15 What Colour Was the Cold War?

Jessica Douthwaite

In museums of twentieth-century history, the Cold War is mercurial. At once everywhere and nowhere, recognisable, or hidden, complex yet all-too-easily simplified, this era of global conflict poses unique problems for collecting and display.[1] What constitutes museum experts' foundational knowledge and presumption about the Cold War? I asked myself this question as I began an ethnography of four institutions' Cold War collections at National Museums Scotland (NMS), Imperial War Museums (IWM), RAF Museums (RAFM) and the Norsk Luftfartsmuseum, Norway (NLM). In this chapter, I use an interview question about the colour of the Cold War to approach this topic. Colours are a useful lens onto personal and institutional perceptions, as well as preconceptions and imaginings, of this historical era. The act of being asked to call a colour to mind that represents the past is an important indicator of how the Cold War is envisaged in museums by professionals – infused with cultural references, nostalgia, highly specialised knowledge and sometimes personal memories. I argue that given that the public space of a museum is always coloured, one way or another, and given that we all recognise the symbolic attributes of colour, a consideration of how it informs collections, displays and institutional narratives of the Cold War can enhance museum practice.

First, I discuss the methodological implications of this research, exploring how and why the Cold War might be better accessed by association rather than direct interpretation. I review recent work on heritage ethnography, auto-ethnography and other critical studies of museology and heritage. A feminist perspective contributes to my argument that metaphor, symbolism and abstraction is often more present in museum professionals' working practices than previously acknowledged by them and their workplaces. Following the methodological review, I consider how an ambition to be experiential has encouraged museums to re-think the use of colour after the so-called "affective turn" focused museums on emotions and senses. Finally, I evaluate the responses on Cold War colour that were revealed in my interviews and discuss how existing collections, museum environments, the cultural sphere and individual impressions inform the colourway produced in these interviews. I conclude that colour can be an enlightening tool in re-imagining how the Cold War is conceived in museums, from collections stores to exhibition displays.

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Museum Ethnography

Popular Cold War narratives lend themselves to simplicity. Such interpretations suggest that a binary confrontation between superpowers was fuelled by a monolithic nuclear threat. Indeed, in popular culture the Cold War can be too simply explained and thus left bereft of further interrogation or tropes are over-emphasised at the expense of nuance.[2] While I was sure that museum professionals would approach this topic from various angles and positions of expertise, when I set out on my ethnography I was not certain that an interview of around 60 minutes, usually a first-time meeting, would create a setting in which we could discuss the granularity and variety of Cold War history. Thus, a question on colour – visual, sensual and metaphorical – arose as a foil to the question "what was the Cold War?" It allowed me to delve into the instinctual responses that museum professionals have when they think about the Cold War; instincts that, I argue, inform their working lives, from collecting, conservation and cataloguing to displaying and retail.

The inherent contestability of both the hue, and the symbolic value, of colour allowed interviewees to deliberate and vacillate on historical "truth." Researching how Cold War history is taught, Barbara Christophe suggests that despite the monolithic narrative in Cold War textbooks, teachers find ambivalence in the text to corroborate (rather than balance) their own preconceptions.[3] She finds that "although all of the teachers appear to hold different positions in discussing a textbook quotation, each seems to believe that there exists only one appropriate position from which to speak the truth."[4] This relates to her broader theory that:

> much of what we know about history may be implicit and more or less taken for granted and therefore difficult to scrutinize critically… In this sense, history could be perceived as entangled between serious academic study, personal memories, and broader cultural and ideological aspects of the past.[5]

A discussion of colours often provided a moment in which respondents illuminated what was taken for granted in their perceptions of the Cold War. The museum narrative, like a textbook, may be singular, but practitioners' understandings and expectations of those narratives vary.

