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## THE ORIGINS OF THE COLD WAR

The starting-point of the Cold War is a matter of some disagreement. Unlike the previous two global conflicts earlier in the century, there was no single event, like the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand in 1914 or the invasion of Poland in 1939, that clearly marked the onset of hostilities. Nevertheless, most historians identify the period from late 1943 through early 1946 as the timeframe in which the divisions that defined the Cold War emerged.

With the forces of the Axis powers increasingly on the defensive in the final years of World War II, the soon-to-be-victorious Allies gradually reasserted the ideological differences among themselves. A conference held at Tehran, Iran, in late 1943 was the first in a series of meetings among the leaders of the three great Allied powers—the U.S., Great Britain, and the U.S.S.R. Initially, these meetings were intended to coordinate the Allies' collective strategy for finishing off the Axis powers, but the leaders also began articulating their differing visions for the postwar world. At Tehran, Joseph Stalin, Winston Churchill, and Franklin D. Roosevelt abstractly debated the degree of influence countries should have in the territories eventually liberated from Axis control. By the February 1945 conference in the Soviet city of Yalta, the end of the war in Europe was coming into clearer view and the Allied leaders turned to formulating more concrete plans for the mutual postwar occupation of Germany. All parties publicly affirmed that all the territories that they occupied after the war, except for Germany, should be allowed to form their own elected governments as soon as possible. In practice, though, the spheres of influence outlined at Yalta would eventually harden into the so-called **Iron Curtain** that separated Europe for decades.

The Allied leaders met for a third time in late July and early August of 1945, a few months after the end of war in Europe. The division of Europe envisioned at Yalta was made into official policy at this conference in the small city of Potsdam in eastern Germany. Although the notion of self-determination was still theoretically the guiding principle, the vagueness of the Potsdam agreements allowed both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. to create Eastern and Western “blocs” of countries that were beholden to the military, political, and/or economic power of the U.S.S.R. and U.S.,



*British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (left), U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (center), and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin meet at Yalta in February 1945.*

respectively. The three major Allied conferences set the stage for the Cold War by ideologically splitting Europe in two.

## THE ATOMIC BOMB

Another topic of the Yalta discussions was already irrelevant by the Potsdam Conference. At Yalta, Stalin committed Soviet troops to the war in the Pacific once the war in Europe had ended. On July 16, 1945, though, the scientists of the U.S.'s highly classified Manhattan Project successfully tested an atomic bomb, and Truman issued an ultimatum to Japan on July 26 demanding unconditional surrender. The ominous reference to “prompt and utter destruction”<sup>1</sup> that concluded this “Potsdam Declaration” hinted that Truman’s ultimatum was backed by the long-rumored atomic bomb instead of the threat of Soviet participation in an invasion of Japan.

U.S. attitudes toward Soviet participation in the conclusion of the war in the Pacific had changed substantially by the time of the Potsdam meeting, both because of the successful atomic bomb test and because Truman was more suspicious of the Soviets than Roosevelt had been. With the bomb in his pocket, Truman felt little obligation to offer the Soviets even a symbolic share in the victory over Japan, a part of the war in which they had previously played almost no role.

Many historians have argued that Truman’s decision to use the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki

physical structures largely intact. Vonnegut’s narrator sarcastically describes the effects of this grotesque experiment:

