

Understanding the Imaginary War: Culture, Thought and Nuclear Conflict, 1945-90

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In *Understanding the Imaginary War: Culture, Thought and Nuclear Conflict, 1945–90*, Matthew Grant and Benjamin Ziemann present a collection of essays offering a new interpretation of the Cold War as an ‘imaginary war’. The chapters document images, reflections and cultural representations of the threat of nuclear war in Western Europe, the USSR, Japan, and the USA and among groups such as Catholics and physicians. The book’s fresh approach to the topic and wide range of perspectives will be welcomed by all with an interest in history, political science and cultural studies, and in particular by those of us interested in the Cold War and the history of nuclear weapons.

In the introductory chapter (chapter one) Grant and Ziemann outline the methodology of the book and the metaphorical nature of the term Cold War and how it can be seen as describing both a state of war and peace. They go on to describe the Cold War as a war ‘against the imagination’ (p. 2) in the sense that the threat of nuclear annihilation forced policy planners and ordinary people to envision a type of war which had not occurred. Likewise, the seemingly contradictory nature of the concept of deterrence, that nuclear weapons were meant to guarantee peace between two superpowers and that this required amassing huge stockpiles of the deadliest weapon invented by man, added to the complexity of the Cold War. Grant and Ziemann describe the various ways in which politicians and ordinary people tried to imagine the nuclear reality that could seemingly erupt at any time. For politicians and generals, military exercises were meant to further their knowledge about the unpredictability of nuclear war, whereas for ordinary people television documentaries, such as *The War Game* (1965), were meant to enable them to understand the horrors and realities of such a war. The only problem was that the BBC decided that *The War Game* was too depressing in its depiction of nuclear war to be aired. This new methodological approach is welcome, yet a minor criticism may perhaps be levied against the book for focusing on traditional cultural mediums such as films in the attempt to portray the imaginary character of nuclear war, especially as the editors state that they aim to move beyond mere descriptions of how popular media dealt with the bomb (p. 10). While significant, the importance of films such as *The War Game*, or *Threads* (1984), have long been established. Perhaps a more rewarding perspective would have been to include nuclear themes in more overlooked cultural mediums such as art, especially abstract expressionism, or music, for example John Adams’ opera *Doctor Atomic*

(2005). It should be stressed however that this is a minor criticism of what is otherwise a fresh and welcome perspective on the subject.

Eva Horn's 'The apocalyptic fiction: shaping the future in the Cold War' (chapter two) brilliantly explains how the imaginary character of nuclear war has leant itself to science fiction. Drawing on H. G. Wells and others she explains that, even before the bomb was invented, it already existed in the minds of scientists such as Leo Szilard, who conceived the nuclear chain-reaction, due to novels such as Wells' *The World Set Free* (1914). Horn goes on to show how, due to the imaginary character of nuclear war, nuclear strategy was no longer a prerogative of the military. Because nuclear war had not happened and could not be simulated by experiments, at least not in a way that anybody wanted to, intellectuals at think tanks such as RAND started playing a much bigger role in helping to imagine the unimaginable. Most noteworthy among this new generation of thinkers was Herman Kahn. Using what he called 'aids to the imagination' (p. 37) Horn shows how Kahn tried to make the incomprehensible nature of nuclear war more believable through showing various scenarios in which nuclear weapons might be used. Kahn's motive was clearly anti-apocalyptic as he sought to debunk myths about the destructive power of nuclear weapons and help people deal with the prospect of nuclear devastation. Ironically, as Horn explains, Kahn became the model for mad military scientists such as those depicted in films such as *Dr Strangelove* and *Fail-Safe*, both released in 1964. Although Horn is certainly right to point this out, it should be borne in mind that Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove* was, in fact, a composite character drawing inspiration from not only Kahn but also military figures such as Curtis LeMay. It would also have been worth noting that Kubrick's argument was undermined by the peaceful resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 which showed that, when confronted with the apocalypse, leaders make rational choices and back away from the brink.

In chapter three, 'Building peace, fearing the apocalypse? Nuclear danger in Soviet Cold War culture', Miriam Dobson provides a much welcome addition to the literature by explaining how a Cold War culture did exist in the USSR, albeit a very different one to the one that existed in the West. The three main features of Soviet nuclear culture were: 1) characterising the enemy as war-mongering as opposed to the peace-loving Soviets 2) the problems of trying to imagine nuclear warfare 3) the condemning of self-annihilationists as religious fanatics. Dobson persuasively shows how the difficulty of imagining nuclear war was tied to the notion that to imagine annihilation was not Soviet. However, the advent of the much more destructive hydrogen bomb in 1952 and the death of Stalin the following year did lead to more publicised worry, though it was not until after the fall of the USSR that signs of retrospective fear began to appear. The cycles of fear and activism against the bomb that have come to characterise nuclear culture is further vividly portrayed in the late Paul Boyer's essay 'Sixty years and counting: nuclear themes in American culture, 1945 to the present' (chapter four). Boyer brilliantly shows how the fear of nuclear war has waxed and waned with political developments. Interestingly, Boyer explains how civil defence films such as *Duck and Cover* (1951) actually increased fears of nuclear war rather than calming them. Even so, he argues that by the 1990s, popular culture used the bomb as a cheesy plot device, as seen in films such as *Broken Arrow* (1996), as opposed to the serious concern of *Fail-Safe* or the satirical songs of Tom Lehrer.

