CULTURAL OFFENSIVES OF THE COLD WAR

Reviewed by Drew Cottle


Australia’s First Cold War: Volume I will be a disappointment to those eager to understand the political significance of that “scoundrel time”, the Cold War. Although its title suggests there is more to come, this reviewer hopes that it is not more of what is offered in this first volume. The various contributors carefully explore those areas noted in the book’s title — society, communism and culture. But, oddly, an intellectual timidity pervades most of these writings on such a contentious period. Odd indeed for a book which assumes we are in a second Cold War. Chapters on the Cold War’s social context (Alomes, Dober and Hellier), a literary witch-hunt (Ashbolt) and post-war economic policy (McFarlane) are memorable for their detail, argument and commitment. Yet even these fine pieces of writing cannot remedy the book’s overall deficiency.

A three-tiered structure, in which the economy, society, government and culture are rigidly separated, limits the general argument and denies integration. Apart from this structural flaw, the primary weakness of Australia’s First Cold War is its insular orientation. Ambiguously, the book’s title infers this intent. The Cold War in Australia did have specific indigenous characteristics, but it was not peculiarly Australian. The editors and many of the contributions give scant attention to the global content of the Cold War and its direct bearing on Australia — a major political deficiency.

The shifts in the power balance in world politics must be examined to grasp the meaning of the Cold War in Australia. Come the end of the Second World War, the USA emerged, largely unscathed, as the leading capitalist country. The Soviet Union, which contributed most to the defeat of European fascism, was devastated economically and socially by the war. Vast tracts of Russia, its richest agricultural and industrial regions, lay in ruin. Over twenty million Soviet citizens died defending their country from the Nazi onslaught. During and after the anti-fascist war, liberation movements in the former colonial empires and elsewhere began their long struggle for national independence.

All looked threatening to the imperial powers, particularly the American colossus. To ensure its global supremacy, the White House, the Pentagon, the US State Department and their Wall Street masters unleashed the Cold War. Socialist Russia, the war-time ally, became, by 1946, the Red Anti-Christ. Communism was vilified, denounced and purged, along with its supporters and sympathisers throughout the “Free World”.

The unholy crusade against communism found its ready supporters in Australia. Australia’s First Cold War makes abundantly clear, a generation of progressive Australians was hounded by the anti-communist “witch-hunters”. Only a terse commentary is offered in the book’s “Introduction” on the “manufacture” of the Australian Cold War by the US and its Australian minions. Strong trade unions needed to be smashed, unreliable Labor governments replaced, the public service purged, communists jailed, liberals and radicals silenced and a “spy scare” concocted to preserve Australia as a suitable area for long-term corporate American investment. Having W.C. Wentworth and B.A. Santamaria bleat about “communist conspiracies” and “the enemy within” made sound business sense.

In its desire to demonstrate Australian capitalism’s “exceptionalism”, Australia’s First Cold War overlooks the obvious: the Cold War was an ideological smokescreen concealing the corporate US invasion and eventual take-over of key sectors of the Australian economy. Bruce McFarlane’s essay delineates this corporate US strategy. Saddled with its rigid structure, however, the book separates the McFarlane contribution from the cultural and social aspects of the Cold War, instead of integrating them.

Too much of the text is given over to Meredith Burgmann’s exposition of the government “response” to the “Communist threat” which officialdom itself had so assiduously created. As well researched as it is, Burgmann’s investigation of the Cold War’s high politics lacks any thorough consideration of the “secret state” (ASIO, etc.) or Washington’s influence over Australia’s politics. Burgmann’s criticisms of H.V. Evatt are unwarranted. There were imperial forces which quietly undermined Evatt’s efforts at reform in the international arena. Evatt vacillated on many questions, but his defence of democratic liberty during the Cold War distinguishes him as an individual of courage and integrity when other “good Labor men” fled
from, or rolled with, the reactionary tide.

Similarly, Cain and Farrell’s autopsy of Menzies’ war on the Communist Party neglects the American presence. A perusal of American archival sources might have revealed the support the FBI and CIA provided that great “Queen’s man” in his efforts to crush communism and, with it, all semblance of civil liberty in Australia. Menzies was a trusted accomplice of Uncle Sam after 1949, despite his grovelling to imperial Britain. His career lay securely in American hands.

In their chapter on post-war conservatism, Alomes, Dover and Hellier catalogue the Cold War’s effects on many aspects of material life such as immigration, clothes, education, hire-purchase, housing, religious sectarianism or popular literature. Their broad empirical survey offers glimpses of the Cold War’s effects, never its causes.

Unlike most of the contributions, Allan Ashbolt’s essay on the “literary mugging” of Vance Palmer is deeply moving because of its sense of personal outrage and polemical eloquence. Palmer, a great nurturer of the Australian tradition, was denounced as a “fellow traveller” by those literary jackals. Wentworth and Keon, from the vantage of parliamentary privilege. This account of Palmer’s victimisation and response is Ashbolt’s testimony to a true Australian patriot.

Worthy as Ashbolt’s chapter is, the orientation and structure of Australia’s First Cold War makes it a disappointing text. Its front cover Women’s Weekly reproduction of a portrait of Joseph Stalin underlines this disappointment. The drawing of Stalin is presented without any political explanation. Though the editors and contributors may find Stalin loathsome, most are aware of the owner of the Women’s Weekly’s thoughts on the matter. When Stalin died in 1953, Frank Packer’s Daily Telegraph celebrated publicly. Packer at the time was president of the Australia-America Association, a spawning ground for Australian compradores.

Moreover, many of the topics printed boldly across the front page — the Victorian Royal Commission on Communism, the 1949 Coal Strike, ASIO’s formation, the ANZUS Alliance, the Korean War — all crucial to an understanding of the Cold War in Australia — are barely considered within the body of the book. One can only hope that the dominant role of the USA in Australian affairs will be carefully addressed in the next instalment. Failure to learn the lessons of domination and dependency in the First Cold War bodes ill for any understanding and subsequent political action in the present one. Will we always be “servin’ USA”?*