

Materialising the Cold War: A collaborative research project exploring museum collections, exhibitions and their audiences.

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UK partners: Imperial War Museums and RAF Museums

International partners: Allied Museum Berlin and Norsk Luftfartsmuseum

The project

Three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in a climate of international tension, the Cold War is more relevant than ever. And yet a generation now has no experience of it, and its public history is uneven. The Cold War's character as an 'imaginary war' in the global north poses special challenges for public engagement, especially for exhibiting material objects in museums. Synthesising approaches from material culture studies and Cold War history, critical heritage studies and museum practice, our project analyses these challenges and proposes a new framework for a Cold War museology. We focus on the process we call 'materialising the Cold War': the transformation of artefacts from the immaterial context of the Cold War to material objects in museums.

National Museums Scotland and the University of Stirling will appoint two Research Fellows to apply these multi-disciplinary methods to co-produce a major exhibition and schools programming, and we will generate innovative resources and outputs for museum users, heritage professionals and academics. In addition, our project partners – Royal Air Force Museums, Imperial War Museums, the Norwegian Luftfartsmuseum in Bodø, and the Allied Museum in Berlin – will benefit significantly from our findings and collaboration as they each develop major new galleries within the next decade (one motive in their participation); a powerful legacy for the project.

Framed by this international context, Materialising the Cold War will ask of UK museum objects: why have they been collected? How are they displayed? How have people responded to this 'fearsome heritage' – those who remember the Cold War and those who don't, whether family museum visitors, school groups, or dedicated enthusiasts? Throughout, we emphasise the fundamentally unstable and contested nature of the ways in which Cold War objects are made to mean something, and the breadth of the emotional register they stimulate.

The project has support from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, 1 October 2021 to 30 September 2024 and benefits from an international expert advisory board.

Research Questions and Methods

Research Question 1: Cold War Collected. What sorts of object have been classified as Cold War objects, and which objects *could* be? This line of questioning will explore what, how and why material was collected, whether military or civilian, technical or cultural. We will assess how objects in collections relate to each other, and what their provenances and taxonomies

tell us about Cold War and national identity, the Cold War and memory (in particular, the differences in objects collected during or after the Cold War). We will deploy material culture methods to address these queries, evaluating the range of Cold War-related material across different categories of collection in the UK case study institutions.

Research Question 2: Cold War Displayed. How has the Cold War been exhibited in UK museums, compared to the World Wars, and other places? Here we will explore how this global phenomenon was manifested locally, and analyse the narratives woven around the objects, global or local. We want to assess what new light is shed on the Cold War by these exhibitions, and to evaluate Cold War objects as contested heritage, or as fetish (e.g. missiles and mushroom cloud iconography). Accordingly the team will undertake exhibition analyses of the three case study organisations, assessing the design and narratives deployed in both explicit and implicit Cold War displays. This will especially involve assessing the interpretative contrasts between aircraft/military technology and other artefacts on display; and detailed study of whose voices and which narratives can be discerned.

Research Question 3: Cold War Consumed. Who visits explicit Cold War displays, why, and what meanings do they afford the material on display? We will seek to unpick any differences in audience community and repertoire of understandings across the different categories of museum, whether technical, military, or artistic; whether schools, family groups, or enthusiasts. In particular we are interested in the role of memory in visitor responses to Cold War displays, how the Cold War permeated the materiality of everyday life. We want to understand the emotional register of responses, from nostalgia to fear – or how those who have no knowledge, nor experience, of the Cold War respond. We will conduct audience evaluation at the case study sites, including quantitative analyses of audience segmentation, on-gallery ethnography, semi-structured interviews and reminiscence groups around particular objects. We will also work with teachers and school students to understand the interest and learning needs around the Cold War.

Outputs and Impact

Materialising the Cold War will generate exhibition content; programming for schools; an international conference ‘Cold War Museology’ and other professional events; sizeable evaluation data sets; an interpretation toolkit for other UK museums to exploit potential Cold War holdings; as well as print and digital outputs for academic and other audiences.

We will also disseminate new evaluation data on Cold War exhibits for the use of museums and heritage sites, which may be considered difficult or challenging, and promote their value in a wider museological and academic context. Materialising the Cold War will thereby have an impact on the experience of UK museum visitors, school-level provision, the professional practice of UK and other European heritage professionals by enhancing collecting policies and informing future displays.

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