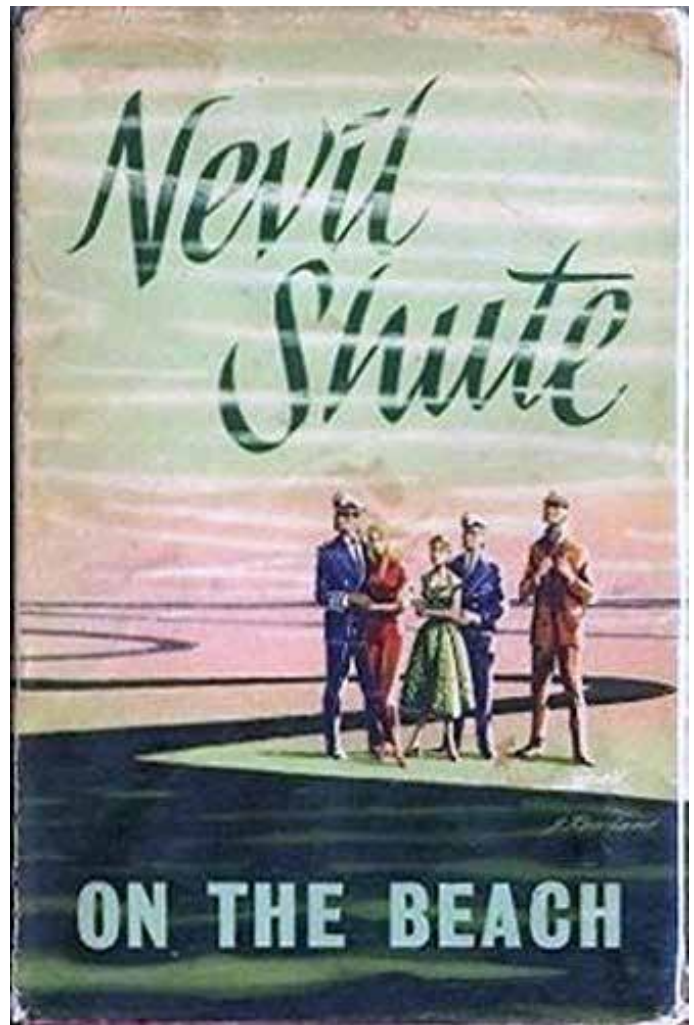
*It might have been a bigger story, a signal for the start of World War Three, if the Government hadn’t acknowledged at once that the bomb was made in America. One newscast I heard...called it a “friendly bomb”.... Everybody in the county was killed...[b]ut most of the structures are still left standing and furnished. I am told that every one of the television sets in the new Holiday Inn is still fully operable. So are all the telephones. So is the ice-cube maker behind the bar.... Since all the property is undamaged, has the world lost anything it loved?<sup>134</sup>*

Although Vonnegut’s answer to this rhetorical question usually seems to have been a sad and frustrated “no,” he continued writing and speaking in an effort to change humanity’s mind in this regard until his death in 2007. *Cat’s Cradle* is thus very much a product of a particular historical and cultural moment in time, but also an expression of a complicated, sometimes even grudging, love for humanity as a whole that its author maintained both during and after the Cold War.

## CONTEXT: APOCALYPTIC FICTION

Apocalyptic literature—that is, stories that depict the end of the world—is not unique to the Cold War. Most mythic traditions include some version of a story that speculates about the eschaton, the end of history; the [Christian Book of Revelation](#), the story of [Kalki](#) in Hindu scripture, and the story of the [Battle of Ragnarök](#) in Norse mythology all qualify as apocalyptic tales. Works of speculative fiction that attempt to imagine the conditions that bring about the destruction of humanity are scattered throughout various literary traditions before the Cold War. Once the development of nuclear weapons made it clear that humanity now had the technological capacity to destroy itself within a matter of minutes, such works begin appearing with increasing frequency, not only in literature but in film and television as well.

Although some of the apocalyptic fiction from the early decades of the Cold War focuses on “genetic engineering, chemical contamination, energy



*The cover of the First Edition of Nevil Shute's novel On the Beach.*

depletion, natural catastrophe, overpopulation, viruses and plagues,”<sup>135</sup> the majority of literary doomsday tales involve a nuclear war of some kind. As Andrew Hammond notes, “While global cataclysm had been forecast in the disaster fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the memory of Nagasaki and Hiroshima and the advent of the thermonuclear age made it a far more immediate worry.”<sup>136</sup> Vonnegut clearly shared this worry, and *Cat’s Cradle* contains plentiful echoes of at least four other nuclear-themed works of apocalyptic fiction.

Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach* (1957), Walter M. Miller’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959), Mordecai Roshwald’s *Level 7* (1959), and Pat Frank’s *Alas, Babylon* (1960) all predate the publication of *Cat’s Cradle* and share the trait of warning their readers against believing that the use of nuclear weapons would be anything but catastrophic. During the early and mid-1950s,

there were still a number of proponents of “limited” nuclear warfare, and the civil defense efforts often collectively described as the “shelter craze” were based on the assumption that nuclear war could be survivable with proper advance planning. However, the massive increase in both the size and power of the nuclear arsenals of the U.S. and U.S.S.R. soon rendered such arguments moot, and the aforementioned novels caution their readers against any lingering justification for nuclear war.

