

Historical Revisionism of Cold War Experiences and Memories

Introduction

Historical revisionism is defined as the ‘deconstruction and dismantling of “truths” of traditional historiography and re-writing a story according to present interpretations’ (Cattini 2011). It involves revisiting a period or event by opening up archives, exploring newly acquired data and gathering life histories. This ‘turns something flat into something three-dimensional’ by adding nuance and presenting a richer and more holistic interpretation of the phenomenon (Paterson 2007, 390). Various crucial historical periods from the Spanish Civil War and the Holocaust to fascism have been subject to revisionist research (Cattini 2011). In the article essay, I explore how intellectuals and individuals have engaged in historical revisionism of the Cold War period. To do so, I draw on examples of historical revisionism in American academic discourses of the Cold War and ethnographic research on Italian and Yugoslavian women’s rights movements during this period. As these revisionist discourses have challenged traditional interpretations of the period, I hope to demonstrate how revisionism can highlight a diversity of experiences of the Cold War to add complexity and nuance our understanding of the period. I also argue that, rather than being neutral, historical revisionism is in fact a political practice intended to craft and disseminate a particular narrative of the Cold War with the goal of shaping and influencing future generations.

Historical revisionism through Academic Discourses

Revisionism of the Cold War period as an academic project sparked a shift in interpretations of the Soviet Union and America’s actions. Traditional interpretations presented an ‘innocent America’ forced into conflict by an ‘aggressive Soviet Union bent on world conquest’ (Paterson 2007, 388). Many of these traditional historians were employed in the United States’ government agencies (Crapol 1987) and received research funding from American government bodies (Fitzpatrick 2007). They therefore reflected the American government’s official stance on the war and presented highly biased narratives in order to justify the United States’ actions. However, through the declassification of Soviet and American archives from the Cold War period and collaboration with Russian and other Western colleagues, American

revisionist scholars began exploring alternative interpretations (Viola 2002). For example, they began exploring America's desire to increase its sphere of influence after World War II and become a global power (Crapol 1987, Gaddis 1994). Using a range of cultural, economic, military and political tools - from foreign aid for post-war reconstruction to alliances such as NATO – America exercised its soft power and 'behaved as an expansionist imperial power' to advance its own interests and ensure compliance from other nations (Paterson 2007, 391). By spreading their ideological beliefs and politic-economic frameworks, they aimed to create opportunities for their domestic development as well as secure international dominance. This move from viewing America as a defensive to an offensive power also brought the nation's 'imposed interventions' in foreign countries to light (Paterson 2007, 390). From fixing foreign elections and inflicting modernisation projects to sparking civil wars, America's actions greatly damaged other nations. Shifts in academic discourses can therefore demonstrate how researchers, particularly, in America, engage in historical revisionism of the Cold War period.

Crucially, historical revisionism of the Cold War also challenged traditional assumptions about the Soviet Union and its people. Orthodox interpretations of the Cold War presented a top-down depiction of the Soviet Union where Stalin singlehandedly controlled and manipulated a 'powerless, passive society' through the use of terror and propaganda (Fitzpatrick 2007, 80). This was challenged by revisionists who questioned people's motivations for conforming to Soviet rule and the social support the regime received from citizens. For instance, Fitzpatrick highlights how reward structures where workers and peasants, and their families, could be 'recruited into a new elite' was perceived as a 'real-life fulfilment' for young and mobile urban groups (2007, 84). These groups identified with the 'Soviet project' and supported the regime and its actions (2007, 89). This example demonstrates how revisionists engaged with the Cold War to show alternative historical experiences, contrary to orthodox narratives.

Revisionist accounts are therefore important for offering a more nuanced perspective of the Cold War. Academics moved away from a simplistic binary of enemies (Soviets) versus friends (Americans and Allies) which pinned all the blame on the Soviet Union (Viola 2002). Instead, they demonstrated how America 'shared responsibility' for the onset and perpetuation of the Cold War (Paterson 2007, 390). Rather than merely reacting defensively to Soviet aggression, America acted offensively. This also shed light on how, in order to further their imperial

interests, America imposed interventions in non-Western countries – such as those in Southeast Asia and Latin America – and brought chaos and suffering. This therefore highlighted different local particularities of experience. Moreover, revisionism also added nuance to interpretations of the Soviet Union and moved away from the idea that it was a monolithic regime controlled by a single totalitarian leader to highlight how and why individuals supported its policies and conformed to its ideals. Revisionism has therefore led to the creation of multiple complex ‘histories’ rather than a single ‘History’ (Viola 2002, 34), turning the narrative ‘three-dimensional’ (Paterson 2007, 390). This has been crucial for shedding light on local, diverse experiences of the Cold War in different contexts and creating more developed accounts of the period.