Chapter five, Grant's 'The imaginative landscape of nuclear war in Britain, 1945–90' switches the focus to Britain's attempts to live with the bomb. Grant correctly points out that Britain's strategy towards the Cold War was one of armed strength coupled with negotiations and that Britain's leaders viewed possessing nuclear weapons as 'symbolic prestige' (p. 92). The difficulty of imagining nuclear war is well illustrated when he shows that between 1947 and 1951 the British government convinced itself that Britain's experience of bombing during the Second World War meant that it would be 'highly resistive' (p. 99) to the effects of nuclear bombing and would be able to keep up production and morale. Grant argues that this shows the limited attempts to understand the social consequences that a nuclear war would bring. However, much like in the USSR he argues that the development of the hydrogen bomb meant that nuclear war became more and more associated with the apocalypse. It created an 'imaginative void' (p. 102) where the nuclear future was unimagined or, if it was, it was associated with emptiness, absence and apocalyptic language. Grant concludes by commenting that civil defence measures were a 'façade' – a propaganda tool for the government's deterrence policy – grown out of the state's own difficulty in imagining nuclear war.

Ziemann's essay 'German angst? Debating Cold War anxieties in West Germany, 1945–90' (chapter six) represents another most welcome addition to the literature on the Cold War by analysing the case of German angst in the face of nuclear annihilation. Ziemann argues that Germany was 'crucified by atomic blasts' (p. 122) by pointing out that the country in need of defending from a potential Soviet attack, Germany, would be destroyed in the event of such an attack, with most of the missiles being western ones aimed at stopping a Soviet advance. This irony does not escape Ziemann, who argues that angst was present in Germany during the 1950s and 1960s but that it was not a matter of public debate. Instead he portrays it as a personal 'fight against death' (p. 132). Building on this, Jason Dawsey's 'After Hiroshima: Gunther Anders and the history of anti-nuclear critique' (chapter seven) deals with the philosopher Anders' philosophical-anthropological analysis of the bomb in which Dawsey describes Anders' attempts at widening people's imagination of the bomb (not unlike Kahn) by portraying Hiroshima as representing an era where 'humanity as whole is killable' (p. 147). Ann Sherif's 'Hiroshima/Nagasaki, civil rights and anti-war protests in Japan's Cold War' (chapter eight) rounds off a trio of chapters focusing on personal reflections of the bomb and attempts to imagine and understand the threat of nuclear war. Sherif argues that a common ground can be found in the experiences of Japanese *hibakusha* (people affected by the atomic bombings) and other Cold War developments such as the opposition to the Vietnam War and the struggle for civil rights in America. For Sherif the common theme is human rights. She explores how the visit by civil rights activist Ralph Featherstone and Vietnam War opponent Howard Zinn to Japan in the late 1960s where they met with *hibakusha* victims is an example of how people tried to confront the bomb, civil rights issues, and the Vietnam War through a common ground. Although an interesting idea, the chapter seems to dwell a bit much on Featherstone and Zinn's visit without offering any definite conclusions although it certainly gives food for thought and something for future research to build on.

Perhaps the most interesting chapters in this excellent collection are the chapters that focus on the reactions to the bomb by specific groups. Daniel Gerster's 'Catholic anti-communism, the bomb and perceptions of apocalypse in West Germany and the USA, 1945–90' (chapter nine) deals with the reaction of the Catholic community and maps the changing attitudes of Catholics as the Cold War dragged on. Gerster argues that Catholics 'internalized' (p. 193) the Cold War as seen through Marian apparitions, specifically the apparitions at Necedah, Wisconsin and the Portuguese village of Fatima, which some believers took as warnings of an impending nuclear war. Nevertheless, Gerster correctly points out that there was both support and opposition to the bomb from the Catholic community. In the early days of the Cold War, Catholics by and large supported the aggressive foreign policy of the United States and the existence of nuclear weapons as a basis for their opposition to godless communism. However, there were also Catholic voices opposing the atomic bomb noting that such destructive devices, in many ways, seemed incompatible with the Christian faith. As the Cold War dragged on nuclear pacifism thus began to spread among Catholics, a trend that Gerster eloquently explores. Similarly, Claudia Kemper's 'The nuclear arms race is psychological at its roots: physicians and their therapies for the Cold War' (chapter ten) looks at how the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) diagnosed deterrence as a psychological disease as a

