



(AN)ARCHIVE

CHILDHOOD, MEMORY, AND THE COLD WAR

EDITED BY MNEMOZIN



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# 14. Anarchive, Oral Histories, and Teaching Comparative Cold-War Childhoods across Geographies and Generations

*Elena Jackson Albarrán*

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Childhood is a normalising phase of life. Each individual's subjective experience becomes the baseline for establishing a worldview and evaluating differences encountered in others. Yet scholars of childhood have demonstrated that formative years are often informed by political, cultural, and social trends. During the Cold War, citizen and identity formation at the hands of state and media influences was particularly strident. This chapter provides a practical application of childhood studies scholarship to undergraduate education in the context of a semester-long project assigned in an undergraduate history course at a Western university. Oral history projects that connect textbook narratives with the memories of living family and community members help to dismantle the East-West divide, generate empathy, and promote self-reflection of the students as agents of their own historical moment.

The year is 1962. Tensions between the United States of America and the Soviet Union have gradually grown tenser over the coming months, now at an all-time high since the Soviets placed missiles in Cuba, a communist country fresh from its own revolution. People were terrified all across America, wondering if they would be caught

in nuclear warfare. Although what I have just relayed may sound like a reading from a history excerpt, I am honored to say that I know someone who was a part of the history of this time. (Student Reflection 2022)

This pedagogically oriented chapter showcases the experiences and opportunities of integrating the Cold-War childhood memories anarchieve into two undergraduate courses taught to three different cohorts of students. The course 'Comparative Cold War Childhoods', taught to US students in a European study-abroad program, sought to make optimal use of the Reconnect/Recollect project and its multiple intellectual and creative activities. The course 'World History since 1945' was taught in a conventional US undergraduate setting to non-history majors fulfilling distribution requirements for a liberal-arts degree. To gain context, students in both courses studied the construction of ideological systems and institutions on both sides of the Iron Curtain, especially as they influenced children. These were augmented by guest testimonies of Cold-War childhoods that belied the propagandistic characterisation of the Other constructed in both East and West. They participated in the virtual exhibition opening of *Kaleidoscope* (2021), utilised the Cold-War Childhoods memories anarchieve, read some of the texts published in *Childhood and Schooling in Post/Socialist Societies: Memories of Everyday Life* (Silova et al. 2018), and conducted their own oral histories of a family member or acquaintance who grew up in the Cold War, from which they extracted first-hand anecdotes, observations, and memories that aligned with the spirit of the memories anarchieve. Students in the 'Cold War Childhoods' course engaged in a semester-long project, while students in the 'World History since 1945' course conducted a truncated version of the oral history assignment.

This chapter will also emphasise the generative capacity of this kind of intellectual model by showcasing its multiple products. I participated in one of the memory workshops (and contributed lightly to the anarchieve), and through those relationships I was able to conceptualise the pedagogical goals of these courses as well as to make meaningful contacts. The student assignment, a capstone project of the courses, intends to achieve the following pedagogical objectives: deconstruct the Cold-War ideological binary, cultivate

intergenerational empathy as well as intercultural curiosity and appreciation, deconstruct childhood as a social category, enhance awareness of historical legacies of personal and familial experiences and migrations, and introduce critical approaches to the political economy of childhood.

### On Becoming a Cold-War Kid

'I know we are supposed to interview somebody who grew up during the Cold War, but I'm having a hard time finding somebody who was alive back then.' This casual student confession made after class cleaved a rift between us, one that I scrambled to seam back together by gently reminding her that I was alive 'back then'. Despite the expanded horizons promised by a liberal-arts education, generational uniformity on a residential college campus limits perceptions of the human condition. Furthermore, the narrow rubric of 'History' creates a false sense of distance from the people whose transformations of identities, nationalities, economic fortunes, and political affinities we approach through published narratives as belonging to the past. Teaching the Cold War through collective family biographies offers an opportunity to extend twentieth-century histories into the present. It affirms the power of historical scholarship through oral histories that reiterate documented observations of living through a particular moment. And it can bridge the generational gap. As with the history teacher who experimented with offering herself as a primary source for teaching her students about 9/11, drawing from family memories of the recent past provides 'evidence of humanity in this history' (Johnson 2021).

