ROUNDTABLE

(New) cold war nostalgia in Britain

Grace Huxford, University of Bristol

The new cold war has been a long time coming. Since at least the early 2000s, journalists and political analysts have generously used the phrase to describe economic, political and military stand-offs between ‘the West’ and an ideological adversary.¹ Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the phrase had been increasingly used by the British press to describe the mistrust between the United States and China, as well as growing tensions within East Asia.²

But the February 2022 invasion brought the new cold war back to its earlier roots. Alarmed by the build-up of forces on Ukraine’s borders in early 2022, British writers grasped eagerly at the phrase – a familiar metaphor for a new, uncertain age.³ Articles referenced iconic Cold War films such as Dr Strangelove, resurgent ‘spymania’ and the long history of Russian imperialism.⁴ The term was even used by right-wing commentators to argue that western societies should stop wasting their energy over the ‘triviality’ of ‘identity characteristics’ and ‘get real’ – overlooking, at the very least, the fact the Cold War in Europe did not always feel ‘real’ to its protagonists. ⁵ The Cold War was not, of course, the only historical framework through which the Russian invasion was viewed by British audiences: as ever in contemporary Britain, the Second World War’s shadow loomed large, with politicians and writers drawing muddled parallels with Churchill, Chamberlain and appeasement.⁶ Others evoked the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 and Europe ‘sleepwalking’ into war.⁷ At a worrying time, historical analogies offered a degree of certainty and predictability – or, more sceptically, a rhetorical tool to legitimise particular political responses.

³ Nick Timothy, ‘In this dangerous new cold war, we need strength and sense to prevail’, Sunday Telegraph, 6 March 2022.
⁴ Matthew Lynn, ‘Markets will stop worrying and learn to love the new Cold War’, Telegraph, 19 February 2022; Janet Daly, ‘We’re not fighting a new Cold War but old-fashioned Russian imperialism’, Telegraph, 19 February 2022.
⁵ Patrick O’Flynn, ‘We must get real and face up to spectre of a new Cold War’, Daily Express, 26 February 2022; Grace Huxford, “‘Deterrence Can be Boring”: Boredom, Gender and Absence in Britain’s Cold War Military’, Critical Military Studies (forthcoming).
⁷ Philip Olterman, ‘Don’t compare Ukraine invasion to first world war, says “Sleepwalkers” historian’, Guardian, 26 June 2022.
At the time of writing, the Cold War is having a further imaginative impact in Britain too. The generation of military leaders currently contemplating the threat from Russia cut their teeth in the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR), Britain’s 55,000-strong military force that spent the Cold War in north-west Germany.\(^8\) In an internal memorandum to all ranks in the British Army and civil servants in June 2022, General Sir Patrick Sanders, the new Chief of the General Staff, wrote that ‘we are the generation that must prepare the Army to fight in Europe once again’.\(^9\) The readiness of the army and the presence of British forces in Europe brought some back to the reassuringly familiar (if deadly) orthodoxies of the Cold War, though so much else has changed. In November 2021 when visiting Estonia, Foreign Secretary Liz Truss even recreated the famous image of Margaret Thatcher in a BAOR tank, showing an apparent preparedness for conflict, should it come.\(^10\)

Even before the invasion though, Cold War historians urged caution. They reminded us that the Cold War was far more complex than an ideological or economic dichotomy; that an east-west divide, largely drawn in Europe, masked the histories of other significant global connections, networks, empires and systems of thought in the post-1945 world; and that the Cold War had been far from ‘cold’ for the millions who lived – and died – amid its violence.\(^11\) For a decade or more, Cold War studies itself was consumed with a debate over the nature of the conflict, asking how far-reaching it had been and whether it was appropriate to aggregate *everything* that had happened after 1945 under its banner.\(^12\)

Dredging up the Cold War during the current crisis thus oversimplifies both conflicts, reducing them to a template that doesn’t necessarily fit. As the death toll in the current conflict mounts, the appalling mislabelling of a war as ‘cold’ becomes ever more apparent too. The designation has always been a matter of perspective, and the soldiers and civilians embroiled in the war today – just as for those in Afghanistan, Vietnam or Angola – do not have the luxury to see the war as anything other than hot. As

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Tarak Barkawi has argued, Cold War nostalgia should be seen as ‘an abomination’ due to this level of abstraction.\textsuperscript{13}

But rather than offer another historian’s unheard critique of the ‘new cold war’, we should perhaps ask why the Cold War remains such an appealing concept in Britain in 2022. One reason is the way the conflict has been remembered in policy circles. Jussi Hanhimäki has highlighted the widespread political nostalgia for the Cold War in the United States during the early 2000s, built on the myths that the conflict was actually a time of unparalleled peace, bipartisan consensus and American exceptionalism. This imagined past seemed immensely preferable to early twenty-first-century difficulties in Iraq and Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{14} As Michael Cox points out such ‘triumphalist’ narratives were widely projected too by the first generation of Cold War historians, who were often involved in policymaking themselves.\textsuperscript{15}