way of coping with the prospect of nuclear war. The idea being that, like a disease, deterrence could be treated. Kemper shows how the physicians of the IPPNW (which was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985) aimed to use their status and moral authority to try and prevent nuclear war. She goes on to explain how the IPPNW was one of the few organizations which enjoyed successful cooperation between US and Soviet physicians. Gerster relies heavily on Robert Lifton's work with Hiroshima survivors and the concept of 'psychic numbing' pioneered by Lifton (p. 225) in her conclusion that the prospect of nuclear war, even for the IPPNW, was almost impossible to come to terms with. However, this should not be seen as a criticism as Lifton's work remains among the best in the field.

Returning to the earlier theme of the book of scientists trying to imagine nuclear war, Paul Rubinson's 'Imagining the apocalypse: nuclear winter in science and the world' (chapter 11) analysis the famous physicist Carl Sagan's theory of nuclear winter as a possible outcome of nuclear war. Sagan used data from NASA's Viking missions to Mars which revealed how dust storms on the surface of Mars had cooled the temperature of the planet. Based on this Sagan theorized that in the aftermath of a nuclear war the debris, dust and ash generated by nuclear blasts would be enough to significantly cool the temperature of the Earth's atmosphere, leading to failed harvests and widespread famine. Rubinson argues that, for Sagan, there was an obvious link between science and policy. Sagan attempted to use his fame and influence to persuade policy makers of the merit of his theory. Yet most politicians and the public at large remained unfazed. The *New York Times* responded to Sagan's theory by arguing that 'why restate the obvious? Surely everyone knows that nuclear disaster is hazardous to human health' (p. 243). Rubinson correctly points out that the theory was vulnerable to criticism due to the huge range of uncertainty that surrounded it. If we can't predict the weather a week away, how could we possibly predict nuclear winter? Perhaps this analysis of the weaknesses of Sagan's theory would have benefitted from drawing on the works of writers such as Spencer Weart and John Mueller (1), who have both pointed out that the detonation of one, or even several, nuclear weapons might not lead to societal annihilation.

The final chapter, Lars Nowak's 'Images of nuclear war in US government films from the early Cold War' (chapter 12), rounds off this excellent collection of essays by showing how government civil-defence films pointed out yet underplayed the extreme dangers that nuclear war would bring. Nowak argues that, although government sponsored, early civil-defence films sought to 'privatize' (p. 266) civil-defence by convincing private individuals just how much they could do to protect themselves in the event of a nuclear war. Yet, as Nowak shows, these films were far from inclusive. Almost all the films depicted a white, militarised father in charge of a model American family calmly preparing for the impending nuclear war. African-Americans and other ethnic minorities were conspicuously eschewed from the films thereby making it quite clear who the US government thought had a better chance of surviving.

This book is a most welcome addition to our understanding of the cultural history of the Cold War. It explores the unique duality of the Cold War in that it could be characterised as a period of peace and conflict. In doing so the common threads that weave the chapters together are fear and imagination as the majority of chapters focus on the fear of nuclear warfare and the difficulty in trying to imagine such a scenario. The book also places a big emphasis on metaphors as a way of coming to terms with the difficulty in imagining a nuclear war. The term Cold War, as noted in the introduction, is itself a metaphor, using an indication of temperature to describe a state of politics short of an actual 'hot' war. Sagan's theory of nuclear winter, as analysed in Rubinson's chapter, can likewise be seen as a metaphor for the nuclear age itself as it bridged a gap between the imagined and a (supposedly) reliable scientific prediction of nuclear war. Rubinson's chapter, along with Boyer's, highlights one of the strongest features of this book, namely the tracking of shifts in attitudes to the bomb throughout the Cold War. Overall the chapters are well researched, clearly presented and the analysis easy to follow. Grant and Ziemann are to be commended for assembling such an impressive collection of essays. The in-depth chapters focusing on key nations, religious groups and other communities allows for a more detailed and thorough presentation of the cultural history of the Cold War as opposed to a generic overview. Although no book should be considered complete or definitive, perhaps a chapter or two highlighting how the West imagined the people and politicians of the USSR, and

vice versa, would have been a useful addition to this otherwise brilliant collection of essays.

Notes

1. See for example S. R. Weart, *The Rise of Nuclear Fear* (Cambridge, MA, 2012) and J. Mueller, *Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al-Qaeda* (Oxford, 2012). [Back to \(1\)](#)
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