khrushchev, for example, repeatedly tried to improve the position of their own side by means of diplomatic nuclear blackmail. It was the Cuba crisis that finally resulted in a rethink.

Chapter three analyses the building of blocs around the centres of gravity Moscow and Washington, and the competition between the systems that was at the basis of the Cold War. Chapter four shows how the rise of the non-aligned countries and centrifugal forces of alliances relativized the bipolarity of the Cold War. In chapter five Gaddis looks first at the numerous activities of the CIA as the more or less covert instrument of US foreign policy before discussing the consequences of the Vietnam War for the USA and showing how the suppression of the Prague Spring turned into a serious crisis for the Soviet system. Beyond this, Gaddis outlines, if only sketchily, the profound consequences of the process initiated by the Conference on

The Cold War

Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and the Helsinki Final Act for the Communist states.

In chapter six, the author again lets people make history, presenting Pope John Paul II, Lech Walesa, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Regan, and Mikhail Gorbachev as actors on the world stage. After the end of détente, initiated by the war in Afghanistan and rearmament, the Cold War, according to Gaddis, got stuck in a political vacuum that could only be filled by the unconventional acts of the actors named above. These also overcame the status quo which, until then, had seemed immoveable. In the final chapter of his book, Gaddis provides a brief survey of the events which, from the American point of view, led to the end of the Cold War and thus to the dissolution of the Communist bloc in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

Bernd Stöver’s book about the Cold War as a radical period can stand as contrast to the work by Gaddis in respect of both style and concept. Stöver’s ambitious work, which is almost twice as long as the American’s account, is divided into twelve chapters which are grouped into three thematic sections. On the whole, Stöver sees the Cold War as a unitary period and describes it as a ‘largely boundless political-ideological, economic, technological-scientific, and cultural-social conflict’ (p. 21).

Stöver starts by presenting the prehistory and emergence of the Cold War between 1917 and 1945–6, before turning to the strategies of a total conflict. By this he understands the ‘rollback’ as a liberation from Communism, to which the Soviet Union responded with the global class war. This is followed by an account of the first big crises of the Cold War which led via Berlin and Yugoslavia to Korea and ended in the formation of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Thereupon the author turns to the escalation of the conflict in Europe, looking at the Hungarian uprising and the second Berlin crisis. With the erection of the Berlin Wall in August 1961, according to Stöver, the Cold War was ‘put on ice’ (p. 132) in this part of the world, and the conflict shifted to the Third World where, as it was below the nuclear threshold, the systemic conflict could again be expressed by military means.

At the beginning of the second section of his book the author looks at the military competition, in particular, at the arms and technology race, and at the strategies of both sides for a nuclear war, before examining the impact of the permanent conflict on society in
East and West. In chapter seven, Stöver explains that the conflict was also seen as a ‘war of cultures’, before turning to the economic and social policies of the two competing systems. He also provides a very good account of how the two blocs used development aid and arms supplies to compete for influence in the Third World.

The third section of the book goes back to the roughly chronological course of the East-West conflict since the Cuba crisis, and in addition to the Vietnam War, casts light on the numerous proxy wars fought in Africa and central and southern America. The 1970s, characterized by disarmament negotiations and détente, ended with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Reagan’s plans for a Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI). Although Stöver tries, for long stretches, to explain the Cold War mainly in terms of systems theory, its end was largely determined by a personal factor: Gorbachev. With his policies of glasnost and perestroika, the young Soviet party leader and head of state was not pursuing the political goal of ending the Cold War, but wanted to strengthen the USSR, economically overstretched by the conflict, for a new bout in the struggle between East and West. The freedom of action this involved for the Eastern European ‘brother states’ ultimately led, via an internal struggle for greater democracy and civil rights in their societies, to a dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and thus to the end of the Cold War.

Stöver’s impressively factual and fluently written account becomes unclear when its systems theory approach forces him to compare phenomena which appear similar in East and West without really differentiating between them. For example, when he writes that both NATO and the Warsaw Pact were ‘dominated by the hegemonial power’, it would have been useful to explain the different scope which Washington’s and Moscow’s allies enjoyed, in order to allow the differences between the two military blocs to emerge more clearly.

The many careless slips, which could have been avoided by more careful editing, are annoying. Thus the fourteen-page section entitled ‘Atomwaffen und Rüstungswettlauf’ contains more than eight factual errors. For example, the first Soviet atom bomb RDS-1 was not called Tatiana; this name was reserved for the next model, the RDS-4. And the Soviet counterpart to the American atomic cannon called Atomic Annie was not the 180mm S-23, but the 406mm-calibre SM-54 Kondensator. Despite these minor quibbles, both Stöver and
Gaddis have produced successful overviews of the Cold War of a high academic standard, although they take different interpretative approaches. Everyone who wants to find out anything about this conflict, which shaped the second half of the twentieth century, will not be able to pass by these two books.

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