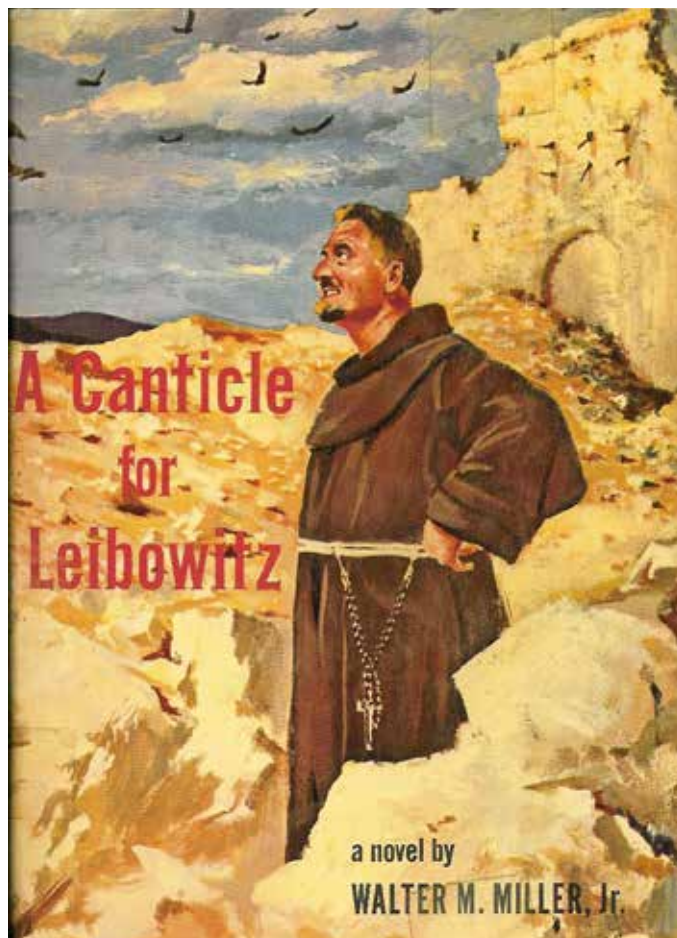
### ***Nevil Shute’s On the Beach (1957)***

*On the Beach* was popular enough upon its publication to be turned two years later into a Hollywood film featuring such prominent stars as Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, and Fred Astaire. Given that it depicts the gradual extinction of life on earth in the wake of a nuclear war, this might seem like an oddly depressing subject for a bestselling novel and blockbuster film, but its popularity speaks to the extent to which the morbid realities of nuclear war were beginning to be acknowledged by the late 1950s.

The novel is set in and around Melbourne, Australia, to which Shute himself had emigrated from Great Britain. A massive nuclear war that escalated from an initial exchange between the unlikely enemies of Albania and Italy has eradicated most of the Northern Hemisphere except for the crew of an American submarine that took refuge in Melbourne. The toxic radioactive fallout from the war is slowly spreading throughout the rest of the world, progressively wiping out the areas like Australia that escaped the initial war largely unscathed. As the inevitable arrival of the radioactive debris from the war draws nearer, the Australians commit painless suicide by taking pills that will allow them to avoid the miserable death caused by radiation poisoning. The relatively hopeless endings of both the book and the film version of *On the Beach* imply that even those with no direct stake in a nuclear war will be unable to escape the effects of one.