In fact, my own reconstructed memories of growing up at the end of the Cold War informed the creation of the 'Comparative Cold War Childhoods' course, prompted by participation in the Reconnect/Recollect memory workshop in October 2019. I had previously not considered my childhood, spent in rural northeastern United States, to have been marked by the Cold War, as no geopolitical forces were evident, nor did we undergo any forced migration or change in status. But participation in the workshop alongside a group of international peers made me see the interconnectedness of our

fates and fortunes. I recalled watching the NBC Nightly News, which projected flashes from far-flung geographies into my 1980s living room, and marvelled that I could share both a room and a history with people who inhabited those places decades ago.

Clear snapshots from those days pieced together improbable scenes from my fragmented memory: I remembered Samantha Smith, a child ambassador to Russia in 1983, being pushed on a swing—by Gorbachev? She was my age at the time of her trip, and I was fixated on the details of her journey, but my adult memory had conflated her trip with other snippets of news from Russia that had filtered into my growing consciousness, allowing for slippage of fact. It was a passing story of public interest at the time, but, in retrospect, I can interpret the coverage of Smith's trip—and my childhood reception of it—as part of a publicity stunt for the warming of East/West relations that were already beginning to take place behind the scenes ('Growing Up on "This" Side' (n.d.)). Through such media outlets targeted to appeal to my demographic, I internalised the subtle messages about the potential dangers of engaging in diplomacy with Russia, affirming the dual-propaganda campaigns by the US and the USSR to control the narrative of Samantha's ambassadorship (Peacock 2019). Not until my participation in the workshop did I have the opportunity to interrogate my complicity in the Cold-War project as a recipient of propaganda.

As a historian of childhood, I am tuned in to the generational nuances of children's socialisation and the extent to which many of our core identities might actually be constructed (in part) by the state, especially in politically-charged contexts. On occasion, I have turned the lens of historical scrutiny inward to interrogate the Cold-War conditions in which my own childhood might have been forged by forces other than my nuclear family and my own will (Albarrán 2021). The lessons learned when we see ourselves as products of historical forces can be revelatory. I wanted to impart that self-awareness of our relationship to the past to students of history.

## The Course: Comparative Cold War Childhoods

The course 'Comparative Cold War Childhoods' was designed as a mid-level undergraduate course in History for students at a liberal-arts university in the United States. It sought to bring together historical and interdisciplinary scholarship on the history of childhood at the service of Cold-War history epistemology. How might we see this global epoch that raised three generations in a different light if we included the politics and experiences of childhood in the official narrative?

The introductory unit of the course established the constructedness of childhood over time, including an overview of how idealised childhoods occupy official discourse, and divergent experiences are marked as transgressive and marginalised from popular view. The childhood-studies framework thus established, the course then focused on the ways that Cold-War politics and ideologies shaped childhoods in the First, Second, and Third Worlds. The course centred on the similarities and differences of children growing up on either side of the Iron Curtain divide. The chronology was split into three loosely defined generations: the Cold-War consensus generation (1940s–50s), the dissenting generation (1960s–70s), and the media generation (1980s). Course themes included explorations of propaganda, consumption and consumerism, peace, youth organisations, child diplomacy, material culture, popular culture, and ideological formation, with an effort to give as equal weight as possible to the ways media and political entities constructed these domains of childhood in both the East and the West. Students engaged with scholarship from historians of childhood, primary-source material in the form of media clips, visual propaganda, and commercial advertisements, and the invaluable anarchive of firsthand memories compiled in the database *Memories of Everyday Childhoods: De-Colonial and De-Cold War Dialogues on Childhood and Schooling* (additional assigned course readings include Bogic 2018; Dror 2016; Dubinsky 2012; Fattal 2018; Funder 2003; Fürst 2015; Ivaska 2015; Godeanu-Kenworthy 2020; Stearns 2017; Vavrus 2021).

