

[Back to index](#)

**Review of "The Cold War: 50 Years of History in 24 Hours of Television"
a BBC Education Presentation at Glasgow University, 8 March 1999.**

by Neil Denslow
University of St. Andrews (UK)
nrd1@st-and.ac.uk

This presentation on the CNN series "The Cold War" was made by Jeremy Isaacs (the series producer), Taylor Downing (co-producer) and Svetlana Palmer (Russian Researcher). BBC Scotland's John Milne was the chairman. The panel first gave short talks about their respective roles in producing the series, interspersed with clips from it, before they took questions from the floor.

In his talk, Jeremy Isaacs spoke about the series' origins and aims. The idea for it came from Ted Turner, the then owner of CNN, and this personal involvement, Isaac said, was necessary for the series to be made. Only a "Media owner", he argued, could agree to such an expensive (\$500,000 an episode) and long series (24 episodes) as commissioning editors would be unwilling to give up such a large portion of their airspace and budget. The aim of the program, he continued, was to tell the story of the Cold War, but "not wrapped in the Stars and Stripes." A member of the audience heatedly disputed this point, claiming that there was an inherent bias against the USSR. Isaacs, however, stated that the team had tried to be as objective as possible and he felt that they had got it about right as conservatives had also accused the series of having a pro-Soviet bias. The audience member, however, contended that the series' American financing must have affected editorial decisions. Isaac denied this, except to say that he would have preferred to use subtitles instead of dubbing as he believed that being able to hear the speakers' voices gives a greater understanding and makes the program more interesting. Turner, however, insisted upon dubbing as subtitles would have put Americans off.

Taylor Downing mainly discussed researching the program and the mechanics of making it. Like Isaacs, he argued that the series had tried to give the widest interpretation of the Cold War, looking at its impact upon the lives of ordinary people throughout the world. They were both aware, though, that making a "popular history" series imposed constraints upon them: "there is not enough time to give three different perspectives." Making the series, Downing continued, had been a three year long process involving 40 staff visiting 31 countries. Two thousand five hundred potential interviewees were considered of which 252 were conducted; researchers also looked at 842 "film stories", equalling over 1,200 hours of footage. A number of new sources were also used, including CIA and KGB archives.

Much of Svetlana Palmer's talk dealt with using the KGB archives which were in a state of disarray; researchers had to search through unlabelled films and badly indexed files. This, however, had uncovered many valuable new records, including footage of the trial a KGB traitor. Aside from the disorder of the Soviet archives, the biggest problem the Russian researchers had faced, she said, was trying to get people to agree to being interviewed. Ordinary people, she said, were so "conditioned" in the Cold War mentality that they were afraid of speaking on camera. Senior officials were the same and it took many long meetings, with much vodka being drunk, to persuade people to appear. The Russians feared that they would be used for "Western propaganda" and, in the end, many had to be persuaded that being interviewed was the only way they could get their own (or their country's) point of view across.

The discussion section of the presentation mainly focused upon the audience members' own experiences of the Cold War, especially the Cuban Missile Crisis. It is clear that this episode was the defining event of the era for many of the people there and that they genuinely feared a nuclear war. Generally, it was argued that the series had given too much credit to Khrushchev for the crisis's peaceful resolution. The panel refuted this, although, like most of the presentation, they did not go into much depth. The talks were interesting and did give an insight into how this type of series is made, but, like the series itself, it was only an introduction to the subject, not a complete answer.