Historical revisionism in Cold War scholarship emerged in a particular political climate with a clear agenda. Fitzpatrick emphasises that shifts in historical interpretations are not sparked ‘so much with the discovery of new data invalidating the old paradigm’ but more so ‘processes within the professional scientific community that generate a shift in perspective’ (2007, 78). These ‘external events were more important than new data’ in sparking revisionist discourse (2007, 89). Therefore, the idea that ‘absolute historical truth can be obtained’ is false (Crapol 1987, 252); rather, a particular ‘truth’ is set aside in favour of another. The paradigm shift towards revisionism occurred as part of a broader political climate in the US in the 1970s as criticisms of the Vietnam War led academics to question America’s responsibility and actions in the Cold War. Doubts began to creep in surrounding the American government’s claims that wars and invasions in Southeast Asia were a defensive move to contain Communism. Moreover, the civil and women’s rights movements occurring simultaneously encouraged people to challenge ‘prevailing assumptions and worldviews’ (Paterson 2007, 388). This led people to question their beliefs about the Cold War as well. This context shaped and influenced academics to interpret America’s actions as imperialist and aggressive. We can therefore see how wider political shifts and criticisms of America’s foreign policy actions sparked revisionist discourses.

Historical revisionism through Individual Experiences

Historical revisionism is also important for presenting the everyday experiences of those who lived during the Cold War period. Orthodox interpretations of the Cold War adopted a top-down approach where they were disseminated from a macro scale (government and politicians) down to communities and individuals. However, revisionist accounts marked a shift to a 'from below' approach where accounts were produced on a micro scale, shedding light on individual experiences of the Cold War (Fitzpatrick 2007, 84). The declassification of archival records and use of memoirs, interviews and oral histories allowed for an analysis of different aspects of life such as gender, class and resistance. These sources shed light on the perspectives of 'ordinary people - workers and peasants who experienced the historical cataclysms of the times as children', either through first-hand accounts or through peripheral means such as family stories that shape future generations' epistemologies of the period (Viola 2002, 31). These local experiences may also be significantly different to those presented by official historical accounts and can therefore challenge traditional interpretations and prompt a shift in narratives. Revisionist accounts allow us to understand the Cold War not only on the macro scale of international politics but also how it was lived and embodied daily by ordinary people to influence their social relationships. It is therefore clear how engaging in revisionism can highlight a diversity of experiences and reveal local particularities of the Cold War.

Ethnography, with its epistemological emphasis on people and methodological tools to engage with them, is particularly helpful in the revisionist endeavour to highlight individual narratives. Bonfiglioli's (2012) ethnographic research on Italian and Yugoslavian women's movements during the Cold War offers a crucial insight into the everyday experiences of women during the period. Bonfiglioli aims to address the 'historical and epistemological erasures' that have silenced communist and women's organisations in both Western and Eastern Europe (2012, 15). Her research explores antifascist women's movements - such as the Union of Italian Women and the Antifascist Women's Front of Yugoslavia, which supported the empowerment of women in their societies and contributed to Cold War politics. Through archival research, autobiographies and oral history interviews, she demonstrates how women's political activism supported the emancipation of Italian and Yugoslavian women. These organisations encouraged women's participation in the workforce and developed their political consciousness by educating them about Constitutional rights.

They also worked to improve literacy rates, 'fought against women's juridical, economic and social inferiority' and challenged women's 'oppression in the private sphere and male violence' (2012, 16). These women's groups ran campaigns in underdeveloped rural areas to address high infant mortality rates, improve living and hygiene standards, address poverty by demanding 'better wages and welfare provisions' and support victims of war rapes (2012, 188). Importantly, Bonfiglioli argues that these efforts were motivated by Marxist beliefs of progress, equality and modernity which could be achieved through 'economic progress, political organising and education' (2012, 221). This challenges traditional anti-communist narratives which perceived women's communist movements or women's movements in socialist regimes as not only 'practically non-existent' (2012, 30) but as inherently 'detrimental to women's rights and interests' (2012, 18). By describing women who participated in such movements as 'manipulated and deprived of agency', traditional narratives devalued their activism as not true feminism. However, Bonfiglioli demonstrates the crucial contribution of such women's groups to show that communist and feminist beliefs could co-exist. She therefore also questions the orthodox view of gender equality and women's rights as a democratic, capitalist endeavour that needed to be introduced to communist nations. This demonstrates how researchers can engage in historical revisionism to make the unique local experiences of the Cold War more visible.

By exploring individual experiences of the Cold War and taking into account issues like gender, revisionism can greatly develop narratives of the period. Through questioning traditional interpretations of women who lived in Communist nations or participated in Communist political groups, Bonfiglioli offers a more nuanced exploration of everyday life. Her research moves beyond a simplistic view of these women as subjugated and controlled and challenges inaccurate accounts which claim they were not active or engaged during the Cold War. Instead, she has shown, through individual accounts and experiences, that they played a crucial role in shaping the everyday experiences of women in Italy and Yugoslavia and therefore contributed to 'Cold War politics, at the local and at the international level' (Bonfiglioli 2012, 289). Historical accounts present a 'flat' story which can be developed and enhanced through new forms of data such as personal accounts and histories (Paterson 2007, 390). Therefore, revealing previously hidden narratives is crucial for achieving a fuller and

more three-dimensional understanding of the historical period and highlighting the different ways in which people experienced the Cold War.