There is an element of "*stealth*" contained in my research – a word used by Charlotte Andrews to describe how she defined the perimeters of improvised interviews on maritime heritage. Her ethnographic practice became organic and managed to "penetrate surface level understandings" and direct informants to "express everyday heritage use that often goes unarticulated."[6] Interviewees were recruited on the basis of their experience and expertise working with materials, themes and memories of the Cold War. As such, it would not have been surprising if our conversations had been limited to the detail of their jobs as opposed to the more ambiguous, contested aspects of Cold War history. Thus, my intention to use colour as a tool to uncover preconceptions about the Cold War was somewhat stealthy. Of course, just because *I* believed in the value of colour, it does not mean that my interviewees were always convinced of it. I habitually couched my question in

a statement of justification, apologised and entreated interviewees to "humour" me.[7] Equally, I noticed that I was delighted when interviewees called the question "interesting" or "good" and on occasion congratulated their answers.[8]

My approach is an informal challenge to the codes and expectations of both the interview environment, the museum setting and Cold War history, mimicking and incorporating strategies used by feminist researchers across disciplines.[9] Gaby Porter influenced my analysis of interviews with museum employees whose "professional codes and day-to-day practice are built on the premise of objectivity and neutrality, eschewing bias or influence."[10] Though the museums sector has changed since Porter published her work in 1995, her depiction of a workforce who are "strongly anti-theoretical or empirical, in their practice and approach" remained highly relevant.[11] Many of my interviewees combatted uncertainty with reference to the "material facts" of the Cold War.[12] Based on Porter's observations, my ethnographical study did not simply amass data, but had a chance to "deconstruct" the ways in which historical "notions are both given and giving meaning, and to build new ways which are more productive, diverse and open to re-reading."[13]

Cecilia Åse and Maria Wendt analyse the silenced and naturalised masculine narrative that dictates the display principles and audience experience at two Cold War exhibitions in Sweden.[14] In order to "un-silence and make strange" those archetypes, Åse and Wendt engage in methods that position themselves within the embodied, known, traversed landscape of their research.[15] In doing so, they allow a subjective spontaneity and intuition to contribute to research and highlight how gendered Cold War narratives are perpetuated in Sweden's national discourse of geopolitics. My relationship with the interviewee and my interaction with their answers created "relational" knowledge, to use Audrey Reeves' term. The proposition of "a perspective that is innovative but believable, relevant, convincing and helpful… in making sense of the world" is its most valuable outcome.[16]

On Colour and Museum Display

For centuries, museums have grappled with interpreting their contents for various audiences.[17] Both the interior and exterior designs of a museum make a statement about its authentic, value-led heritage policies.[18] Experiencing the atmosphere, environment and material of each museum was an essential task in siting and evaluating the Cold War heritage therein. Crucially, I needed to witness the types of museum conditions that framed professional handling of Cold War collections and displays. Colour informed my movement across and between these museum research settings, an experiment that nods to Goethe's theory of colour, in which it is understood not as an objective truth or material fact, but as an intrinsic and changeable subject of human–material relations.[19] In historical scholarship, colour is the subject of science, art and design.[20] Its relationship with nostalgia has also played a role in how it is treated – the black, white and sepia past versus the colour of the present.[21]

In recent years, museums have increasingly prioritised visitor experience. The affective turn of the late twentieth-century encouraged museums to engage

visitors emotionally.[22] As Marzia Varutti writes: "in museums and museum studies, reverberations of the affective turn have produced a move away from text-centred exhibitions, and a stronger engagement with non-verbal channels of communication such as emotions, imagination and sensory experiences."[23] Colour, as a component of display, in tandem with light, sound, architecture and other sense perceptions, has become a tool to affect and immerse visitors in their museum surrounds.[24] RAFM Art Curator Julia Beaumont-Jones explained,

> Whether it's the wall colour, whether it's the kind of display hang, whether it's films that might be used, it's always about atmosphere. And if you don't have that, then it isn't really an exhibition… Audiences these days want immersion…[25]

Peter Johnston, RAFM Head of Collections and Research at the time of the interview, noted that there is a "wider museological trend… about… how you invoke emotion and feeling in space… you might make something dark, for example, to make it foreboding."[26] However, in the public sphere and in museums scholarship, the production of displays to incite emotional reactions has been criticised for glamorising inherently complicated histories and in the process "construct[ing] meaning about warfare and security."[27] Darkness, Johnston suggested, had been over-used to add gravity to exhibitions, a technique, he noted, that museums were "moving away from."

