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Digital History

Wilson Center The Cold War Digital Archive

The Wilson Center Cold War Digital Archive allows for students, teachers, and researchers to have online access to formerly classified documents from governments and organizations around the world during the Cold War. This group has worked since 1968 to create an unbiased digital record of primary sources from the 20th and 21st centuries. The website was built and maintained by the History and Public Policy Program at the Wilson Center, and for years they have been researching documents about historical events around the world to create a one stop digital research center. The members of the History and Public Policy Program have collected and translated several key documents relevant to major events in global history and added them to the archive as secondary sources. Although they are based in Washington D.C., the Wilson Center has institutions around the world. While the research and management of the archive is done by the Wilson Institute, the Digital Archive website was developed by d’Vinci Interactive, an eLearning solutions provider for corporations, government organizations, medical institutions, non-profit organizations, and schools, that are in Hagerstown, Maryland. The Wilson Center has a multitude of projects that are accessible from its website. The specific project that caught my attention was the Cold War Digital Archive. The goal of this project is to provide a simple and interactive way for students and researchers to learn about the Cold War. While the actual Wilson Center is based in Washington D.C this digital archive allows for students and researchers all over the world to access the information held at the Wilson Center online and for free.

The Wilson Center Cold War Digital Archive is full of unique ways to learn information about the Cold War. The website is well organized, offering a summary of the page and introducing the topic and how to navigate the page. There are three menus to choose what you want to learn about, including people, places and general topics. There is even a catalogue, which allows you to search anywhere on the page for information. The most interesting thing about this is that when you search something in it, it brings up a graphic showing the topic as well as related topics to generate your interest and explore more. Another feature is that the Wilson Center added documents from governments around the world during the Cold War and attached them through hyperlinks to the page. This is so that anyone exploring a topic can view the documents as primary. While the Wilson Center is based in America, there is no clear thesis to the Cold War Digital Archive projects since the Wilson Center wants to provide an unbiased version of events. This unbiased stance on history and having connections with multiple research institutions in countries around the world, they have access to documents from the Cold War Era that were previously classified by the Soviet Union, the Cuban government, and even the Chinese government. The Cold War Archive contains many topics regarding events during the Cold War. This institution has always taken an unbiased stance on history, even in times when countries were hostile towards one another. The center do a proficient job of not painting anyone in a negative light. For instance, under the Sino-Soviet Relations Topic, they do a really good job summarizing the alliance the two communist countries had, and even included a timeline to follow up to the point where their relations started to deteriorate, before the Soviet Union fell. Another example is under the Vietnam War and Korean War topics, where they discuss how the clash of cultures between Communism and Capitalism led to proxy wars. The most interesting topic featured is the Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty Topics. These are about how the CIA funded radio broadcast programs across Europe, including West Germany, and West Berlin, used to promote Capitalism and to spread anti-communism propaganda. This was something that I didn’t know happened during this time and was interesting to read about. Another interesting feature is that for certain topics such as the Radio Free Europe and Radion Liberty, they provide hyperlinks to essays and books about the topics, so that students and researchers can enrich their knowledge on the subject.

This project does a really good job of presenting information about the Cold War in an easy and informative way. However, there are a lot more weaknesses to the project, as opposed to its strengths. First, one of the project’s biggest strengths is how well it’s organized. The website offers three menus of general topics, places and people. It is easy to navigate and through exploration you can learn a lot. The archive really put work in to provide the most amount of information as possible and through exploring you can go down a rabbit hole easily. The biggest problem is the catalogue feature. The normal catalogue works fine, allowing you to find information relatively easily, however the visualization feature lives up to its name mainly being only for looks. When you click on it and type in a topic to look up, it brings up a bubble with branches connecting it to other bubbles containing similar information to what you looked up. However, in order to access this information, you must go back and search it up again, a cool feature for this option would be to make it so that you can click on the bubble, and it would take to the page with the information on it that you wanted to research. Another criticism is that despite claiming to be unbiased there is clearly some bias in the topics provided. For instance, some of the topics covered are the Chernobyl Crisis and the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, however one of the topics not mentioned is the Bay of Pigs invasion. While this was not a major event, this is still an important event during the Cold War Era. While not a major issue, it’s a little weird that they would include controversial disasters for the Soviet Union and not one of the biggest blunders of the United States during the Cold War.

Hyperlinks:

Cuban Missile Crisis: <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/topics/cuban-missile-crisis>

Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/topics/soviet-invasion-afghanistan>

Chernobyl Nuclear Crisis: <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/topics/chernobyl-nuclear-accident-1986>

Sino- Soviet Relations with Visual Catalogue: <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/search/visualization?f%5B0%5D=topics%3A86435&fo%5B0%5D=86435>

Screenshot of Catalogue on Visualization setting

Timeline

Description automatically generated