

Book Review

Penny M. Von Eschen, *Paradoxes of Nostalgia: Cold War Triumphalism and Global Disorder Since 1989, American Encounters/Global Interactions*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022. Pp. 400. \$109.95 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

Many actors in Penny von Eschen's *Paradoxes of Nostalgia: Cold War Triumphalism and Global Disorder Since 1989* share the wistful view expressed by Judy Dench's character M in the 2007 James Bond film *Casino Royale*, "Christ, I miss the Cold War." This sentiment reflects a cynical longing to return to an era that was dark and anxious, but also a time when superpower bipolarity ostensibly provided a simpler state of global affairs. Nostalgia is central to von Eschen's framing of a complex and compelling argument about the problems of the contemporary world, their connections to the Cold War, and the remarkable capacity (particularly among United States leaders) to ignore the link between them. The book opens with a convincing example of such amnesia: As Nelson Mandela received a hero's welcome across the United States upon his release from twenty-seven years of imprisonment, the George H.W. Bush administration did its best to bury all memory of the United States' long support for South Africa's apartheid regime, its insistence on branding the African National Congress a terrorist organization, and even the role of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in Mandela's arrest.

Paradoxes of Nostalgia, an entry in the American Encounters/Global Interactions series von Eschen co-edits with Gilbert M. Joseph, analyzes three processes she views as related. She argues first that the United States played a crucial role in the global disorder that developed after 1989, including, to name just a few examples, the rise of the Russian mafia, the Rwanda genocide, the isolation of North Korea, Taliban control of Afghanistan, and the massive growth of cocaine and opium production and export. Americans adopted a triumphalist stance in the Cold War's aftermath, insisting that the victorious United States was entitled to impose a unipolar future on the globe. Von Eschen offers scathing criticism of the ways American leaders linked democracy

and capitalism as they imposed harsh neoliberal “reforms” on many nations, which created poverty and resentment, provoking crises that often became international.

American unipolar triumphalism also meant dismissing multilateral solutions, like those envisioned by Mandela, Mikhail Gorbachev, Vaclav Havel, and others. Rather than dismantling the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), for example, the United States expanded it to Russia’s borders, helping to sow the seeds of the Russia-Ukraine crisis.

Second, instead of the “peace dividend” many expected from redirecting military spending, the United States ploughed its former Cold War budget into fighting new enemies American leaders invented. They manufactured a new global binary through a “clash of civilizations” narrative that pitted “ancient” ethnic tensions against the demands of the modern globalized world. The search for enemies sometimes meant turning on strong, albeit unsavory allies like Panama’s Manuel Noriega and Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, both secret beneficiaries of CIA support. The United States often demonized Islam as an inherently backward religion ill-equipped to navigate the contemporary world. This characterization ignored many examples of Islamic modernity and extensive American Cold War efforts to foster global Islamic radicalism as an anti-Soviet weapon. The post-Cold War binary had a domestic component as well in the culture wars Republican conservatives launched against liberals, LGBT people, and immigrants. This intolerance eventually fueled the rise of Donald Trump’s authoritarian administration. Combined with the nation’s massive economic disparities, largely the result of deregulation and reductions in social spending aggressively begun in the Ronald Reagan administration, these problems have made “disorder” an apt description of the United States domestically since 1989.

Third, von Eschen uses nostalgia to explain a central paradox: Americans—from decision-makers to everyday people—insisted on “a cold war political culture of innocence, unable to recognize, name, or act to redress the consequences of its past policies and actions” (85). Memory is, of course, about forgetting as much as remembering. Choosing a nostalgic Cold War memory meant embracing a sentimental imagining of the past that ignored United States suppression of nationalist movements, use of international institutions (the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and others) to bully smaller nations to accede to its policies, and deployment of the CIA to topple governments and support terrorist groups around the world.

As a cultural historian, von Eschen is keen to examine how nostalgia worked through various forms of popular culture. She analyzes films in the James Bond and Jason Bourne franchises, TV shows such as *X-Files*, *24*, and *The Americans*, and the Call of Duty video games for evidence of popular views of the world and of the Cold War. Mass entertainment is subject to multiple interpretations, so von Eschen’s arguments though always intriguing are not always compelling. She does convincingly show how

the deception, intrigue, and murder committed by the Soviet sleeper agents in *The Americans* mirrored actions actually carried out by the CIA. She is also undoubtedly right that filmmakers like Jerry Bruckheimer and Ridley Scott, who produced *Black Hawk Down*, conveyed a pro-military message because of their cooperation with the military, using its equipment and consulting its expertise. In addition, a section felicitously titled “celebrating the epistemology of lying” shows how the International Spy Museum, founded by a philanthropist with deep ties to the intelligence establishment, conveys the message that surveillance and deception are patriotic activities.