The Holocaust is a topic that conflict museums have addressed through a variety of these affective and immersive visitor experience techniques. But, as with Cold War galleries, affective techniques to stimulate visitor experience have often led to poorly devised narrative and an awkward treatment of the subject.[28] The recently re-opened and refurbished Holocaust galleries at IWM London break with tradition.[29] Appreciating its new and "interesting perspective" Johnston said,

> It's specifically designed to show this is something that happened in the daytime. This is not a secret thing. It's a shameful thing that happened… in the light and people need to confront that rather than have it hide away in darkness…

James Bulgin, Head of Content for the IWM's new Holocaust Galleries, stated that "every colour and texture has a reason for being as it is."[30] Shades of blue "ebb and flow" throughout the galleries; chosen for the walls because not only was it "quite a neutral colour," but it also referenced the sky – "the world" – crucial in debunking notions that Auschwitz epitomised the Holocaust and avoiding a "situation where [the exhibition] got darker and darker and darker as things got worse and worse and worse." As we will see below, the colour of collections and existing exhibition displays influenced interview answers. While display is not the subject of this chapter, the affective, experiential purposes attributed to colour bore out in interviewees' notions of Cold War history. Very few academic studies have considered how historians might make use of colours to better understand a period in time, yet the lived-in space of museums, where history is materialised, provide the perfect location in which to explore this potential.

Colours of the Cold War

When asked about colours, interviewees often also referred to light, dark and temperature. Instinctively the question prompted a convergence of visual perceptions and sensations. The associative nature of the word "colour" incited responses that participants themselves found unexpected and surprising. For example, Peter Elliott, Curator Emeritus at RAFM replied, "the one that comes to mind was white, simply cold, snow. I don't quite understand how I've reached that."[31] Former National Museums Scotland Curator Alison Taubman elaborated on the link between the colour white and cold weather, musing "I think it would be something at the cold end. It makes me think of *Ice Station Zebra*… then somewhere I think the hot needs to be in there, white with a hint of red underneath."[32] The icy nature of relations, a pop-cultural reference point for Cold War tensions, was evoked by the colour white; red stands for the reality of hot and unpredictable aggression. Taubman's reference to the film and novel *Ice Station Zebra* also illustrates how artistic representations set and released during the Cold War have contributed to perceptions of atmosphere and symbolic colour. Other examples of this cultural influence in our interviews were the film *Wings of Desire* (1987) and the television productions *When the Wind Blows* (1986) and *Threads* (1984).[33] Cultural references are an important reminder that memory and personal tastes colour professional visions of Cold War history.

The colour cited most easily in interviews was red, often preceded by interviewees with the word "obviously."[34] The suggestion was that the connection between the colour red, the Soviet Union and the Communist flag was self-evident.[35] As one curator at the RAFM said: "any Soviet bit of kit has got either a dirty great big red star on it or a dirty great big red flag and the same with the Chinese as well."[36] Red also signified the colour of the nuclear threat because, the same curator stated, "it's a word that is used quite a lot in connection with air raid warning reds." Others evoked the red button that would initiate the final phase of a nuclear war and the "four-minute warning."[37] Red was also the colour of nuclear blasts and the heat of a detonated weapon.[38] Thus, red symbolised a multitude of Cold War phenomena: a political and cultural stance, the emotions and atmosphere associated with ideology, the hardware designed to manage war, and the results of a worst case conflict scenario.[39]

