INTRODUCTION

NEW APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF
THE COLD WAR IN ASIA

Michael Szonyi and Hong Liu

To speak, as the title of this work does, of the Cold War in Asia is to hold that the history of Asia can be productively related to the complex rivalry between the two superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—and their allies in the second half of the twentieth century. It is to argue that what has conventionally been seen as a peripheral theater of the Cold War actually played an important role. To speak of a battle for hearts and minds as part of the Cold War in Asia is to presume, further, that this relationship should be explored not just in its political and diplomatic aspects but also as social and cultural phenomena. In this brief introductory essay, we lay out our arguments for these linked positions. While some leading historians continue to see the Cold War primarily as a conflict between the two superpowers, fought primarily in a European theater, other scholars increasingly recognize that the Cold War was fought in multiple theaters, and that developments in the Third World were not simply a sideshow to the main event, but central to the Cold War itself. On the other hand, while the history of Asia in the late twentieth century cannot simply be subsumed within a Cold War narrative, the global geopolitical struggle profoundly shaped the context in which regional and national change unfolded, and the choices that were available to local actors. These choices went well beyond decisions about diplomatic and geopolitical orientation or about the most appropriate system to organize the national economy. Rather, they could touch on virtually every aspect of culture and society. Asians also had their own concerns—nationalism, revolution, independence, ethnic integration and nation-building—and the relationship between these and the ideology of the superpowers is another important issue for study. The ideological dimension of the superpower rivalry, and the ways in which it was perceived by leading protagonists at least in part as a struggle for the hearts and minds of the peoples of the world, make propaganda, public diplomacy and the media particularly fruitful areas for research.
Study of the Cold War in Asia is not simply helpful because it allows us to better understand the history of the region itself. It is also crucial to a global comparative history of the Cold War, one that situates the Cold War in relation to other global processes and explores similarities and differences across countries and regions. While the more traditional approaches of international and diplomatic history continue to find adherents, not least in the general reading public, many historians now call for a broadening of approaches to fully understand the Cold War as a global history of diplomatic, military, social and cultural conflicts and realignments. This volume is intended as a contribution to this broadening of approaches.

The existing English-language historiography of the Cold War is conventionally divided into three broad phases. At the height of the Cold War itself, the dominant or orthodox interpretation laid the blame for the conflict squarely on the Soviet Union and Stalin. The Soviet ideology was seen as intrinsically expansionist; the authoritarian system meant there were no checks and balances on expansionism, and Stalin himself was as ruthless, immoral and self-aggrandizing as the regime he led. Perhaps unsurprisingly, by the 1960s this orthodoxy had begun to be challenged. With the US increasingly embroiled in Vietnam, historians, mostly on the political left, argued that the causes of the Cold War lay as much in the US as in the Soviet Union. The US too had been an expansionist power in the years after WWII, creating its own informal global empire. At least some Soviet action could be seen as legitimate defense of national interest in the face of the threat posed by the US. According to this revisionist approach, the locus of responsibility for the outbreak and persistence of the Cold War lay with the United States.

Challenges to the revisionist approach soon appeared. Exemplified by the work of the dean of Cold War studies, John Lewis Gaddis, the post-revisionist scholarship shifted primary responsibility for the Cold War back to the Soviet Union, whose fundamental expansionism the US had sought to contain. The unexpectedly sudden collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War seemed to lend

---

1 There are of course alternative periodization schemes. See for example David Reynolds, ed., The Origins of the Cold War in Europe: International Perspectives (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).