Equally intriguing is the role individual books—some aspiring to intellectual respectability—played in presidents’ foreign policy decisions. George H.W. Bush’s “new world order” was deeply influenced by Francis Fukayama’s “end of history” framework and the “clash of civilizations” narrative advanced by Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington. Bill Clinton’s reluctance to intervene in the Kosovo crisis was shaped by the monitory tone of Robert Kaplan’s *Balkan Ghosts*. More disturbingly, Reagan’s suspicion of Gorbachev was informed (if that is the right word) by Tom Clancy’s novels *The Hunt for Red October* and *Red Storm Rising*.

Throughout the book, von Eschen engages with a rich and diverse historiography. This includes recent scholarship by Hal Brands, Jeffrey Engel, and others on the end of the Cold War and the rise of American unipolarity, as well as efforts to globalize Cold War scholarship, notably by Odd Arne Westad. In seeking links between domestic and foreign policies, particularly regarding race, she draws on Mary Dudziak and Thomas Borstelman. In exploring Cold War nostalgia, she builds on Jon Wiener, in addition to the scholarship on nostalgia in the Eastern bloc. Her examination of CIA activities builds on her own earlier work and that of Hugh Wilford on CIA front organizations. She also makes significant use of Mahmood Mamdani to show how demonizing radical Islam was one strategy to deflect attention from the United States’ own work in building and training international terrorist networks. Though Chalmers Johnson only makes one appearance in the text, von Eschen’s entire narrative might be viewed as a substantiation of his notion of “blowback,” which she glosses as “the disorder unleashed by actions in the cold war and its aftermath,” particularly as a result of violent clandestine actions by the CIA (224).

Paradoxes of Nostalgia is an expansive work of United States international and transnational scholarship, rather than global history. Occasionally, von Eschen elides this distinction and overreaches. She explains in the introduction that she has been deeply influenced by the nostalgia scholarship on the Eastern bloc, which leads to distracting (albeit fascinating) explorations of Prague’s Museum of Communism and Budapest’s Szoborpark, which displays former communist statues. But this does little to detract from a brilliant, ambitious book that links foreign and domestic policy, the Cold War and the postwar world, policymaking and popular culture. More than the sum of its

parts, von Eschen's book is a masterly synthesis of various strands that provides a convincing depiction of the United States' shaping of the post-Cold War world.

Ultimately, *Paradoxes of Nostalgia* is about the nature of history. Von Eschen recognizes, as the series introduction explains, "the representational character of all stories about the past" and thus seeks to understand "the context in which meanings related to nations, cultures, and political economy are continually produced, challenged, and reshaped." Historiography bears an ethical responsibility. As a counterpoint to the dangerous nostalgia she explores throughout the book, Von Eschen invokes "critical nostalgia:" "grief over the loss of a commitment to the public good" and a longing for "the audacious dream that individual happiness could align with a more equitable and just social world" (16). Critical nostalgia requires confronting the myth of American innocence by uncovering buried memories of the use of American power during the Cold War and since 1989 to foment gross injustices abroad and at home. *Paradoxes of Nostalgia* admirably succeeds in unveiling the contingent nature of the world we inhabit and hinting that we might still work toward a better one. Von Eschen's explicit reflection on the nature and uses of history is just one feature that makes this book worth considering for classroom use. *Paradoxes of History* is thought-provoking and conceptually rich, but also accessible—filled with fascinating exploration of everyday objects that give texture to important theoretical constructs. At 300 pages the book is too long to assign in most high school or university survey courses but would be useful in upper-division or graduate courses on the Cold War or modern world history. Individual chapters would be extremely useful for many courses and as engaging material for lectures on the Cold War, the postwar world, and the treacherous ground of historical memory.

David Neumann (Ph.D. in History, University of Southern California) is Associate Professor of History Education at California State Polytechnic University in Pomona. His research explores transnationalism, American religion, the Cold War, Southern California, and historical thinking. His publications include *Finding God through Yoga: Paramahansa Yogananda and Modern American Religion in a Global Age* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019) and articles in *The History Teacher*, *The Journal of Religious History*, *Religion and American Culture*, *Southern California Quarterly*, and *World History Bulletin*. He can be reached at djneumann@copp.edu.