Despite these shortcomings, Zhang’s is a timely, readable, path-breaking, and, overall, convincing account that considerably advances our knowledge of this still rather poorly understood, if perhaps now a little more meaningful, war.


Reviewed by Poul Villaume, University of Copenhagen

This collection of seventeen essays focusing on the relationship between media in the Nordic countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland) and the Cold War is partly the result of a Nordic conference on media and communication research in Oslo in 2013. With few exceptions, the contributors to the book are media and communication researchers rather than historians. Accordingly, readers looking for an introduction to the general history of the Cold War in the Nordic countries should look elsewhere. However, if you are looking for detailed case studies based on original research of Nordic media representations and (to some extent) cultural reflections of the Cold War, this is a book to consult, even if the selection of researchers and topics betrays a clear Norwegian bias (only three of the essays relate to Finland, three exclusively to Sweden, and one to Denmark).

The essays are structured reasonably in three main chronological sections. The first, covering the early Cold War period from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, focuses on the degree of Soviet influence. The second section stretches from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, covering such diverse issues as the space race, sports, and spy cases. The third and final section covers the end of the Cold War period from the late 1970s onward, focusing mainly on nuclear weapons issues and the impact of the final Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev.

In the introduction, the editors underscore that in addition to covering the entire Cold War period and all four Nordic countries, the volume differs from previous comparable research by including not only the press (newspapers) but also a variety of audiovisual media and cultural artifacts. In truth, not all essays of the book can make a fair claim of substantial novelty or eye-opening results. For example, it is hardly startling that the Norwegian personnel employed by Radio Moscow made systematic attempts, with some initial if modest post-1945 success, to influence public opinion in Norway. Similarly, painstaking documentation of the self-censorship of Finnish media on Cold War–related issues and on Finland’s nonaligned foreign policy emerges as less than surprising to anyone with basic historical knowledge of the country’s delicate position between East and West.

Still, taken together the essays, to varying degrees, bring forth intriguing details as well as fresh perspectives on media or cultural representations of the Cold War in the Nordic countries. This is no small achievement. One of the contributors, Marie
Cronqvist, points out a peculiar and striking fact of the Cold War: namely that it remained cold (at least in a European context) and therefore to a large extent was played out in and by the media. Accordingly, the public remembers the Cold War mainly through its media representations.

Given that the essays in this volume are written almost exclusively by media and communication researchers, readers might have expected to find somewhat more systematic theoretical reflections and thorough concrete applications of communication theory in the empirical studies presented in the book. Classical and updated basic elements of general framing theory and analysis (Erving Goffman, Stephen Reese, Oscar Gandy, Robert Entman, and others) are referred to in several chapters—as opposed to agenda-setting theory, which is regarded as somewhat outdated, according to contributors Rolf Werenskjold and Erling Sivertsen. They point out that frames and framing do not only signify how the media present their cases but also include “the internal editorial processes and the societal relations of which the media are a part. In these processes, the media are both arenas and actors” (p. 272). Hence, referring to Claes de Vreese, the two authors assert that frames “may influence attitudes both on the individual and social level, and provide stimulus for political socialization, political decisions or collective actions” (p. 274).

The challenge here would be to establish to what extent such general propositions may be substantiated in a Nordic Cold War setting. Although most contributors carefully chart how Nordic media and cultural products reflected domestic and international Cold War–related conflicts, the essays generally have little to say about the actual effects and impact of the activities of the media on public opinion and discourse in the Nordic countries. Then again, this may be asking for too much, at least at this stage of research. Many of the contributions are pioneering ventures into previously uncharted territory. This is probably also the reason that almost all of the chapters are strictly national studies. Only one chapter has a comparative ambition in studying press coverage in neutral Sweden and in North Atlantic Treaty Organization member-state Norway during the Ice Hockey World Championship in 1969.

Future historical media research of the Cold War period—whether in the Nordic region or elsewhere—is likely to be broader, as pointed out in Cronqvist’s chapter. Her suggestions include a focus on Cold War international politics in relation to the rise of media and communication studies in 1960s and 1970s academia; the interrelatedness of different media during the Cold War (i.e., concepts such as intermediality, convergence, and remediation—as currently employed by media historians); and the manufacturing and commercialization of Cold War memoirs in mass media, digital media, and in the field of cultural or industrial heritage, connecting to existing scholarship on media and memory.

If this book is able to inspire such future research and similar research avenues, it will have earned a position as a valuable addition to Nordic and international Cold War historiography.