

## Round Table: The New Cold War The Marginalization of History

*Peter Gurney*

University of Essex

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine is having profound repercussions in Britain, not least on our cultural and intellectual life. However, although the media has presented this unfolding crisis in exhaustive detail, no one could reasonably argue that there has been much depth to the general treatment. From the outset, media coverage has been superficial and woefully lacking in objectivity, with briefings by President Zelensky and other government spokespeople routinely accepted as absolute truth, or very nearly. This is hardly surprising, as Western journalists have tended to be based in Kyiv or Lviv, hundreds of miles away from the front line. Overt and covert control of the media by the British state is, moreover, a story that is familiar enough to students of the early Cold War.<sup>1</sup> One particularly striking feature of the superficiality of approach is the almost total absence of historians in public discussion – we cannot say ‘debate’, as there has been very little, not in the public sphere anyway. The marginalization of history is even more surprising, perhaps, given the unremitting pressure on academics to prove that their research has some tangible ‘impact’ and demonstrate their engagement in the ‘real world’.

Unfortunately, the few historians who have gained a hearing have tended to misuse history for their own cause; the partial views of Yale historian Timothy Snyder, who believes that the war in Ukraine is a colonial war and that imperial Russia must be defeated at whatever cost, were aired occasionally by the BBC early on, for example. But Snyder’s argument serves merely to abstract the conflict from the contemporary conjuncture with all of the complexity that entails, simplifying it instead in a Whiggish, ahistorical manner to an ‘existential’ struggle between a heroic colonized people yearning for democratic freedom and an oppressive, even genocidal, colonizing power.<sup>2</sup> As for the profession in Britain, *History Workshop Journal*

- 1 Tony Shaw, ‘The British popular press and the early Cold War’, *History*, 83 (1998), 74–6; Peter Gurney, ‘“Co-operation and communism cannot work side by side”: organised consumers and the early Cold War in Britain’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 30 (2019), 347–74.
- 2 Snyder’s views can be found in an article he published in the *New Yorker* at the end of April: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/essay/the-war-in-ukraine-is-a-colonial-war> (accessed 24 October 2022).

published an online article at the end of April by Cambridge historian Hubertus Jahn, the one-sidedness of which merely mirrored the line adopted by mainstream media commentators, Jahn similarly excluding the wider context and explaining the war as a product of Russia's fraught history and President Putin's Machiavellianism.<sup>3</sup> Intellectuals who have dared to discuss the role of the United States and NATO in provoking the conflict, such as University of Chicago's 'realist' international-relations scholar John Mearsheimer, have simply been ignored.<sup>4</sup> For some of us, the overall marginalization of history understood as objective critique is not only bizarre; it is also extremely ominous, appearing as an attempt to smother dissent and controversy, defining features of the practice of history as well as liberal democracy – the latter we are insistently told the cause for which Ukraine is fighting.

In this context, the round table that follows is a modest contribution to opening up debate among historians and others about this vital subject. The five specialists on different aspects of the Cold War who have kindly contributed were given a very wide brief: they were asked to reflect on possible parallels between the current crisis and the earlier Cold War, whose end in the late 1980s seemed to inaugurate for a short while a new and more optimistic phase in international relations. It is hoped that similar round tables on echoes between past and present will appear in future issues of this journal.

The rationale for the present round table is clear, then: it seems to me that despite the fact that they have been mostly shut out of the conversation, historians have a duty to engage with such momentous events if they possibly can. The increasing dangerousness of the crisis as it has developed has gone largely unremarked by political and intellectual elites, who refuse to discuss openly the possibility of nuclear war between the superpowers, fought on European soil. In a few short months we have become accustomed in Britain to witnessing on our television screens military experts (recruited from the conservative think tank the Royal United Services Institute and elsewhere) updating us gleefully about the latest hardware supplied by the West, with not even a nod to where it might all end. Our

3 Hubertus Jahn, 'A war on history? Patriotism and propaganda in contemporary Russia': <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/a-war-on-history-patriotism-and-propaganda-in-contemporary-russia/> (accessed 24 October 2022).