The Cold War was generally seen as a ‘victory’ in Britain too and has been referred to as such during the current crisis.\textsuperscript{16} Military histories of British forces in Germany too describe their Cold War work as a ‘job well done’.\textsuperscript{17} This tone has something to do with the way the Cold War ended. The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 had a decisive impact on how British people regarded the long years of Cold War conflict that preceded it. The jubilant scenes of east Germans crossing \textit{en masse} into West Berlin, images of their \textit{Trabant} cars broadcast by ecstatic television news teams, rapidly became an emblematic Cold War moment, vindicating the western ‘way of life’ and Britain’s Cold War efforts. Though historians have warned against this simplified version of the conflict’s end, the scenes from Berlin nevertheless profoundly shaped how the Cold War was remembered in Britain.\textsuperscript{18} Just as the conflict retrospectively represented a period of American exceptionalism to US policymakers, the Cold War had given Britain a post-war, post-imperial purpose too. This perhaps explains Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s feeling that things were ‘going much too fast’ when the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989, fearful of Britain losing its voice and international standing in a post-Cold War world.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{16} Charles Moore, ‘The West is forgetting the lessons of Cold War’, \textit{Telegraph}, 7 June 2022.
\textsuperscript{17} Paul Chrystal, \textit{British Army of the Rhine: the BAOR 1945-1993} (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2018), 114; Peter Johnston, \textit{British Forces in Germany: The Lived Experience} (London: Profile Books, 2019), 172.
\textsuperscript{19} Margaret Thatcher, ‘Remarks on the Berlin Wall’ COI transcript, 10 November 1989, Margaret Thatcher Foundation Archive, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107819; Richard Vinen, ‘Thatcherism and the
It is easy to dismiss this attachment to the Cold War as political self-interest, but others far removed from decision-making have also expressed nostalgia for the Cold War. My own oral history interviews with former residents of British military communities in north-west Germany showed the complicated legacy of the Cold War. Some former residents were heartbroken to leave Germany and still recalled the sadness that accompanied the long years of military ‘drawdown’ after 1991 and the Options for Chang’ programme which restructured the British military. In my current book project, I show how a generation of service personnel and their families saw postings to Germany as a completely normal and expected part of their lives and mourned the loss of these communities in numerous ways. Their expressed some nostalgia for the Cold War (and especially its material culture, much like European Ostalgie), but also a longing for a particular kind of community which they felt had long disappeared in Britain itself. Other feelings of longing, lack and loss fed into Cold War nostalgia too, making it a powerful sentiment in military communities.20

Cold War nostalgia is also present in wider British culture in the early 2020s. John Le Carré observed in 1989 that Britain had been on a ‘Cold War trip’ (though he and his main protagonist George Smiley had long grown weary of it) and they might now gradually come back to reality.21 But that ‘trip’ does not seem to be over, though it does seem to have moved partially away from the spy novel genre. The popularity of television programmes like Deutschland 84, Chernobyl and the remake of The Ipcress File show a resurgent interest in the Cold War ‘aesthetic’, as well as in former Cold War sites, such as abandoned military bunkers.22

There is also potentially a deeper, more abstract reason why western societies repeatedly return to the idea of a new cold war. Just as in 1989, Thatcher’s critics argued that she would be unable to leave behind the exigencies of the Cold War and the power it gave, so too critical military theorists suggest that some societies need war. Scholars of ‘militarization’, though they have criticised and redefined the term in recent years, argue that western societies are built around conflict; not just their militaries, police forces or carceral regimes, but seemingly non-military aspects of cultural, social and everyday life. Linguistically and philosophically, militarized societies organize their societies around violence and conflict.23 Continually preparing for war too becomes a part of a society and its everyday activities; the rehearsal for impending conflict is embedded in how people live, work and contemplate themselves and

the future. For so many decades, militaries – and the societies intimately intertwined with them – arranged themselves around the Cold War. Is it any wonder then that those societies have found it hard to rid themselves of it?

Why the Cold War remains appealing is, of course, not the most urgent historical question to ask at the current time, nor should the impact of the war in Britain – far removed from the fighting – be the main focus of our energies. But those of us writing Cold War history in this context should remain alert to the developing usage of this term; however ill-fitting it may seem, it seems the (new) cold war is here to stay.

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Grace Huxford is Senior Lecturer in Modern History at the University of Bristol. She is author of The Korean War in Britain (Manchester, 2018) and has recently led the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project, ‘British Military Bases in Germany’, conducting an oral history of British military communities in Germany during the Cold War. She is author of various articles on Britain’s Cold War, oral history, veterans’ histories and military families.