The primary assignment for this semester-long course was the Oral History Project named 'Growing Up as a Cold War Kid'. This involved

a series of tiered assignments, both individual and in groups, that culminated in a critical collective biography of three generations of Cold-War children. As a starting point, students initially conducted very short interviews with three people who would have been ten years old anywhere between 1946 and 1991. From this initial bank of informants, students would each select one that seemed to be the most promising for an in-depth interview, the content of which would be transcribed and then critically analysed in historical context. As students learned more content about the shape of geopolitical events, cultural contexts, and popular references, this growing knowledge base enriched the interview-and-analysis process. The assignment structure was as follows:

### Stage 1: Cultural Zeitgeist Crowdsourcing

Working together as a class (using Google's Jamboard tool, a digital whiteboard that can be saved as a PDF and used later as a reference), students drew from the first few weeks of course readings and lectures to populate lists of keywords that defined each generation. They sorted keywords into the categories of Politics, Ideologies, Organisations, and Popular Culture, trying to generate references that were as specific as possible (brands of commodities, television shows, names of politicians, pieces of legislature, keystone events, for example). The platform also allowed students to import iconic images that characterised each generation.

### Stage 2: First-Round Interviews

Students conducted three short interviews with informants identified from their family, community, religious congregation, or place of employment. The goal of this stage of interviews was to identify a subject who had enough specific memories or anecdotes from their childhood, and willingness to engage in the interview, to supply material for discussion and analysis in the context of the cultural politics of the Cold War. Ideal subjects were effusive, had many stories to tell (or demonstrated interest in indulging in childhood memories prompted by the line of questions posed by the student), or were inspired by the



initial interview to talk to a friend or dig out a photo album to enhance the memory.

Prior to conducting these interviews, students read *Oral History* (2022), a brief guide published by the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, which prepares students for the ethics, methods, and structure used by oral historians. As per these recommendations, students filled out a worksheet for each interview subject that included confirmation of oral agreement to participate in the project, identification of the generation that most aligned with their childhood, a list of questions asked, an evaluation of the interview subjects' responsiveness, and comments on the viability of the informant as a subject for the final project (informants had the right to remain anonymous, if they chose, and students could assign a pseudonym). Based on the worksheets, students submitted a rationale for their final selection.

### Stage 3: Group Development of Final Interview Subjects and Themes

Once again as a class, taking into consideration the responses garnered by the first-round interviews, and drawing from the wealth of detail found in assigned readings and lecture materials, students developed a list of categories, themes, and sample interview questions that corresponded to each generation. These were not intended to be prescriptive but, rather, to create a bank of common experiences that characterised each respective generation in order to give the interview subject a starting point from which to share their memories. Sample interview questions might not resonate with some, while unleashing a torrent of memories from others. Some interview questions were: how did your school react to political events (assemblies, policies, codes, or curriculum)? What did you think/hear about the Black Panther party? Were you afraid of being drafted for Vietnam? What was the gender dynamic in your family? Did you drink milk? Was there any point at which you were afraid of radiation? Was there a moment when you or your parents started to distrust the government? How did you view 'the Other' (Russians, or some other Other)? Was religion a defining factor in your childhood, and what bearing did that have on your political beliefs?

### Stage 4: Follow-Up Interview

Using the class-generated interview questions as a baseline, students followed up in a longer-form interview with their selected subject. These interviews were conducted in-person, over the phone, via online conferencing, or, in some cases, through a series of email or even text-message exchanges. Students submitted the transcript of the full interview, including questions asked, with editorial clarifications as needed. This oral history transcript served as the primary source material for the final written analysis. I submitted comments on the transcript indicating areas in the interview that lent themselves to analysis or that needed clarification in footnotes.

### Stage 5: Written Oral History Draft

This draft included a preface of a brief biographical paragraph identifying the oral history subject (or pseudonym) and relevant information about their age, geography/nationality, social class (if stated), and the general conditions of their upbringing. Following this was the entire interview transcription, including questions asked, lightly edited for clarity where needed, in first-person narrative style, with complete sentences that retained the tone of the answers given. Students used footnotes to annotate, in their own words, when clarifications or fuller historical context were needed to explain the meaning of a reference. If they made a passing mention of a significant historical event, name, industry, organisation, or other item of interest without explaining it, this helped clarify things for the readers.

