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Slide 1 - title

What have we forgotten? Using school magazines to reveal children's thinking about the Cold War and the future during the 1950s and 1960s.

Slide 2 – quote

Our fate lies in the hands of scientists. Are we heading towards a better way of life, or are we, slowly but inexorably moving towards Orwell's conception of the future? Or indeed is our destiny that of the final destruction of our planet? Time alone will tell.

This phrase makes up the concluding words of a written piece composed in 1955 by a fourteen or fifteen year old school pupil in a small Welsh coastal town. Considering how the Cold War is often remembered, perhaps we are not too surprised by this chilling conclusion? In fact, maybe we even expected it?

This conference paper aims to demonstrate how the use of school magazines can reveal the complexity of children's thinking about the Cold War whilst living in the midst of it. These primary sources allow us a unique insight into narratives of uncertainty, fear, but also hope. They bring science and technology to the fore, illuminating perhaps less expected ways that children made sense of the Cold War. This exploration of school magazines as primary evidence allows us to re-examine how we remember the Cold War home front, and the narratives that might have been forgotten.

Finally, this paper hopes to encourage wider study of school magazines and similar sources in order to trace beliefs, ideas, and attitudes among children. This posits an exciting

prospect for historians of childhood as well as the Cold War to reveal a more complex history of children's thinking and experiences during this period, beyond what has sometimes been described as the 'master narrative of the bomb' or 'an age of anxiety'.

Slide 3 - map

This paper uses articles from the school magazines of the Holyhead Comprehensive School in order to evaluate Cold War attitudes among some of the town's adolescents during the 1950s and 60s. It also looks to analyse the relationship between the wider Cold War context and local experiences, and how these were reflected in pupils' writing.

A brief overview of the period, from high politics to the regional, gives valuable context to the magazines scrutinised here. After the end of the Second World War, it was felt that Britain's diplomatic proximity to America, and its relative geographical closeness to the Soviet Union, put the country and its people in a particularly precarious position during the early stages of the Cold War. By November 1952 the British government believed that the Soviet Union had, and I quote, '**an appreciable stockpile**' of atomic bombs. Moreover, it was assumed that Britain constituted the main target since the bombs were as of yet unable to reach American targets. By 1957, the same year as *Spunik* was successfully launched, a Defence White Paper was published, promoting the nuclear deterrent as the UK's main defensive strategy.

While Cold War rhetoric (along with scientific developments and nuclear testing) might have been associated with high politics and power struggles played out on the world stage, people in Wales were by no means excluded from their implications. For example, the introduction of the 1948 *Civil Defence Act* had noticeably brought the Cold War to the

attention of local government and local communities. The new Act demanded that local authorities establish Civil Defence Corps in order to recruit, organise, and train volunteers for a range of duties in the event of a hostile attack, including, and I quote: **‘Protection against the effects of nuclear, biological or chemical attack’**.

The British historiography in general has predominantly taken a top-down approach to history of the Cold War, with a lack of focus on the Cold War home front, and on the conflict’s cultural and social dimensions. While there have been studies of Cold War motifs in fictional writing, movies and television, responses to such imagery have rarely been specifically addressed, and some historians have stressed the difficulties of tracing the impact of Cold War culture.

So, in view of these difficulties, I think school magazines present a very valuable source to historians. They have the capacity to reveal contemporary views and attitudes of Welsh children otherwise effectively unobtainable to a present-day observer. We get away from the methodological issues of oral history, since these sources were not created for the specific purpose of providing conscious retrospective reflections on Cold War experiences.

A study of these school magazines from the 1950s and 60s shows that wider social and political issues had a noteworthy presence. While the majority of contributions were concerned with sport accomplishments, and reports on local and school events, there were also a significant number of articles that specifically commented on current affairs, while others inadvertently reflected wider concerns and attitudes of the time.

Of specific interest to this paper is the impact of Cold War rhetoric and realities on pupils' writing. The articles studied will be considered in light of what might have been forgotten in regards to how this period was experienced by children and adolescents.

Despite its rural nature and relative remoteness, the island of Anglesey, and the Holyhead district, were more intimately involved with Cold War activities than might be immediately evident. The siting of the Royal Air Force (RAF) base in Valley since 1941, (close to Holyhead), brought Cold War realities to the district. Already in the late 1940s the Ministry of Defence trialled bombs on the sands of Newborough beach, and the RAF base retained an important role in the development of Britain's Cold War defences. For example, in 1958 aircraft from the RAF base at Valley were trialling guided-missiles in front of the press.

So, having provided a bit of context for you, I would like to look at a sample of writings from this period, that can provide us with some insight into attitudes among children at the Cold War home front.

Slide 4 – Communist attack

From the same year as the first quote, 1955, comes this extract from an article about the likelihood of a, and I quote, a '**Communist invasion**'. Although the author expressed doubt as to the reliability of reports concerning what everyday life in the Soviet Union might be like, the prospect of living under Communist rule was compared to the conditions in Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*. This was undoubtedly an expression of 'an age of anxiety', not just as far as the Communist threat, but also the destructive powers being developed by the West, and whether the arsenal would provide a sufficient defence. This piece expresses

very similar sentiments to the introductory quote, where the author asks whether the future would be one of ‘**Orwell’s conception...**’

Slide 5 – To this atomic age

So far, the two articles from the mid-1950s have expressed uncertainty and anxiety. The following extract by a Holyhead pupil is from a 1956 poem called *To This Atomic Age* and it reads:

This is an age of destruction and power;

Of guided missiles and aeroplanes

that are traced by Fall radar masts, that tower

Above us all, *as if* [sic] like huge cranes.

