

Debating the rise and collapse of détente

The reasons behind the emergence of détente have created a considerable amount of debate among scholars of the Cold War. In fact, the arguments are so wide-ranging that it is hard to detect clear 'schools of thought'; the most complete account remains Raymond Garthoff's *Détente and Confrontation* (Washington, DC, 1994), which emphasizes the bilateral Soviet–American relationship and the emergence of nuclear parity in the 1960s, but also pays homage to the many other issues that impacted upon the superpower relationship. On the American side the chief among these is the Vietnam War; the links between Vietnam and détente are detailed in Keith Nelson's *The Making of Détente* (New York, 1995). In addition, a number of other historians, including Chen Jian in *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001), have stressed the impact of the Sino-Soviet split on both Soviet and American thinking on international relations. The origins and onset of European détente and its impact on Soviet–American relations provide another interesting avenue of inquiry. And in his book *Power and Protest* (Cambridge, MA, 2003) Jeremi Suri has opened yet another provocative avenue of investigation by maintaining that the global social context of the late 1960s was a root cause of détente.

In recent years the debate about the reasons behind the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan has been reinvigorated in light of new documentary evidence from the former Soviet bloc archives. Whereas the 'official' American explanation in the late 1970s and early 1980s emphasized aggressive Soviet motivations, today's scholars, from Henry Bradsher to Odd Arne Westad, tend to stress the essentially defensive motivations of the USSR.