Following the bio and transcript, students conducted a two-to-three-page analysis of the oral history. This was a reflection on the underlying political, social, economic, or cultural tensions that affected this person's childhood, informed by our assigned readings and class discussions. They made specific references (citing their sources) and used their interview to demonstrate how the subject's childhood seemed either to be a product of the times described or to depart significantly from that usually assigned to their generation in the mainstream narrative. An important comparative aspect to this project was in finding a memory in the anarchive database that

they could draw into conversation with their interview subject's childhood narrative—these could be similarities or differences, but the observation had to be developed around a common keyword or reference point.

In the analysis, they considered the questions: What seemed to be the values held by this generation, and how and where were they reinforced? How did Cold-War narratives, rhetoric, propaganda, or material circumstances inform this person's worldview? How does their experience, or their perception of their experience, compare with others of their generation? Compare with the *Memories of Everyday Childhoods* database to find contrasting experiences for your analysis. How do your experiences (international travels, reading firsthand accounts of other childhoods, learning more about the mutual propaganda machines constructed by the First- and Second-World powers, etc.) help you to understand this person's childhood in a broader historical context?

The project concluded with a bibliography of all works cited and sources referenced.

### Stage 6: Peer Review

Students uploaded the complete draft (including bio, transcript, analysis, and bibliography) to a shared drive, and each was randomly assigned to conduct peer reviews of two other project drafts. Students read the transcript and analysis for clarity, but more importantly, they looked for opportunities to deepen the analysis. This was an opportunity for students to demonstrate what they had learned about the nuances of each Cold-War generation or, perhaps, the cultural differences that might distinguish one childhood from another. They could comment on similarities with their own interview subjects' stories (finding commonalities that reinforced certain arguments about identity formation as a generational process) or remark on unexpected differences (cautionary tales to avoid falling into causal arguments). Students reminded each other of the connections between these family histories and the national narratives we studied in class, enhancing the collective process of applying learned material to the project.

## Stage 7: Cold-War Childhood Memories Class Database

Using the *Memories of Everyday Childhoods* anarchive as an inspiration, students identified passages in the original transcript that could be excerpted as Cold-War childhood memories, evocative of a historical moment without requiring further explanation or context to interpret them. The final product was a collective memory database that represented a cross-section of the class's relationship to Cold-War histories, whether through family heritage or an affective tie to a kinship network (a neighbour, employer, or other member of the student's community). These memory-stories were compiled anonymously in a shared drive, with only a list of keywords as titles or introductions. Following are a few examples:

### *Catholicism, Religion, Prayer, School, 60s, USA*

*I remember we would take time out of our class day to pray every day for the conversion of Russia's citizens to Christianity. Every day in class we would take time to do that.*

### *Malaysia, USA, Propaganda*

*I saw that on tape delay at the US Embassy because a country on the equator does not air the ice hockey games. We went to the embassy and they had a big party to watch the game. In order to go to the Embassy you had to be invited. They had this program called USIS in which you could check out documentaries and films on US things and watch them. Part of the propaganda to promote US culture. This program was promoted by the American government and anyone could participate, not just US citizens. My dad would rent movies on a Friday night.*

### *Hockey, Memory, Russia, Olympics, Ohio, USA*

*I played hockey that morning of the game that we beat the Russians (it was a night game), and we still had to win the gold against Finland. That one was a morning game at around 10 am and after we won, we ran out and played hockey that day. You'd sling your skates around your neck with the shoestrings*

*tied and skates banging the whole way. I remember almost RUNNING the whole 10 minutes it took to get to the frozen lake to play hockey! ... The Soviets were always messing with the rules trying to tilt them and cheat or do something. And the big thing was that all our best athletes were pros, so they were playing for money. But the Russians didn't believe in any of that, ya know, the whole collective and nobody makes money, and so all of their best players would play for the national team. So, it was our college kids vs. the best players in the world! We definitely wanted to beat them bad and my friends and I talked about how stupid and unfair it was, so that's why we were so happy when they won.*

### Stage 8: Final Oral History Project

Students incorporated edits from my draft reviews, and the comments from the two peer reviews, to make any corrections and enhance their analysis of the interview according to the following suggestions:

**Bio.** Is the biographical preface descriptive enough to provide necessary background and context? Is the interviewee's age and generation clearly defined? Are other relevant characteristics presented (geographic location, urban/rural upbringing, socio-economic status or class, political or religious tendencies in the family, etc.?). Not all of these are relevant for each interview, but in some cases a description of characteristics not explicitly brought up in the interview help to contextualise comments or observations made.