The range of meanings embodied by the colour red mirrored the material setting of each museum. None was dominated by the colour red, each was built in extension to, or as a renovation of, ex-military sites. The archaeology of these spaces is industrial and mechanical reflecting the changing needs of modern warfare. IWM Curator, Carl Warner, described the importance attributed to colour as historical context at the IWM's Duxford airfield:

> The backdrop of… the chronological display changes… so all of the set works and carcassing for the cases in the First World War is hessian, sandbaggy with sort of muted, woody tones.
>
> The inter-war period, it's white… all of the buildings were painted white. But it's white that sort of shows the wood underneath sometimes because

> they sort of let it go. Second World War, it's the camouflage colours that they painted the place, so it's very much the green…
>
> And then The Cold War they came up with mixing a particular type of material that sets and looks like concrete and it's a combination of that plus the white again. So white painted concrete rather than white painted wood.[40]

The predominance of the colour red in interviews highlights the importance of ideology and political change as a *background* to the material collected within these museums. Red historically contextualises the anticipated military stand-off and communist menace that brought these military locations to life during the Cold War; red also evokes the violent reality of nuclear warfare – an image engendered and inspired by the objects located within collections. Whether ideologically or militarily, red was the Cold War colour for something "serious" to use Norwegian MP and amateur historian Erlend Larsen's word (Figure 15.1).[41]

Only in one instance in our 46 interviews is red attributed to the corporeal cost of Cold War violence: Karl Kleve, curator at NLM, observed: "red is a very good bloody colour."[42] He also noted that, although the "redness of the Soviet Union" might best describe the threat of communist ideology felt throughout the West, "seen from an ordinary Russian it was the other way around."[43] The equivalence of experiences on either side of the Cold War divide was precipitated by the exploration of red as the colour of Western fears. Kleve's comments highlight how my interview question on the colour of the Cold War provoked ambivalence. For example, Paris Agar, a curator at IWM stated that the "explosive" colour orange shows that the "Cold War wasn't cold… It is hot, it is tense."[44] Karl and Paris diverged from answering red for communism and nuclear violence, but their answers were important indicators that brightness and saturation levels also alter the symbolic meaning of colours. The deeper, thicker red of blood, and the scorching orange of explosives evoked a more violent Cold War than the cliché of the Soviet red menace.

In our responses, blue is mentioned as another "obvious" colour because it represents the United States and the West in NATO combat exercises. Usually, our respondents cite red and blue together to describe the head-to-head ideological contest of the Cold War era.[45] Harald Høiback, Deputy Commander at the Norwegian Armed Forces Museum, evoked the symbolic attributes of blue: "for me, growing up in the '80s with Ronald Reagan and this kind of American romanticism… America is blue."[46] Aside from his history qualifications and museum experience Høiback is a serving lieutenant colonel in the Royal Norwegian Airforce. With his personal memories of serving in the Cold War he recalled a "red sign and there were the blue arrows." He did not clarify whether this was a map graphic, military signage, or training material, but his memory corroborated his impression that the Cold War was "very much blue and red."

Blue also evoked cold for our respondents. "Frozen blue" and "black ice" as IWM Curator Richard McDonough described it.[47] Høiback's colleague, Erling Kjaernes, Director of the Norwegian Armed Forces Museum, answered: "it's more or less cold and hot… So I would definitely think of it still as a blue with some hint of red it in sometimes."[48] An archivist at NLM responded, "well, it's obviously

Figure 15.1 A red background: Hiroshima bomb blast display, Norsk Luftfartsmuseum. Image author's own

blue and red… red because of the communistic… colours, and blue because, you know, cold."[49] Michelle Kirby, Film Curator at IWM also said that she visualised "a strobe light display flashing between blue and red" because:

> there are these… two competing sides to it, aren't there, there's the… icy blue… because… at the heart all of this was a real rupture in terms of two

