

## **Farewell, Iron Curtain! Rewriting European Cold War History as Entangled Histories**

Corinne Geering

**Abstract:**

The edited volume *Beyond the Divide: Entangled Histories of Cold War Europe* aims at tracing the manifold connections and interactions in Europe during the Cold War. It is the first of two publications to proceed from the conference “East-West cultural exchanges and the Cold War” (Jvaskylä, 2012). Together with 14 contributors, Simo Mikkonen and Pia Koivunen explore transnational networks in Cold War Europe and redirect their focus from the state-to-state level to unofficial and semi-official bodies. Thereby the chapters reveal a neglected part of European Cold War History, but they also point to the need for further research on borderlines beyond the Cold War divide.

**How to cite:**

Geering, Corinne: „Farewell, Iron Curtain! Rewriting European Cold War History as Entangled Histories [Review on: Mikkonen, Simo; Pia Koivunen (Hg.): *Beyond the Divide. Entangled Histories of Cold War Europe*. Oxford: Berghahn, 2015.]“. In: *KULT\_online* 46 (2016).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2016.951>

© by the authors and by KULT\_online

## **Farewell, Iron Curtain! Rewriting European Cold War History as Entangled Histories**

Corinne Geering

Mikkonen, Simo; Pia Koivunen (Hg.): *Beyond the Divide. Entangled Histories of Cold War Europe*. Oxford: Berghahn, 2015. 335 S., kartoniert, \$120.00/£75.00, ISBN: 978-1-87238-866-1

There is hardly another metaphor for European History after World War II that has been as powerful and unloved as the 'Iron Curtain'. Recently, historical scholarship has turned to reassessing Cold War history by highlighting the manifold interactions, connections, and exchanges across the systemic divide of the Cold War. Several alternatives, such as György Péteri's "Nylon Curtain" (2004), have been suggested over the years. Yet it seemed the 'Iron Curtain' was here to stay.

The edited volume *Beyond the Divide: Entangled Histories of Cold War Europe* now makes a new attempt at rewriting Cold War history. The publication represents one of two edited volumes that came out of the conference "East-West cultural exchanges and the Cold War" that took place at the University of Jvaskylä, Finland, in June 2012 (the second volume was edited by Simo Mikkonen and Pekka Suutari: *Music, Art and Diplomacy: East-West Cultural Interaction and the Cold War*. New York 2015). The editors Simo Mikkonen and Pia Koivunen argue in the introduction that the Cold War has defined the historiography of post-Second World War Europe until the current day. Such thinking emphasised the East-West division of Europe into Communist Eastern Europe and Capitalist Western Europe. In this traditional view, Europe appears as a battlefield of the two warring superpowers, the USA and USSR, whereas European countries act merely as allies. In *Beyond the Divide*, the editors instead want to explore the transnational history of Europe by looking at connections between countries on the opposite sides of the East-West division. They argue that despite the Cold War rhetoric, East and West were also connected through corporations, organisations, unofficial networks and individuals.

In order to allow for such shift in focus, the edited volume draws on both transnational and entangled history as inspiration. The multidisciplinary edited volume assembles 14 book chapters from the areas of history, cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, political science, and media studies that redirect their attention from the state-to-state level to transnational networks of unofficial and semi-official bodies. This includes nongovernmental organisations, expert networks and scientific cooperations, friendship societies, transnational television networks, student exchanges, readers of magazines, and families. The case studies span the entire period following World War II until the 1980s, before many socialist countries assumed

independence. Particular focus lies on the 1950s and 1960s, when new policies and cooperation agreements were set across the political divides. Thus, the years leading up to the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 may shed light on the ways “Europe was seeking common nominators, mutual language, and lively connections beyond national and systemic borders” (p. 16) while the Cold War was still in effect.

The edited volume is structured in four parts, each highlighting a different sphere of transnational connections. The first part analyses the interplay of official and unofficial diplomacy, the second part focuses on academic networks, the third part looks at nongovernmental and semi-governmental institutions, and the fourth part puts forward border crossings by professional and family networks. The case studies have in common that they seek to rewrite Cold War history with a focus on cooperation rather than confrontation. By looking at agency beyond the states, the chapters give insight into alternative paths actors took in order to connect and establish dialogue between East and West. The case studies cover a broad geographical area ranging from France, Switzerland, Italy and Great Britain to Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and Estonia, among others. They not only show different intentions within the same state, but also the heterogeneity within the two blocs.

Giles Scott-Smith describes the efforts of four Dutch intellectuals who engaged in “parallel diplomacy” while official relations between the Netherlands and socialist countries declined. Along similar lines, Sonja Großmann describes how private Soviet friendship societies in the West challenged the official intergovernmental relations. In Sarah Davies’ chapter on the magazine *Anglia*, she shows how readers in the Soviet Union engaged in correspondence with the editors in Britain. In order to analyse these entanglements, most of the book chapters use archival sources from ministries and institutions, but they also work with published material, or employ methods of oral history or ethnographic fieldwork that allow the authors to tell the story of individual, transnational cross-border practices. By means of oral history, Sampsa Kaataja is able to uncover the small-scale scientific cooperation and personal contacts in his study on the Finnish-Estonian Computing cooperation that tended to elude official accounts. The anthropologist Anna Matyska, on the other hand, reveals the mutual making of ‘East’ and ‘West’ in her interviews with transnational Polish family networks in Finland and Poland. By tracing alternative paths of transnational cooperation during the Cold War, several book chapters take a deliberate stance against the notion of the East-West division in Europe.

In combination, the book chapters succeed in presenting a diversified picture of European Cold War history: aspirations for cooperation and the desire for peace exerted influence over individuals’ lives just as much as conflict and isolation. However, when looking at the sources and methods chosen by the individual case studies, there are also some problematic aspects in the writing of entangled histories of Cold War Europe. In the framework chosen for *Beyond the Divide*, ‘Europe’ is defined from an integrative perspective. The majority of the case studies do not go beyond the binational orientation of Cold War history that shows the connections between one country from the West and one country from the East. Thereby the chapters partly reproduce the rationale of systemic divide and only hint at the larger picture of

Cold War Europe. For instance, the publication only marginally touches upon centre-periphery relations and ignores Europe's outside border regions, such as the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea, altogether. Here, further analysis into European Cold War history could prove particularly insightful. In addition, the systemic divide persists in the selection and interpretation of archival sources. This imbalance is not only quantitative, but also qualitative: interpretations about the overall political situation in Europe are mostly taken from archives in Western Europe, whereas sources from the East, if used at all, provide mostly technical details. More elaborate reflections on the nature of available sources may provide a deeper understanding of the diverse and sometimes conflicting issue of transnational cooperation per se. Notwithstanding these critical remarks, the edited volume offers fascinating insights into Cold War History beyond state interests. Were the metaphor of the 'Iron Curtain' to stop being the principal marker of the Cold War period, the opportunity would arise to turn to other dynamic borders and divisions within and outside of Europe.