**Interview transcript.** Is the transcript written clearly and does it accurately reflect the voice and tone of the interviewee's responses? Be sure to add in clarifications where needed. For example, if an important word or phrase is left out and you need to include it for clarity or to make the sentence work better grammatically, you can add words or phrases to the transcript [in brackets]. This signals to the reader that you, the editor, have added something for clarification. Do you need to define a person, place, or thing mentioned in passing so that the reader gets the reference? This could be a reference to a last name, or a political figure, or a local eatery, or a favorite toy, or a family member. Add a footnote and include your own explanation for the reader.

**Analysis.** Place this person's childhood, as described by them in their own words, in the context of the comparative Cold-War childhoods that

we have been studying this semester. Is this person's experience typical of their generation, or do their stories and memories depart from the expected characterisations of how they grew up? Are there surprising similarities or differences from the experiences of their peers in the US? Or in the USSR/Eastern bloc? What are some of the broader political and social events, discourses, or themes that defined their generation on the national and global scale, and how can you see those playing out in their everyday experiences? In this section, I'm looking for lots of comparative work. To do that, bring in as many specific examples from class readings, film clips watched in class, propaganda posters, documentaries, socialist memories websites, etc. as you can find. Consult the syllabus and class notes to review the materials that we have covered. Review the insightful comments from the peer review in our shared drive. Cite specific page numbers when you have them.

**Bibliography.** Please include full bibliographical citations of all materials consulted, both assigned class readings and any external sources that you might have used.

## Demographics and the Master Narrative

The student-body demographic for this class, including but not limited to their national and ethnic heritage, has implications for the conclusions we draw from the oral histories to create a collective biography. This midwestern, public university in the United States is a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), a feature that scholars have observed to be detrimental to pedagogies that introduce cultural diversity (Morales and Raible 2020).<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, a vast majority of students' interview subjects overwhelmingly bear out the demographic breakdown of university enrolments, representing white, rural, Judeo-Christian families in the Midwest. At first glance, the content of the interviews reveals uniform childhoods: private Catholic education, military service, Boy or Girl Scouts membership, 'Duck and Cover' drills in school, uninterrupted education, and economic stability consistently appear in individual stories across the

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1 Fall 2021 enrollment data for Miami University identifies 76.6% of the student population as white, 4.9% Hispanic/Latino, 4.0% Black, 4.0% multi-racial, and 2.5% Asian. [www.miamioh.edu/diversity-inclusion/data-reports/index.html](http://www.miamioh.edu/diversity-inclusion/data-reports/index.html).

three generations. Cold-War memories invariably honed in on the moments of prolific media coverage: the Cuban missile crisis, Vietnam War footage, Reagan's speech at the Berlin Wall, the fall of the Berlin Wall. Reading each other's oral histories, twenty-first-century students with personalised algorithmically curated media playlists marvelled at the common cultural references of their parents' and grandparents' entertainment programming: *Father Knows Best*, the *Rocky* franchise, and *Rocky and Bullwinkle* all received multiple unprompted mentions in the childhood reminiscences.

It might be tempting to paint the Cold-War generations in the West with a single brush, pointing to these cultural trends as evidence that state and media interests successfully constructed the childhoods that they idealised. Yet doing so would fall into the same trap as those who crafted the hegemonic Soviet childhood narrative: 'the predominant descriptions of the region often employed the framework of totalitarianism and discussed socialist countries in monolithic terms, highlighting the dichotomies between East and West' (Piattoeva et al. 2018, p. 3). Foregrounding childhood memories of the Soviet era have demonstrated both an appreciation for nuance and diversity across the socialist landscape and the power of the everyday in revealing that children are more than just 'passive receivers of societal norms' (Piattoeva et al. 2018, p. 4). Much as the post/socialist memory workers sought to dismantle the single story of Soviet childhoods, our stories help us to question the story the West has constructed about itself in diametric opposition to the Soviet childhood trope. A critical analysis of our informants' stories of growing up in the West unearths a wealth of details that reveal children as more than simply constructs of a national propaganda machine. Their stories reveal independent thinking and sentiments of dissent.