4 A lecture by Mearsheimer entitled, 'The causes and consequences of the Ukraine war', was given at the European University Institute, Florence, in early June, was taken down from the EUI's website. Available on YouTube, it has had over 1.7 million views: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qciVozNtCDM> (accessed 24 October 2022).

government diverts money from the foreign-aid budget to fund more arms for Ukraine, while the head of the British military as well as our recently deposed self-styled Churchillian prime minister warn us that we must better arm ourselves against the Russian enemy for decades to come – now to the extent of 3 per cent of GDP – regardless of a crumbling NHS that was praised to the skies in our moment of need not so long ago. The disastrous Liz Truss, as one of our contributors reminds us below, likes to be photographed driving tanks. To draw on a somewhat hackneyed but still highly resonant cultural reference, it increasingly seems that reality is in danger of becoming an inferior and very unfunny remake of Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove*.

It is worth recalling for a moment that there has been an honourable tradition on the left going back to early CND times which has criticized increased defence spending when so many lives continue to be blighted by poverty and ill health. Michael Foot made this argument from the start of his political career, for instance, and it was the keynote in *The New Hope for Britain*, Labour's 1983 general election manifesto when Foot was leader of the party. Shamefully, the current opposition are content to ride the wave of patriotic militarism, with Keir Starmer threatening to discipline any Labour MP who steps out of line; eleven MPs who supported a statement organized by the Stop the War Coalition in February, which called for an immediate diplomatic settlement of the conflict but also criticized NATO's eastward expansion, withdrew their signatures after intimidation by the chief whip.<sup>5</sup>

On a personal note, it was the reinvigorated peace movement of the early 1980s that confirmed both my sense of the importance of history and the precarity of the present. Many people of my generation found inspiration not only in E.P. Thompson's historical writings but also in his commitment to civil rights and his role in the disarmament movement, which included helping to found European Nuclear Disarmament (END) in 1982. These were all complementary aspects of his practice as an engaged socialist intellectual.<sup>6</sup> While consideration of the origins and trajectory of the conflict has

- 5 See <https://labourlist.org/2022/02/11-labour-mps-pull-signatures-from-stop-the-war-statement-after-whip-request/> (accessed 24 October 2022). The MPs were Diane Abbott, John McDonnell, Richard Burgon, Ian Lavery, Beth Winter, Zarah Sultana, Bell Ribeiro-Addy, Apsana Begum, Mick Whitley, Tahir Ali, and Ian Mearns. Jeremy Corbyn, ex-leader of the party and now an independent MP after having had the whip withdrawn, also signed the statement.
- 6 Christos Efstathiou, *E.P. Thompson: A Twentieth-Century Romantic* (London, 2015), 131–65; Michael Bess, *Realism, Utopia and the Mushroom Cloud: Four Activist Intellectuals and Their Strategies for Peace, 1945–89* (Chicago, 1993).

tended to be excluded from public discussion dominated by monochrome viewpoints, this earlier phase and the present crisis differ strikingly in other ways too, notably the almost complete absence of popular protest. The decision by the United States to site cruise missiles in the United Kingdom provoked not only an outpouring of radical intellectual criticism in the early 1980s but also a widespread and vibrant popular movement that was characterized by imaginative alliances between different groups, including veteran activists from the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, second-wave and younger feminists, gay rights activists, students, and others. Although Stop the War has organized meetings and protest marches in various towns and cities across the country since the invasion of Ukraine began, participation in them has been dismal, for reasons that we might ponder. Thompson's 1980 pamphlet *Protest and Survive* dismantled in devastating fashion government propaganda concerning civil defence and arguments in support of waging a limited, winnable nuclear war against the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup>

Such arguments are as misguided and terrifying now as they were forty years or so ago, but political and military elites have learnt important lessons since then: there has been no talk about civil defence by the current administration because it is now tacitly accepted that there is no defence for the vast majority if the unthinkable happens and the proxy war between the United States and its NATO allies and the Russian Federation being fought in Ukraine escalates into direct confrontation. Although it would be morally indefensible to excuse the military invasion of Ukraine, it is incumbent upon us surely both to question false analogies circulated by those who wish to prolong the terrible waste of human life – Putin is not Hitler and the Russian regime is not fascist – and also understand the reasons why this conflict has occurred. This round table might not lessen our anxieties about the current situation but reflecting on the similarities and differences between the old and the new Cold War may at least provide better illumination of some of the key issues.

7 The title was a play on *Protect and Survive*, the widely ridiculed advice leaflet circulated to British households by the government. A longer version of Thompson's pamphlet was later published in a Penguin Special: E.P. Thompson and Dan Smith (eds), *Protest and Survive* (Middlesex, 1980).