> opposing ideologies who just couldn't see eye to eye and there was real tension… and they were worlds apart. And there was paranoia… I know that thawed at different points but ultimately, it's about… being… diametrically opposed… which I just associate with ice.[50]

Drawing on her expertise in Cold War film, she explained that blue also reminded her of the skies made so threatening by nuclear testing films which convey the "ultimate fear" of nuclear threat. "Of course," red, she continued, "would be the flashpoints" of nuclear danger and the blue epitomised tense relations. In a similar answer, the Head of Collections Care and Management at NLM contended that blue conveyed the "icy relations" of the Cold War.[51] He clarified "I don't mean cold as in not a hot war, but cold as in people rejecting people, giving people the cold shoulder so to speak." To his mind, blue was linked to a "human condition" intrinsic to this conflict, "where you turn someone down, you turn away from someone." An idea he explained with the Norwegian word "avvise" – to reject. Again, referring to colour allowed interviewees to explain and nuance their impressions of what the Cold War was – in this case, a refusal to cooperate, avoidance of tolerance, a rejection of difference.

Our interviewees also examined colours as descriptors of Cold War nature. Green symbolised the German forests and fields where British forces would fight if the iron curtain was breached, but it also described the environments where hot wars most frequently erupted – the jungles of Asian and south American landscapes.[52] These interview responses are unique in the sense that the museum environments in which the recording took place held little, if any, reference to the greenery recalled in the interview. Others, like Carl Warner, referred to the colours of Cold War architecture. The grey of concrete – defence installations, hangars, shelters, walls, aircraft, offices, missile housings – became a trope of Cold War materiality.[53] Warner described how grey defined the Cold War era at Duxford where the pre-1945 "green grass and wooden buildings" were overlaid by "thousands and thousands of tons of concrete."[54] The Cold War, he continued, "created a runway… peritracks… an enormous apron… hardstanding… the baffles that go with that hardstanding… an armoury." He concluded, it was "about pouring large amounts of cement and letting it set into shapes."

Grey also describes the Eastern bloc and life under communism.[55] One curator evoked "the colour of concrete, the Berlin Wall, in drizzle or possibly slight snowfall [and] bunkers" to conclude "they're all grey things."[56] For some of our respondents, the colour grey provoked associational answers and led to the most developed conversations about colour in interviews. While the colour itself can be connected to material things and places reminiscent of the Cold War, it also describes an emotional and political climate that respondents felt dominated the historical mood. In effect, colour epitomised by period objects also becomes a descriptor of contemporary feelings. This was evident in my interview with Bodil Nyaas, Head of the Dissemination and Research department at NLM, in which I referred to a catalogue from 1999 exhibition *The Many Faces of the Cold War*.[57] I asked her about a sub-title, "Grey but frightening at the same time – our view of them?"[58] This, she said, referred to Eastern Europe during the Cold War – a place

that was almost "colourless" because it was so unknown, "It was a kind of grey mass behind the Iron Curtain." The exhibition booklet might also have been referring to a lack of colour television, she suggested, but largely, the sense of,

> … same-same, if you know what I mean… all these different countries Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Russia and all the Baltic States kind of… no impression. They were just part of the big USSR. I don't think we had any notion… that they were different cultures.

Ruth Tove Trang-Liljar, a Heritage Officer in Nordland County, echoed Nyaas' thoughts. Grey signified, she explained, "something that was depressive or something that is in the back of the minds, maybe of the people who lived in the worst periods of the Cold War."[59] An Exhibitions Officer at NMS stated that, apart from her family's experience of exile as Polish post-war refugees, she had little knowledge of Cold War history but grey and khaki colours reminded her of "people wearing old uniform because they couldn't afford new clothes."[60] She elaborated:

> I have this strong association of depravation and, sort of, loss of quality of life and a lot of soldiers obviously continued wearing various uniforms […] it's economic deprivation and… because it's so obviously linked into the Second World War, I think it's this idea of people… continuing to have to live that way.

