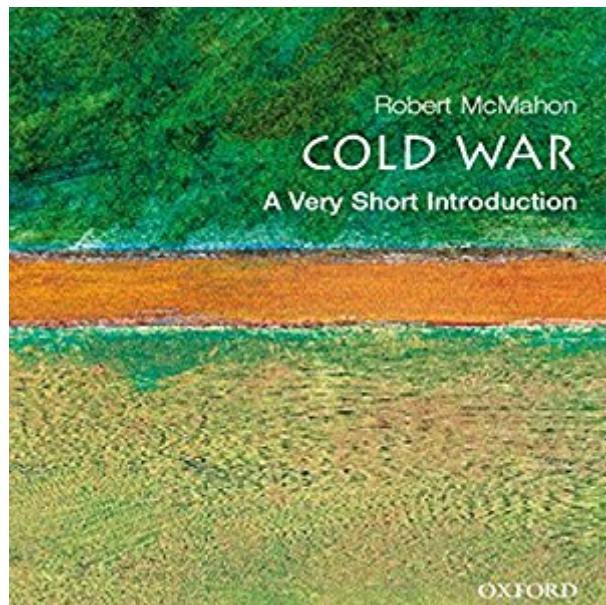


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# The Cold War: A Very Short Introduction



## **Synopsis**

The massive disorder and economic ruin following the Second World War inevitably predetermined the scope and intensity of the Cold War. But why did it last so long? And what impact did it have on the United States, the Soviet Union, Europe, and the Third World? Finally, how did it affect the broader history of the second half of the twentieth century--what were the human and financial costs? iv>

## **Book Information**

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 6 hoursÂ andÂ 23 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Audible Studios

Audible.com Release Date: August 4, 2009

Language: English

ASIN: B002KE9BL8

Best Sellers Rank: #200 inÂ Books > Audible Audiobooks > Politics & Current Events > International Relations #1508 inÂ Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > United States & Canada #8040 inÂ Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > International & World Politics

## **Customer Reviews**

McMahon presents this survey of the Cold War with authority, insight, and balance. He takes us from the events of WWII that set the scene, to the US and Soviet disagreement over the disposition of Germany after the war, to the competing ideologies that led to a global competition, to the detente of the 70's, and to the end of the Cold War. He puts the key events and players in their correct Cold War perspective, and he doesn't shrink from making moral judgements along the way. I came away with a much firmer grasp on this important episode in our history.

Professor McMahon has written a wonderful introduction to the Cold War for Oxford University Press's "Very Short Introduction" series. I read this slim volume right after I finished John Lewis Gaddis's The Cold War: A New History. While I found Gaddis's "New History" to be very disappointing insofar as it focused mostly on politicians and leaders of the US and USSR, I found McMahon's introductory text to be a clear and balanced discussion of the multiple dimensions of the

Cold War. In 168 pages McMahon covers all of the main points of the cold war: origins, Korean War, Cuba, Détente, collapse of Detente, 1989/1990, etc. I found his discussion on the origins of the Cold War (Chapters 1 and 2) to be the most valuable part of the book. Throughout, McMahon blends discussions on perspectives of leaders and politicians with discussions on the Cold War in the periphery (Third World); there is even a chapter dedicated to "Cold Wars at Home," which focuses on the domestic repercussions of the Cold War. At times, however, this book seemed to look at the Cold War exclusively through a United States-tinted lens; that is to say I thought that more attention could be paid to the Soviet Union's perspective. We learn a lot about what Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan thought, but not enough about what their respective Soviet counterparts thought: this is one of the only things that Gaddis's book succeeds at. The other aspect of Gaddis's book that I did not find in McMahon's is a sense of drama: Gaddis did a nice job of grabbing and holding the readers attention. (Then again, Gaddis did have an extra 100 pages to fill.) Nevertheless, I found McMahon's Very Short Introduction to be a much better and more evenhanded introductory survey to the Cold War. This book is also one of the better "Very Short Introductions" that I have encountered.

This is exactly what the title says, the entire Cold War in 168 pages. Oxford University Press has started this "Very Short Introductions" series on many different subjects for those with short attention spans or those teaching undergraduate courses (two categories which aren't necessarily mutually exclusive). I decided to read this one to see what these books were like, and to see if this book could be used in one of my future classes. For anybody that has some in depth knowledge of the Cold War, or certain aspects thereof, this book can be very frustrating, since it is a brief overview of events. However, everything is covered, from the origins to the battle for the Third World to Cold War culture to the collapse of the Eastern Block. For someone wanting a short intro to the Cold War outside of a University, this would serve them well, though the book pays much more attention to the US than the Soviet Union. When I cover this subject in future classes I will cover most of the areas covered in this book in lectures, and will assign reading looking at one or two aspects of the Cold War in more detail.

Robert McMahon's "The Cold War" is a very short introduction to a complex topic. In less than 170 pages including maps and photographs, the author attempts to sketch the history of the Cold War from its World War II origins to its de facto ending in 1990 with the reunification of Germany. The author makes a vigorous show of presenting both sides of the long rivalry between the US and the

USSR, although to this date, the Soviet side remains far less transparent in the historical record. The book covers ground quickly, tracing the many arenas of the superpower competition in Europe, East Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and the Caribbean. He very deftly interweaves political, military, and economic developments, although the constraints of space mean light coverage for each. The book succeeds in the limited sense of offering its promised short introduction. There are many more detailed and more nuanced studies available. This reviewer was offended by the author's apparent willingness to grant moral equivalence to the Soviet Union, a murderous regime whose ideology was incompatible with Western values and whose culpability in starting World War II with Nazi Germany is ignored. This book is recommended only to those who lack the time and interest for a serious study of the topic.

Good, but not great. It was interesting to compare this to John Lewis Gaddis' "The Cold War, A History", which is a better book, I think. For instance, the big heroes of the end of the Cold War in Gaddis' book are Reagan, the Pope, and Lech Walesa, with Gorbachev sort of along for the ride. In this book, the hero is Gorbachev, Reagan is Along for the ride, and the Pope and Walesa are not mentioned at all. Gaddis' book has a bit of a right-wing slant, whereas this one has a bit of a left-wing slant, in particular, he tends to portray the Cold War as the-Soviet-Union-was-provoked-by-the-US. This book was very good through the 1970s (the coverage of colonial wars like Vietnam is particularly good), but then dispensed with the implosion of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union very superficially - almost as if the author ran out of time. Worth reading, but get Gaddis' book too.

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