The apparent demographic uniformity might also suggest homogeneous worldviews, but a closer look at the interview subjects' intersected lives reveals a host of international experiences, diverse national or ethnic heritage, or affective ties to other cultural traditions. Informants traced their Cold-War memories to Israel and Palestine, Russia, Germany, and Malaysia. They married, lived next door to, served alongside, shared a dorm with, or befriended people from India, Croatia, the segregated South, Cubans, Jewish people,

Vietnam veterans and anti-war protestors alike. The diversity of individual stories belies the narratives of whiteness and American exceptionalism that prevail in this part of the country and that the students have internalised as part of their latent identity formation. Personal stories of hardship also challenged the perception of the student body as coming from affluent backgrounds or as beneficiaries of generational wealth. This assignment offered them a rare opportunity to interrogate the unstable constructs of whiteness and US national identity.

The quiet heterogeneity of our collective biography notwithstanding, students did note the surprisingly strong trends that marked each generation. For subjects who grew up in the 1940s–50s, their negative assessment of ‘communism’ and ‘Russians’ and supportive stance regarding US military operations in places like Korea and Vietnam were less likely to have undergone meaningful revision over time, suggesting the socialising power of the first wave of Cold-War educational propaganda. For those coming of age in the 1960s–70s, a political reawakening seemed to mark the generation, as they expressed sympathy with or involvement in Civil Rights activities and anti-war protests. And for those who grew up in the 1980s, the popular and material cultural references resounded in the form of conspicuous consumption (or aspirations to shop) in a world in which capitalism seemed poised to prevail over the version of socialism purveyed in movies and television. A discussion of these observed generational trends led us to draw two conclusions: first, the Cold-War publicity machines achieved a measure of success in constructing childhoods (or inciting generational pushback); and second, a more diverse student body (national, ethnic, racial, or religious) would yield a much more nuanced story about the construction and breakdown of the Cold-War consensus. Within our group, we had no representation of the Third World or the Global South, a striking omission for this era of world history, as scholars are working to put the majority of the world’s population more meaningfully into the Cold-War narrative (Prashad 2007).

Another important conclusion drawn from this assignment was that, regardless of the ideological conformity observed at peak moments of geopolitical tensions, many interview subjects who



confessed to prejudices, bias, or extreme political positions in their youth had since moderated their stance. The capacity for evolution in political thinking is not one of the official narratives of the Cold War—the reification of a diametrically opposed East vs. West and the intransigence of thinking on either side. But one student interviewed their mother—described as an intelligent, independent thinker who did not subscribe to a political position—and expressed surprise at her admission that, as a child, she had hated Russia and communism. The mother’s self-awareness allowed her to acknowledge that she had fallen sway to a propagandistic media landscape, but her distance from that now provides anecdotal evidence that the totalitarian socialising aims of the state need not have a permanent grip on the ideological formation of its citizens.

### The Value of Seeing Ourselves in History

Experimenting with oral history as a tool for teaching the Cold War has the obvious benefit of allowing students to see the legacy of historical processes, conflicts, propaganda machines, policies, and migrations in their own lives. But the framework of childhood adds another dimension to the pedagogical possibilities of such an approach. Here, I discuss the tacit conclusions that could be drawn from the surprising commonalities and divergences that these interviews yielded.

The Cold-War era provides a particularly suitable laboratory for examining childhood—the stark binary worldview set forth on the ideological plane disproportionately implicated children as subjects, objects, and agents (Levison et al. 2021). Images of children served as powerful propaganda fodder within the two spheres of influence, especially in the early years of the Cold War, inciting individuals to contribute to the consensus solicited by their respective state. By the 1960s, though, Cold-War dissenters mobilised images of children abandoned by society to critique the Cold-War narrative, leading to a breakdown of consensus (Peacock 2014, pp. 5–7). Testaments from the oral histories revealed undeniable evidence of ideological indoctrination, especially for the first Cold-War generation. Classrooms, youth organisations, and religious communities all served as laboratories for

the politicisation of children, leaving indelible impressions about good and evil on young minds that withstood the ideological challenges posed by later generations. Students expressed surprise when interviewing family members of an older generation that some of the antiquated anti-Russian, anti-Communist vitriol still echoed in their twenty-first-century ruminations.

