

Traditionalist (orthodox) interpretation

This was the original or orthodox approach to thinking about the Cold War. Key Historians who agreed with this view were **Thomas Bailey, George Kennan and Herbert Feis**. Both Kennan and Feis had held advisory roles in US government at the start of the Cold War.

Bailey said the USSR wanted world revolution and their actions in Eastern Europe caused the Cold War.

Kennan said Stalin needed a threatening enemy so people would accept his tough dictatorship to stay safe.

Feis said the USSR were trying to spread communism and the USA were forced to respond.

The Traditionalist view lasted from the late 1940s until the early 1960s

The US public generally accepted this view. Films such as War of the Worlds helped promote it.

At this time it was difficult to counter this argument as people who did might be considered communist sympathisers or spies. It was known as the RED SCARE. Many historians censored their own work to avoid this.

Soviet historians tended to display exactly the opposite viewpoint at this time. They too had to be careful of what they wrote .

US Historian William Appleman Williams did blame the USA at this time and said the Soviet actions were defensive.

English Historian E.H Carr, a USSR admirer, was also supportive of this view blaming US policies for the conflict.



Newspaper review 1947

Revisionist interpretation

The Revisionist view lasted from the mid 1960s until the mid 1970s

When **William Appleman Williams** began to question the traditional orthodox approach following the US reaction to the Cuban revolution in 1958. Following Castro's takeover he said America behaved more like an aggressive empire-building power than a force for good and likened it to what happened with the USSR. This was not widely accepted at the time.

The war in Vietnam (1960s-70s) went a long way towards challenging traditional interpretations of the US role and lots of new academics agreed with **William Appleman Williams**. America had fought against communism by supporting a corrupt regime, killing tens of thousands of innocent civilians by using chemical weapons and at the same time had neglected its duty to the poorest members of society at home. This saw a lack of trust in the US government begin to happen.

Popular opinion was divided. The older generation tended to be traditionalist whereas younger people supported it

This was the first challenge to the traditional orthodox approach. A key historian of this view was **William Appleman Williams**.

They said that

- The US provoked the Cold War by trying to achieve economic dominance in Europe
- The Marshall Plan was aimed at reducing the chance of post war depression as that would impact on US trade, which is why they only helped capitalist countries not others.
- Truman's tough stance made USSR feel threatened which is why they reacted aggressively

American foreign policy in the years 1945-54 was a drive to expand American capitalism through the world. Because Communism was the greatest enemy of this drive, American diplomacy had to oppose Communism everywhere in the world. The Cold War was not a conflict between Russia and the United States but an American campaign to dominate the world and reshape it in its own image. The Soviet threat to the world was a mirage conjured up by the Truman administration.

US Historians J&G Kolko writing in 1972

Post - Revisionist interpretation

The Post Revisionist view lasted from the early 1970s until 1989

This was the first time historians began to compare the traditional orthodox view with that of the revisionists. A key historian of this view was **John Lewis Gaddis**.

He said that

- He rejected the view of William Appleton Williams that the Cold War was caused solely by US aggression and expansionism
- He said The Cold War was a result of fear, confusion and misunderstandings on both sides.
- He instead said that the actions of the USSR and particularly Stalin and the US policy of misunderstanding and over-exaggerating the strength and intentions of the USSR and their subsequent retaliation caused the conflict.

Revisionist historians have performed a needed service by stressing the influence of economic considerations on American diplomacy, but their focus has been too narrow: many other forces - domestic politics, bureaucratic inertia, quirks of personality, perceptions, accurate or inaccurate, of soviet intentions - also effected the actions of Washington officials .

US Historian John Lewis Gaddis writing in 1972

In the early 1970s following the US failure in Vietnam the US began working closer with Communist countries such as China and the USSR. They even agreed the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT).

This led historians to review earlier views.

Gaddis work had a huge impact amongst historians. Many didn't agree with the traditional view but didn't feel comfortable being openly critical of American policies. The Post Revisionist approach blamed misunderstandings which caused mistrust. This was effectively saying that no-one was directly to blame - which made it easier for people to accept

This view became the most dominant view on the topic. Some revisionists claimed it was actually very similar to the traditional view

Post - 1991 interpretation

The Post 1989 view started as the Cold War ended

Context - Key events

- New Soviet sources of evidence became available to US historians. There were literally millions of new sources to consider.
- President Ronald Reagan had been following an aggressive policy towards the USSR towards the end of the Cold War - he called it the 'Evil Empire'. Many traditionalist orthodox historians agreed with this and found new sources in the archives that supported their original views

What is so distinctive about Gaddis's new book is the extent to which he abandons post-revisionism and returns to a more traditional interpretation of the Cold War. In unequivocal terms, he blames the Cold War on Stalin's personality, on authoritarian government, and on Communist ideology

US historian Mervyn Leffler reviewing Gaddis' book 'We now know' in 1999

Following the end of the Cold War this was the first time historians were able get hold of and use source material from both sides. A key historian who did this was **John Lewis Gaddis**.

Gaddis work had a huge impact amongst historians. The fact that he began to change his original views to a more traditional orthodox view in light of new evidence being available. Many were not convinced though and as a result historians who believed orthodox, revisionist and post-revisionist views are all pushing forward their own interpretations.

The hope was that all historians would finally agree what caused the Cold War but this didn't happen - they all identify the differing ideologies as being a factor but there is no clear outcome