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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Jamie Miller**, Quinnipiac University

“The failure of most U.S. diplomatic historians to consult foreign archives or to master the necessary foreign languages perpetuates a one-sided perspective that tends to repeat, rather than critically examine, the assumptions of American officials... One simply cannot discuss with any degree of authority the impact of American policies on France or the Soviet Union or Japan or Brazil unless one is familiar with the histories and cultures of those areas. It would be equally inexcusable to ignore any available archival records in those countries that might shed light on the issue.”¹

To panellists at SHAFR or regular readers of H-Diplo, such words will seem thoroughly unremarkable. The idea that diplomatic history involves international (or transnational) perspectives and commensurately broad source bases is today much closer to the heart of the field of international (née-diplomatic) history than it is to the periphery.² What is remarkable about this quotation is its context. Robert J. McMahon wrote these words in a *Diplomatic History* article published not in the last few years, but in 1990. At a time when unipolarity was on the horizon and American triumphalists were speaking of the very ‘End of History,’ McMahon was already presciently looking outwards from America towards new horizons.

¹ Robert J. McMahon, “The Study of American Foreign Relations: National History or International History?,” *Diplomatic History* 14, no. 4 (1990), pp. 556-557.

² In its advocacy for the internationalisation of diplomatic history, McMahon’s article focuses heavily (though not entirely) on developed countries; the envisaged broadening is to German and British archives, not Zambian or Indian.

Thus it was with anticipation that I picked up McMahon's edited volume *The Cold War and the Third World*. The result is a multi-purpose tool, featuring contributions from some of the leading scholars in the field today. The book is short enough, tight enough, and coherent enough to be used essentially as a college resource. Certainly, given the pricing and paperback format, that appears to be the publisher's aim. Some chapters are little more than ten pages long, exclusive of endnotes.

The first half of the book is organised geographically. Five chapters explore the Cold War in a series of geographically delimited spaces: the Middle East, Latin America, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Africa. The contribution on the Cold War in Africa by Jeffrey James Byrne is particularly welcome.³ Over the last decade and more, researchers have readily turned their gaze to the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, even the Caribbean, but Africa has lagged far behind in their priorities.

The other chapters are essentially thematic. Contributions focus on China's ambiguous role as both a dormant superpower and a Third World country, the intersection of the Cold War and decolonisation, the non-aligned movement, culture and Cold War history, African-American anti-colonialism, and the "war on the peasant". Odd Arne Westad finishes with a profile of the Third World project and some thoughts on why that project collapsed in the 1980s. Indeed, Westad's *The Global Cold War* casts a long shadow over this volume and the field.⁴ His emphasis on the visible geopolitical conflict as a function of more deep-seated ideological competition, his foregrounding of decolonisation as the major aim of Third World leaders against a backdrop (sometimes useful, sometimes not) of an external Cold War, and his positioning of theories and priorities of economic development and political modernisation at the heart of the discourse all feature strongly in this volume.

At the same time as being a useful resource, the book is clearly also an effort to both explore the frontier and delineate the field. If the *Cambridge History of The Cold War* substantially extended the borders of Cold War history from its heartland in political and diplomatic history to encompass vectors of cultural, social, technological, and scientific history too, then this much shorter volume is an effort at consolidation; a strong argument that the field is not falling victim to imperial overstretch.⁵ Andrew J. Rotter's essay, "Culture, the Cold War, and the Third World" is a signal lesson in dynamic new frontiers, even as Carol Anderson's piece on African American anti-colonialism shows the continued vibrancy of more established sub-fields.⁶ Indeed, several of the contributors have clearly

³ Jeffrey James Byrne, "Africa's Cold War," in *The Cold War in the Third World*, ed. Robert J. McMahon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War : Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁵ Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. 1-3 (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁶ Andrew J. Rotter, "Culture, the Cold War, and the Third World," in *The Cold War in the Third World*, ed. Robert J. McMahon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Carol Anderson, "Histories of African

revelled in being given the leeway to explore new ideas in a less formal publication format. This reviewer found himself fondly remembering a Boston University seminar held in the woods in New Hampshire, where scholarly exchange was likewise facilitated by the informal setting and atmosphere. Will Jason Parker's labelling of the post-colonial era as "post-Columbian" catch on?⁷ Maybe not – but this is just the right type of forum for the advancement of such ideas.

Where does this volume leave our understanding of the scope of a vast field, stretching to almost every corner of the globe? In his introduction, McMahon writes that the field "explores two distinct but closely interrelated sets of questions. First, how did the Third World influence the course of the Cold War and the international behaviour and priorities of the two superpowers? In other words, how did perceptions of, rivalry over, and events within the global South shape the overall Soviet-American contest for global dominance? And, second, what impact did the Cold War exert on the developing states and societies of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America? What difference did it make, in sum, *within* the Third World?" (3).

In the event, the focus of the contributors lies substantially more on the second question than the first, which is indicative of a shift that has been occurring over the last few years. As more and more scholars delve into Third World archives, literatures, and concerns, they inevitably position those actors, their concerns, and their perspectives - more than the broader superpower conflict - at the centre of their studies. What is really fascinating in this field is precisely the extent to which scholars are realising that Third World elites took Cold War concepts and ideas and adapted them to their own ends, based on the (often extraneous) priorities of their own societies. Superpowers had very little say about how they did so. Moscow and Washington might have respectively sought the creation of new socialist societies or new cities on a hill, whether in sub-Saharan Africa or South-East Asia. But leaders in the Third World were far more interested in *adapting* the ideological tools and political programmes of superpower, rather than simply adopting them in package form. This is quite different from the old tale of the tail wagging the dog in pure geopolitical terms. Rather, it is a historical realisation that superpower actors had limited control over the norms, ideas, doctrines, and languages that they developed once these were disseminated into the international scene through the Cold War. Perhaps McMahon's two questions are actually two separate sub-fields of enquiry.

Of course, there are always things that catch the reviewer's eye. McMahon's assertion that "only about 1 per cent of the total war-induced casualties of the Cold War era occurred in the Northern Hemisphere, 99 percent in the Southern Hemisphere" (7) is clumsy. He means the Global North and Global South; participants in the Korean and Vietnam Wars, Central

Americans' Anticolonialism During the Cold War," in *The Cold War in the Third World*, ed. Robert J. McMahon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁷ Jason C. Parker, "Decolonization, the Cold War, and the Post-Columbian Era," in *The Cold War in the Third World*, ed. Robert J. McMahon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

American conflicts of the 1980s, and Ogaden War would all be very surprised to learn that they lived south of the equator. But such are minor criticisms. This book further opens the door on an exciting and growing field, illustrating the breadth of opportunities available for scholars.

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