In effect, for some of our respondents, grey signifies Cold War stasis and the continuation of wartime conditions, particularly the drabness of the communist east – drawing together inter-generational memories and professional understandings of twentieth-century European history.

Cultural and social history curators' answers are often informed by their collections. Carys Wilkins, Assistant Curator, Modern and Contemporary Design at NMS, associated the Cold War with post-war modernisation and the product design of western consumerism – "bright pop colours" and "plastic in any colour you wanted."[61] These products symbolise Cold War competition and ideologies – with "advertising… and… the pop art movement spilling over into design" and "that space race aesthetic, space odyssey, Stanley Kubrick kind of thing where you have these mad organic forms and big inflatable chairs." Dorothy Kidd, former Social History Curator at NMS, reflected on the design of the CND logo as an emblem of the Cold War, the colours of black on white. She also mentioned yellow because "zillions of people" had an anti-nuclear t-shirt "with the smiley face on it."[62] Jane Pavitt, former Curator at the Victoria & Albert Museum, reflected on colour as a structural element in the *Cold War Modern* exhibition she was responsible for (2018). In that exhibition, at the "midpoint" in the floorplan a colour palette from the 1950s emerged. That colour palette

> … is often referred to as kind of Expo colours or… Brussels style [after the World Exhibition 1958]… you get lots of bright, they're not primary colours, they're kind of like really strong pastels […] the colouring of '50s design.[63]

Though fewer in number, interviews from social and cultural practitioners were an important comparator to responses from professionals working in military departments. The colours evoked by Carys, Dorothy and Jane were reminders that the Cold War intersected with developments in post-war art, design, fashion and late twentieth-century aesthetics.

These interview responses illustrated how significant the colours of collections and museum surroundings are to the perceptions of the staff responsible for their interpretation. Much literature focuses on the impact of museum design on visitors but it is also important to staff learning. Two interviewees at RAFM reflected on the impact of the galleries on their understandings of the Cold War as non-experts. Angela Vinci, Head of Exhibitions and Interpretation, interpreted her own answer, red and black: "it's the way that the main colours of the exhibition in Cosford are, and I wonder whether… ten years ago, when I hadn't seen the exhibition, if the answer would" have been the same.[64] Frances Galvan, Head of Retail and Admissions, answered the colour question: "because our hangar has a lot of red and white in it… [and] all of the signage is… yellow and black."[65] These responses highlight that the application of colour implicitly informs museum staff as well as museum visitors.

When Hilary Roberts, IWM's Senior Curator of Photography, answered me firmly with "no" and hypothesised that her Cold War colour(s) would be a "rainbow" or a "Joseph's coat of many colours," I wondered whether this research led to a dead end.[66] Hilary contended, and I agreed, that the Cold War was "lots and lots of different elements, which combined to make a whole." Trying to identify and claim the colours of the Cold War could become an endless and consequently vague project. However, the way in which museum professionals remember, imagine and perceive the Cold War is not a rainbow – it is a group of associated, lived and materialised colours which also denote light, atmosphere and texture – some more dominant than others. Museologists and museum professionals should reflect on these colours more often. Why are they significant and what is missing? This, Pavitt implies, was what her and co-curator, David Crowley, had intended to do when she remembered the yellow, grey and black colour scheme of *Cold War Modern*,

> [W]e did have lots of discussions about colour and imagery… those are the colours of a kind of hazard, a modern-day hazard branding, so that was quite useful, they're the colours of contamination… so you get lots of symbolism there, the colours of that Henrion poster I was telling you about, certainly. So lots of greys. But we wanted to avoid clichéd imagery of… Soviet red… the colours of anything that sort of smacks of patriotism or so on.[67]