But a closer look at the ways that the memories departed from the expected patterns of generational identity formation reveals more about what a lens of childhood can tell us about conventional Cold-War wisdom. In the US, the narrative of Western affluence was constructed against the image of Eastern austerity. But several students' interview subjects relayed stories of childhoods in rural Kentucky, or Appalachian West Virginia as being completely disconnected from consumer capitalism, relying on a community-sustenance economy premised on collectivism and reciprocity. Even though such livelihoods modelled the socialist ideal much more than the capitalist one, the children growing up in those circumstances did not use such ideological frameworks to politicise their childhoods. Invention born of scarcity defined their 'normal' American childhood, out of the mainstream by any definition. Such childhoods, considered in the halo of post-Cold-War validation of a narrative in which capitalism vanquished communism, affirmed an American ethos of 'pulling oneself up by the bootstraps.'

On the other hand, as consumer culture accelerated in the latter half of the Cold-War, children expressed agency through their economic behaviour, quietly exerting powerful influence through actions that often fly under the radar of historians because of how children have historically been coded as dependents (Sosenski Correa 2012). Children's persistence and creativity in acquiring a desired object seems to be universal. Evidence of children's conspicuous consumption practices in the West, compared to the *kulturnost* ethos of consumption in the East, or the steady filtering of Western goods into places like Yugoslavia and late-socialist Poland that straddled the Iron Curtain, all reveal children's consumption as a normalising factor that elides the constructed cultural differences between communism and capitalism (Burrell 2011; Drakulić 1991).

The lens of childhood helps us to dismantle, or at least contextualise, Cold-War narratives. Ruling Cold-War officials continued to think

of children unilaterally as products, proof, or assets in political machinations. Yet historians of childhood know that children as subjects, objects, and agents continue to respond to material and ideological forces in diverse ways. A look at Cold-War history subverts the power dynamic of the story—the causal forces, the socialising institutions, and the material conditions artificially created by state decisions fall to the background—and, through children, we see the nuances of history, the subjectivity of human actors, and the permeability of the Iron Curtain.

When asked to reflect on the exercise, students expressed appreciation for the opportunity to ground their own family histories in the context of the drier textbook narratives. One student remarked that, prior to the class, they felt no connection to history; after interviewing their grandfather who lived through the Cold War, they began to see themselves as a historical actor as well, living through a pandemic and controversial presidential election that would mark the pages of future history books.

Students gained empathy for historical subjects, having a better understanding of the contexts that led them to make unsavoury choices or hold untoward opinions. One grandmother conveyed a second-hand story of a friend who had served in the Vietnam War, and the emotional impact of that story held enough power to transmit feeling across generations and continents. Another student's mother travelled to Russia in the late-1980s as part of a People-to-People child-ambassador exchange, and the student was astonished to hear her mother describe the architecture of the Hermitage, the colour of the sky, and the flavours of the food of a country that usually only entered the American imaginary as the 'evil empire'. As her mother recounted her journey from decades past, she realised that nobody had ever asked her about how this exchange shaped her as a global citizen—not her parents, not her teachers, not her partner—until she had been prompted to reflect on her child ambassadorship in the context of Cold-War geopolitics. She was able to articulate her childhood experiences as part of a transformational moment on the eve of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, giving her the opportunity to historicise her own experiences.

For Western students, especially those in the United States, the Cold-War narrative has rarely been dismantled or questioned by previous

generations of their families. It was accepted as fact. Learning to read personal testimonies comparatively, against the official history and alongside the anarchic memories of counterparts from across the Cold-War divide, allowed students to read their own family histories critically, and ultimately helped them to see themselves as both constituted by, but also free from being tethered to, the historical forces that inform their own lives.

Reflecting on history through the lens of their family member's youth made students consider themselves as historical actors living through a significant moment of their own. They noted that future historians—or their own children conducting oral history projects?—might look back at Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, or contested presidential elections as significant junctures in history's trajectory. 'There are so many stories in history that don't get told because people just don't ask,' reflected the student whose mother had been a child ambassador to Russia:

The fact that she went abroad when she was younger than me makes history feel so close, like my mom is only in her 40s but she went to the Soviet Union during a period of tension and change that ended up being crucial historically, and she didn't know that at the time.

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