It is still important to consider the motivations and agendas that inspire individuals to engage in revisionism. For instance, Bonfiglioli discusses how her research was inspired by her own family's memories as members of the antifascist resistance movement and her upbringing in the Communist 'red Bologna' in Italy (2012, 255). Moreover, the sources that she drew on – such as archives from the women's rights organisations' and autobiographies of group leaders – reflect their political aims. Therefore, her ethnographic research has a clear agenda to revise traditional narratives to highlight the experiences of communist feminists during the Cold War and promote their activities and achievements. This emphasises how historical revisionism is inherently politically motivated and therefore, the importance of also considering the motivations that inspire it.

Purpose of Historical Revisionism to Shape Future Generations

In order to understand the use of historical revisionism to further a political agenda, I find it useful to draw on Foucault's ideas about power. He presents the idea of discursive power, that is power embedded and realised through discourse, to explain how knowledge can be used to exercise power over groups and individuals (Miller 1990, Jungherr *et al* 2019). Those who create narratives have power over those represented by dictating how they are perceived by others (Fitzpatrick 2007, Johnson 2011). For instance, Bonfiglioli's research demonstrates how 'imbalance in power' between Western and Eastern European countries during and after the Cold War has had 'consequences for knowledge production' (2012, 35). Western researchers traveling to Eastern European countries adopted a colonial attitude, emphasising how these nations differed from the West. In particular, women from these countries have been viewed by them as subjugated victims. Even decades later, these interpretations persist in a variety of areas and prove damaging for Eastern European women. In the academic world, for example, research from Eastern European women is side-lined and undervalued in favour of their Western counterparts. Bonfiglioli has attempted to challenge this Orientalist representation of Eastern Europe by going back and demonstrating Yugoslavian women's agency throughout history. This emphasises how controlling a country's

histories and 'construct(ing) a version' of the past (Cattini 2011, 29) is part of a 'political battle for the present' (2011, 30). Therefore, historical revisionism is concerned with the practice of going back and rewriting events by focusing on the implications of such processes for the present and future. Bonfiglioli aims to change representations of Eastern European women in contemporary societies so that current and future generations do not face the same stereotypes and barriers. In this way, she is challenging the discursive power (Miller 1990, Jungherr *et al* 2019) exercised by Western researchers over Eastern European women and seeking power to represent them alternatively in order to grant them agency and power. This helps us understand how historical revisionism as a political project reflects contemporary political contexts and aims to influence future generations by shaping their epistemologies.

Importantly, historical narratives rely on dissemination through educational institutions. Foucault's work emphasises the power exercised by schools to discipline and socialise younger generations into particular ways of thinking (Deacon 2006, Hannus and Simola 2010). This is supported by Cattini (2011) who explains how school curriculums align with the beliefs and interpretations of the political systems in power. For instance, Paterson describes how growing up in the United States in the 1950s, he 'knew about the Cold War before (he) ever thought about it' through a map in his school classroom 'with huge blotches of vibrant red covering the Soviet Union and China and menacing neighbours' (2007, 388). Paterson's example highlights the omnipresent indoctrination of children into certain ways of thinking from an early age through educational institutions. Naturally, revisionist accounts would also require promotion through education in order to be accepted and institutionalised. For instance, Cattini explains how the rise of the Partido Popular party in the 1990s in Spain led to reforms to create a national secondary school curriculum to eliminate 'important distortions of Spanish history' in autonomous communities like Galicia, Basque Country and Catalonia (2011, 33). This aligned with the political party's desire to emphasise the unity of the Spanish State and promote nationalism in order to prevent autonomous independence movements. The party therefore engaged in historical revisionism to 'clean up the image of centralist Spanish nationalism' (Cattini 2011, 33) and published pro-Spanish state discourses in school textbooks to be disseminated to children. This demonstrates the value of educational institutions to secure revisionist aims of furthering present political goals and securing a particular version of the future. Over time, through dissemination, these revisionist

discourses become orthodox knowledge themselves. Paterson explains how revisionist interpretations become 'incorporated into the main body of historical scholarship' (2007, 390). This is supported by Fitzpatrick who explains how, as traditional historians retire, a 'new generation of graduate students and scholars' is 'trained largely on revisionist work', eventually making it orthodox knowledge (2007, 86). Therefore, the goal of revised accounts of history is to become accepted and internalised so that they may be perpetuated across generations and shape future interpretations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have demonstrated how people engage in historical revisionism of the Cold War by drawing on the examples of shifts in academic discourses of the period and ethnographic research on women's rights organisations in Italy and Yugoslavia. These revisionist accounts have opened up multiple interpretations and experiences of the Cold War, creating rich, complex and multidimensional accounts of the period. By exploring Soviet and non-Western experiences in academic discourses and individual women's accounts through ethnographic research, we can see the diverse "local particularities" which vary across communities. I have also tried to emphasise the importance of considering context and purpose when considering revisionist accounts as these are not created in a vacuum. Particular political environments trigger revisionism of traditional historiography and the preference for one interpretation over another. The process of revisiting history is therefore driven by a specific agenda in mind. The broad aim of revisionism is to present a narrative that suits the political aims of the present society and to disseminate it to generations (through education, for instance) in order to shape the future in their image.

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