

Edward Geist. *Armageddon Insurance: Cold War Civil Defense in the United States and Soviet Union, 1945-1991*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019. Xiv + 324 pp. \$34.95. ISBN 978-1469645254.



In his 2019 book entitled *Armageddon Insurance: Cold War Civil Defense in the United States and Soviet Union, 1945-1991*, the historian Edward Geist offers a comparative history of American and Soviet civil defense during the Cold War. Geist defines civil defense as the “use of measures such as shelter and evacuation to reduce damage to life and property caused by enemy attack or other disaster” (2). Acknowledging that both superpowers’ concepts and methods of civil defense changed over the course of the Cold War, Geist’s study compares American and Soviet civil defense programs in an attempt to answer the question of what role civil defense actually played in American and Soviet Cold War strategy.

Geist argues that both the United States and the Soviet Union embraced the contradictory position of a willingness to risk nuclear annihilation coupled with very few concerted efforts to try to avoid such annihilation (8). In short, both American and Soviet officials viewed their own civil defense programs as failures. Civil defense programs suffered from arguments that they were economically inefficient, scientifically impractical, and political infeasible. For instance, cases of mistakenly identifying aircraft inappropriately triggered air-raid warnings on both sides of the Iron Curtain. However, Geist points out that, despite claims from various

experts in both the American and Soviet camps, there is little historical evidence to substantiate strategic arguments against civil defense (6). Though Geist asserts that the only way to know for sure whether or not civil defense is an effective strategy for surviving a nuclear war is to actually have a nuclear war, he argues that both the American and Soviet failure to fully develop and utilize effective civil defense programs in the face of grave nuclear threat during the Cold War resulted in a contradictory position of policy, and that

luck rather than calculated employment of strategy is the chief reason the Cold War ended without nuclear tragedy.

Geist structures his book largely chronologically, beginning with a discussion of why neither the United States nor the Soviet Union began their respective civil defense programs until the early 1950s. Domestic politics, rather than technological or economic inability, stood in the way (18-20). From there, Geist follows the parallel story of American and Soviet civil defense through the 1950s, when both superpowers focused on preparation for limited nuclear war. By the end of the decade, international ballistic missiles and thermonuclear weapons made the nuclear threat far more imposing, forcing both sides to rethink strategy. However, Congressional roadblocks impeded American civil defense while inefficient and ill-informed Soviet policy produced similar results. These domestic failures coupled with mutual misunderstanding of the enemy’s civil defense efforts to produce what Geist characterizes as wholly inadequate civil defense programs in both the United States and the Soviet Union (237-238).

Geist utilizes a comparative approach to the study of Cold War-era civil defense programs. Unlike many recent contributions to the Cold War historiography that divert attention away from the traditional cast of state actors, Geist’s focus remains at the elite, government and institutional levels and the structures that support them. As such, his source-base is largely composed of traditional, state-produced sources such as institutional histories produced by civil defense advocates of both the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as state-centered studies of civil defense programs. However, departing from some of the traditional Cold War histories in the vein of which Geist follows, the comparative approach dictates the need for the use of Russian-language Soviet sources. Though some Soviet documents remain classified or otherwise unavailable, the Russian and Ukrainian

governments have released a wealth of material on which Geist bases large portions of his study.

This book contributes to the overall Cold War historiography in that it is the first of its kind to explore the institutional history of civil defense programs of both superpowers in a comparative study. The use of as-of-yet unanalyzed sources places Geist's work in a position of importance in the historiography. It differs from recent Cold War historiographical interventions in that it returns focus to elite-level political actors. However, it is in some ways reminiscent of the methodological approach of Kate Brown's *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters*, in that it draws parallels between American and Soviet Cold War efforts based on domestic political developments and mutual misunderstandings.

Overall, Geist presents an efficient and compelling argument that will be of note to historians of both the United States and of Russia, and international historians interested in comparative studies that link domestic politics to international developments. Though the availability of sources prevented Geist from fully exploring the parallels between government planning or the relationship between civil defense and popular culture, this study is a worthwhile entry into the historiography and provides several avenues for further research.

Michael Fischer
Temple University Graduate Student