### ***Walter M. Miller’s A Canticle for Leibowitz (1959)***

*A Canticle for Leibowitz* may be even grimmer in its conclusions than Shute’s novel since it depicts not just one near-complete human self-extinction, but two. The novel opens in a remote monastery in the desert of the American Southwest, where a group of Catholic monks work to preserve the few remnants of human



*The cover of the 1960 edition of Walter M. Miller’s novel A Canticle for Leibowitz.*

knowledge that managed to survive a nuclear war, now known simply as the Flame Deluge, six centuries earlier. A young monk named Brother Francis accidentally discovers a fallout shelter in which several documents are found on which the foundational knowledge for atomic weapons has been preserved (though neither Francis nor any of the monks understand this). Over the course of the next eleven centuries, human civilization manages to rebuild itself—partly with the aid of the documents that Francis uncovered—to the same level of technological development it had reached before the Flame Deluge, but the novel ends with the dark irony that human history—and the possible end thereof—appears likely to repeat itself in the form of another imminent nuclear war.

### ***Mordecai Roshwald’s Level 7 (1959)***

Whereas the previous two works focus on the flaws in human psychology that contribute to the likelihood of a nuclear apocalypse, *Level 7* is one of the first works to warn about the dangers of overreliance on

Having the house repeat the date—112 years minus a day since the Hiroshima bombing—at the story’s conclusion suggests to the reader that this grim future is a likely outcome of continuing the Cold War’s fundamentally alarmist mindset, summed up in the story as the house’s “preoccupation with self-protection which bordered on a mechanical paranoia.”<sup>155</sup> This ironic comment highlights the madness of a situation in which the house maintains all the trappings of middlebrow American values—the same values often invoked as being in need of protection against the Soviet menace—even though the humans who embodied them were vaporized long ago while playing on the lawn that the house continues to sprinkle with water.

Both the story’s setting and the lingering traces of

its now-absent characters comment ironically on the propagandistic conception of “the American way of life as the triumph of capitalism..., characterized by affluence, located in suburbia, and epitomized by white middle-class nuclear families.”<sup>156</sup> Nuclear weapons and labor-saving devices like automatic dishwashers—a precursor to the fully automated house in the story—are both technological products that came to define suburban American life in the decades immediately after World War II. Bradbury’s story does not highlight the great differences in these machines’ designed purposes but rather underscores the manner in which both are able to separate humans from the natural world, even to the point of complete nonexistence that Teasdale muses upon in her poem.

## SELECTED WORK: “THE TERMINAL BEACH” (1964) BY J. G. BALLARD

*“Terminal Beach”*. Copyright © 1964 by J.G. Ballard, from *THE COMPLETE STORIES OF J.G. BALLARD* by J.G. Ballard. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

At night, as he lay asleep on the floor of the ruined bunker, Traven heard the waves breaking along the shore of the lagoon, like the sounds of giant aircraft warming up at the ends of their runways. This memory of the great night raids against the Japanese mainland had filled his first months on the island with images of burning bombers falling through the air around him. Later, with the attacks of beri-beri, the nightmare passed and the waves began to remind him of the deep Atlantic rollers on the beach at Dakar, where he had been born, and of watching from the window in the evenings for his parents to drive home along the corniche road from the airport. Overcome by this long-forgotten memory, he woke uncertainly from the bed of old magazines on which he slept and went out to the dunes that screened the lagoon.

Through the cold night air he could see the abandoned Superfortresses lying among the palms beyond the perimeter of the emergency landing field three hundred yards away. Traven walked through the dark sand, already forgetting where the shore lay, although the atoll was little more than half a mile in width. Above him, along the crests of the dunes, the tall palms leaned into the dim air like the symbols of a cryptic alphabet. The landscape of the island was covered by strange ciphers.

Giving up the attempt to find the beach, Traven stumbled into a set of tracks left years earlier by a large caterpillar vehicle. The heat released by the weapons tests had fused the sand, and the double line of fossil imprints, uncovered by the evening air, wound its serpentine way among the hollows like the footfalls of an ancient saurian.

Too weak to walk any further, Traven sat down between the tracks. Hoping that they might lead him to the beach, he began to excavate the wedge-shaped grooves from a drift into which they disappeared. He returned to the bunker shortly before dawn, and slept through the hot silences of the following noon.

### ***The Blocks***

As usual on these enervating afternoons, when not even a breath of on-shore breeze disturbed the dust, Traven sat in the shadow of one of the blocks, lost somewhere within the centre of the maze. His back resting against the rough concrete surface, he gazed with a phlegmatic eye down the surrounding aisles