Wood and coal are followed by the atom

As the creator of our heat and light...

So this our age we see is full of good

If olive grows where once a rocket stood

The poem reflects both the wider Cold War context in its reference *To This Atomic Age*, but I also feel that the local context is present. Anybody living in the north-western corner of Anglesey during this time would have constant reminders of military aeroplanes passing overhead. For example, in 1961 the *Times* reported on the first public firing of the

Thunderbird, an air-to-air missile, on the beach in Ty Croes (on Anglesey's west coast). It was reported that the missile, which was pointed across the Irish Sea, was surrounded by radar aerials while emitting '**...curious noises like the sound track of some science fiction film**'.

Masts did indeed 'tower [A]bove' the population of Anglesey as the poem reminds us, and its reference to 'guided missiles and aeroplanes' also had a particularly local significance.

So, the north-western part of Anglesey was intimately involved with Cold War developments, and perhaps the imagery (or as the *Times* put it '**the sound track**') of science fiction was rather tangible. Cold War-stimulated technological advances were being shaped, and tested, in the local area.

However, *To This Atomic Age* also inferred that rockets should be replaced by more productive pursuits, and ends on a slightly more positive note '**...so this our age we see is full of good, If olive grows where once a rocket stood**'. This hopeful note in relation to the good that might come out of new advancements, is something which is reflected in a number of other articles from this period as well. In fact, moving into the 1960s, science and technology, rather than the island's potential position as a Cold War target or the nuclear threat more generally, become more dominant themes.

Overall, apprehensive attitudes to science and technology were frequently juxtaposed with a measure of optimism, and a general fascination with the potential of scientific and technological advancement. *To This Atomic Age*, despite its threatening beginning, finishes off on a decidedly hopeful note, and other articles show similar patterns. For example, in the article *Arts versus Science* from 1959, the potential of science to solve the issue of food shortages in an overpopulated future world is emphasised (overpopulation was also a

recurring theme in the news and sci-fi literature in the 1950s). In the same article, science's inability to **'change or improve man's attitude to man'** was identified as an apparent flaw, contrasted to the possibility of the Arts to **'enable one to realise and understand the problems and difficulties of our times'**.

The 1950s and the early 60s saw science and technology at the forefront of social and political debates, with vigorous enthusiasm and belief in the potential of these fields often being expressed by politicians of the time. Simultaneously, however, it was advancements in these very fields that had generated the volatile situation facing the world. The general tendency of many of the school magazine articles correspondingly reveals the coexistence of gloomy predictions together with optimistic prospects of scientific endeavour.

Ambivalent attitudes towards science, together with a firm conviction in its significance for the future, are recurrent themes in many of these articles. While the nonchalant portrayal of the **'destruction of our planet'** in the introductory piece to this paper might appear morose, the same piece also expressed the hope that humanity is heading **'towards a better way of life'**.

Slide 6 – space flight

Another writer's assertion in an article titled *Space Flight* is quite bleak where they proclaim **'nowadays with such destructive weapons, it would be inevitable that if a war broke out, the whole world would be destroyed'**. But the same article also suggests numerous optimistic prospects for the future linked to technological advances. For example, solving the issue of overpopulation (by finding another planet, or the moon, for people to inhabit – another popular sci-fi theme), holidays and sports in space, as well as the opportunity to

predict the weather and even to control it. Space exploration was quite a common theme in a number of articles. Some with rather more fanciful ideas in regards to the future than others. The *Space Flight* article emphasised the significance of having a presence in space as a **'strategic point in a war'**, echoing arguments voiced in the wider Cold War debate in the latter part of the 1950s. As has already been emphasised, it expresses little doubt regarding the potential dire consequences of a modern war breaking out, but the idea of a United Nations based in space (while fanciful perhaps) was a much more hopeful prediction, contrasting with the potential prophecy of the destruction of the world.

Slide 7 – sports day

Another piece, by a 13-14 year-old girl in 1966, indicating its fascination with a mechanised future – you can see the image and read the accompanying caption there...

This is quite a playful piece, in stark contrast to another article, *The Encroachment Upon Liberty* (1955), that declared that: **'[I]n time, no doubt we will come to depend more and more on machines...and there is a danger that in time men will become slaves to machines'**. While different in tone, the subject of the two items was strikingly similar. Both pieces show a preoccupation with the possibilities of future technological advances and their potential impact. They are both examples of a mind-set that assumes science and technology would have great significance to everyday life in the future.

In light of the above discussion, I'd conclude the following:

These magazines reveal a narrative closely linked to the Cold War, and are especially influenced by attitudes and views on scientific and technological developments and their implications for the future. As has been demonstrated, a Cold War discourse can be discerned from an assortment of pieces from different genres as well as from a variety of subject areas.

So, what have we forgotten? Well, these school magazines definitely indicate attitudes of uncertainty and anxiety, and it is noteworthy that dystopian views of the future sit alongside more optimistic predictions. Although a Cold War narrative certainly existed, the discourse which emerged out of the reading of these magazines can most accurately be described as one of science and technology, rather than solely a 'master narrative of the bomb'.

I definitely feel that these sources can give us snippets of insights into childhood during this period of uncertainty, and perhaps remind us of alternative narratives to the 'bomb' that might have been forgotten. In this instance science and technology, but maybe, with a bigger sample, other narratives might emerge as well.

Finally, I think there could be great opportunities in widening the research of these types of sources in order to develop more far reaching conclusions, and perhaps comparisons and contrasts too.

Slide 8 – comic