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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

The Cold War and Its Consequences: Introduction to the Cold War Special Issue of *Social Science History*

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The Cold War, as a historical period, ranged from 1947 to 1991. During this time when the United States and the Soviet Union confronted each other, this interstate rivalry was the stage on which both superpowers sought to bring the other to its knees. As Andreas Glaeser underscores, on both sides, Cold War politics was "an intentional effort to maintain or get an advantage in the balance of power while at the same time avoiding any direct military confrontation." The United States was a liberal, capitalist state that espoused political democracy; the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was a communist state with a centralized economy that ignored political democracy. Both sought to create their own empires as part of their struggle. Empire building and decolonization both took place during these years. For generations, the rest of the world was faced with only three choices: to be on the side of the United States, to be on the side of the USSR, or to try to be nonaligned.

During the peak years of the Cold War, especially in the early 1960s, many critical social and political moments unfolded on this stage. In Europe, a critical expression of the Cold War was the division of Germany into East and West immediately after World War II, with each Germany seeking its own identity. That division was particularly felt in the city of Berlin, where the wall built in 1961 separated Germans on both sides, often families torn asunder – until the wall fell and all Germans were reunited in 1990. In Latin America, in the peak years of the Cold War, the Cuban revolution triumphed and moved from being aligned with the United States to being aligned with the Soviet Union, politically and economically (Pedraza 2007; Pedraza and Romero 2023). Thus, from 1960 on, a conflict developed with the United States that has lasted over 65 years. That conflict peaked with the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, which brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. Likewise, in Eastern Europe, important transitions developed. The independence of Romania from the Soviet Union took place in 1964, redefining what it meant to be Romanian and to be a communist. In Asia, both superpowers sought to envelop Sukarno, the leader of the newly independent Indonesia, from its

Dutch colonizers into their fold. Few countries suffered as much from the Cold War as Vietnam, where a real war ensued between North Vietnam (expressing and supported by the communist world) and South Vietnam (expressing and supported by the capitalist, democratic United States) that painted the rivers there red with blood until the South lost to the North. Historians have never ceased to highlight the importance of this long interstate rivalry for the world in which we live. Yet sociologists have mostly ignored it. That is precisely the point that Mitchell L. Stevens and Ioana Sendroiu seek to redress with this fine collection of articles. Hence, many of the articles included in this special issue provide a sociological perspective on the Cold War.

Although it is said that the Cold War ended with Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, it lasted for close to 40 years, leaving many cultural, political, and economic residues. It may well be at our doorstep once again, played by some of its legendary cast of characters (the United States and now Russia) at a time when a new player progressively gains the center stage (China) and the real war that erupted between Russia and Ukraine returns the conflict to our consciousness. Along with this change, we note the change of labels: from the "Third World," which indicated the many mostly underdeveloped countries that were left over and largely ignored after the rivalry of the two major superpowers, to the new label of the "Global North and Global South." As James Mahoney notes, the oxymoron of the "Cold War" label allows it to endure, as it expresses the many tensions – ideological, political, and economic – in those years. Mahoney stresses that it was a time of "not-war and not-peace," though "it is a better example of not-peace than not-war." Given *Social Science History's* deep commitment to interdisciplinary scholarship, we are delighted to publish this special issue with contributions from sociologists, historians, and political scientists that help us see this long period of interstate rivalry from a variety of disciplines and perspectives.

Over its long timespan, the Cold War had many consequences for the nations and people caught within it. Each of the articles in this special issue highlights them; I need not repeat them all. Some consequences were plainly obvious from afar, such as when Nikita Khrushchev, Prime Minister of the Soviet Union, withdrew the nuclear missiles found in Cuba that were pointing toward the United States, the subject of Andreas Glaeser's analysis, as well as the creation of a Non-Aligned Movement of nations, the subject of George Steinmetz's analysis.

Other consequences were far less obvious yet hardly less important, as Elisabeth Clemens's analysis of the very early years of the Cold War shows. Clemens stresses the disjuncture between what US politicians said – stressing a leaner state – and what they did – enlarging the welfare state by supporting the GI Bill and carrying out the Marshall Plan. Thus, the seeds of what we much later grew to understand as the welfare state were planted then.