Analysing the predominant colours of museum collections, the gunmetal hues and hazard graphics of late twentieth-century military technology, helps us consider the narratives underpinning that colourway. If colours do not fit standardised expectations, what happens? For example, the "psychedelic" purple and green "swirly patterns" of 1960s–1980s sofas in the married quarters and crew rooms of RAF bases

Figure 15.2 Purple and green interiors intended for the armed forces: Bernat Klein Design Consultants Ltd and the Department of the Environment, 1971. © Crown copyright. Licenced under the terms of the Open Government Licence v 3.0

were disposed rather acquired for the RAFM collection.[68] But could purple and green RAF furnishings add to a Cold War collection? Unexpected colours might make a visitor think twice about the social life of an aircraft or missile but they also remind museum professionals of the Cold War experience and create a contrast to the violence and ideological competition of its narrative (Figure 15.2).[69]

Conclusion

Among museum practitioners dealing with the history of war and technology colours create a loose frame of reference that governs heritage understandings of the Cold War. In these circles, the Cold War colourway is red, blue, grey, white, yellow and black. An investigation of museum practitioners' impressions of these colours in the context of object collections, galleries and their understanding of history reveals that despite the coherence of this palette, individual colours often signify a diverse range of symbolic and historical meanings. Indeed, a conversation about "obvious" colours red and blue soon uncovered less literal impressions of why each represented the Cold War. Intuitive answers comprised personal and inter-generational memory, cultural signposting, artistic representations, academic knowledge and were informed by existing museum settings.

This research tells us two things: that a popular and figurative narrative of the Cold War governs museum practitioners' approaches to this era; and that this is a narrative which goes largely unrecognised and under-reflected in Cold War display. By adding colour to the impressionistic way in which individuals approach this topic, it is possible to identify moments of alternative within the museum space and

this is important because it disaggregates the standard museological approach. This is what Marie Louise Stig Sorensen means by identifying "cracks" in research on attitudes to heritage and identity. She argues that insights gained by avoiding a dedication to data collection and conventional wisdom offer a comparative benchmark of far greater value to scholarship. Questioning the colours of the Cold War became my route "between the lines and in the margins" of this museological research.[70]

Another finding arising from this research suggests that colour is as important to museum staff as it is to visitors. Altering colourways destabilises norms embedded in staff attitudes and supports non-experts to learn more about Cold War history. In interviews, despite a largely unchallenged Cold War narrative existing in each museum, a question on colour simultaneously invited ambivalence and implicit knowledge. This research complements scholarship that focuses on mono-causal presentations of war in European museums of conflict that have a neutralising and desensitising effect on visitors.[71] A general absence of agonism in European museums of war, write Anna Cento Bull and colleagues, results from the competing responsibilities and activities required of each.[72] However, though "war and conflict lend themselves to being represented in ways that emphasise patriotic consensus" they can "also highlight dissent, contestation, antagonisms, multiple perspectives and alternative visions of society."[73] In our interviews, colours mediated the potent question of consensus and contention in Cold War history, allowing me to listen without challenging comfort levels in conversation.

Coherent colours disadvantage the narrative ambiguity of this period. I argue that the complexity of Cold War history deserves more colour, and less coherence – a collections-based reflection of the technicolour dream coat. This does not mean re-colouring objects, but it means highlighting how colour might influence collecting strategies. It does not mean jettisoning the standard Cold War colours for eye-catching alternatives but recognising that milieu makes a difference to meaning. Rather, my argument is to use colour to enable museum professionals to think carefully about what an exhibition says to its audience, and to break down any immediate impulses to impose affect for purely dramatic purposes. The Cold War cannot be handled without an understanding of the value judgements we bring to this history – explicitly, the relationship between museum professionals and the physical setting of the narrative, the material remains of this period and the images in their minds' eyes. In the interview, a conversation about colour helped consider those value judgements. Not one interviewee refused to answer the question. There is little doubt, therefore, that although it is unusual to ask respondents to reflect on the colour of the Cold War, it is valid. The Cold War is unquestionably coloured.

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