To those who lived through the dramatic transition entailed in becoming a communist nation at this time, as was the case for much of Eastern Europe and Cuba, not only historical structures, such as political parties, but also identities changed. As Ioana Sendriou's analysis of Romania underscores, this involved redefining who was a hero and who was a traitor, as narratives of betrayal came to the fore and people began to accuse others and to put traitors on trial. Thus was the old order delegitimated and consent to a new order built. Gradually, consent was

generated not only to state power but also to a new way of being and thinking, not only to a new structure but also to a new culture that guided their daily lives.

In their introduction to this special issue, Stevens and Sendriou propose the notion of the *moyenne durée* to go beyond the notion of how particular historical conjunctures of the *longue durée* shape both events and structures, to capture the contingency of social change – its eventfulness as well as its stability. The Cold War was such a space, one that lends itself to the sociological goal to explain both stability and change.

The metaphor of a chess game is often used to express the moves both sides made (involving an intricate web of spies and counterespionage embedded in foreign policies) as they sought to win the match, while other nations were pawns caught in the game whose moves were decided by others. As Charles Kurzman notes in his incisive comment, "If the Cold War was a chess match, it was one in which many of the pawns were struggling to leave the game." True, but some of the pawns, as was the case with Fidel Castro, deliberately placed themselves amid a critical move, as when he placed the nuclear missiles on Cuban soil pointing to cities in the United States. This stance is not covered well by the articles in this special issue. As Glaeser underscores, learning from history is both remarkably difficult and urgent. To him, the Cuban Missile Crisis involved two significant Cold War dynamics that drove both Nikita Khrushchev and John F. Kennedy to that "rationality-defying precipice": the paradox of nuclear politics and the paradox of just governance. The paradox of nuclear politics created the potential for uncontrollable escalation, as each side erroneously believed that the other side remained in control of its forces. The paradox of just government involved American presidents, including Kennedy, in a campaign tradition in which both political parties relied on the anti-communism of the electorate and amplified it with their own "talking tough on communism" rhetoric and policy proposals.

Yet another consequence of the Cold War was the effort of some nations to get out of the chess game. Steinmetz traces the development of a new geopolitics. This included the vision of several important Third World intellectuals, such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, President of Senegal, who had a vision of a postcolonial federation in which France and its former colonies would be equal. This also included the development of the Non-Aligned Movement from 1945 to 1965. In an effort on the part of many governments to counterbalance the polarization of the world during the Cold War, it eventually grew to include 121 countries (some of which, such as Cuba, were quite aligned). Still, the movement responded to the international class struggles in which nations such as China engaged – as did Cuba under Ernesto Che Guevara's leadership. Steinmetz demonstrates the space of possibilities for geopolitical experimentation this entailed under conditions of late colonialism, decolonization, the Cold War, and the United Nations – a "structural assemblage" that, together, "opened spaces of maneuver and autonomy for a flourishing of geopolitical imaginaries." Thus, there arose a period of experimentation for alternatives to the nation-state that, sadly, came to an end. As Steinmetz underscores, today nonalignment may be "a shadow of its 1960s self, but that does not mean that these ideas will not reemerge at some future point," as they remain latent and unconscious.

The editorial team wishes to recognize several individuals connected to this special issue. For their imagination and efforts in putting together this fascinating special issue, we give special thanks to the authors, the special issue editors Mitchell L. Stevens and Ioana Sendroiu, our former journal co-editors Rebecca Emigh and Kris Inwood, and our former managing editor Jeffrey Beemer. We also thank our current editor, Simone Wegge, and our new managing editor, Tammy McCausland. We especially thank the many reviewers who provided insightful feedback.

We hope that this issue will encourage a deeper understanding of the ways in which the historical period in which we live shapes the possibilities available to people and nations and how society and history are inextricably intertwined, even as we engage in the difficult task of explaining both stability and change.

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