



***The Global Cold War:
Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times***
Roundtable Review

Reviewed Works:

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Review by David S. Painter, Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University

Although most scholars recognize that the Cold War had a major impact on the Third World, far fewer acknowledge that the Third World played a significant role in the Cold War. Without denigrating the importance of the division of Europe and the arms race, international historian Odd Arne Westad puts the Third World at the heart of the Cold War, arguing that “the most important aspects of the Cold War were neither military nor strategic, nor Europe-centered, but connected to political and social development in the Third World” (p. 396). Based on research in archives in Moscow, Beijing, Belgrade, Pretoria, Berlin, Rome, and Washington, the invaluable collections at the Cold War International History Project and the National Security Archive, and wide reading in secondary sources in several languages, *The Global Cold War* should convince even the most Eurocentric scholars of the central role of the Third World in the Cold War.

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Westad argues that the United States and the Soviet Union, as the main proponents of competing “modernity projects,” were “driven to intervene in the Third World by the ideologies inherent in their politics” (p. 4). In his view, “Washington and Moscow needed to change the world in order to prove the universal applicability of their ideologies, and the elites of the newly independent states proved fertile ground for their competition” (p. 4). Westad repeats this emphasis on ideology in opening chapters on the U.S. and Soviet interventionism, but in the rest of the book his analysis of motivation takes into account a wider range of factors, including, in the U.S. case, race and the systemic impact of economic factors.¹

¹ On race, see Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); and Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). On Westad's emphasis on ideology, see the astute review by Mark Atwood Lawrence, “The Other Cold War,” *Reviews in American History* 34.3 (September 2006): 385-92.

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Whatever their motivation, “U.S. and Soviet interventionisms to a very large extent shaped both the international and the domestic framework within which political, social, and cultural changes in the Third World took place” (p. 3). Indeed, Westad believes that U.S. and Soviet intervention in the Third World during the Cold War was so pervasive that it constituted “a continuation of European attempts at controlling Third World peoples” (p. 5; see also p. 396).

Many of the basic features of U.S. and Soviet policy toward the Third World were already evident before the Cold War began. Westad joins a growing number of scholars in viewing the history of U.S. interaction with the Third World as encompassing the history of U.S. expansion across the North American continent. This history included a legacy of territorial and commercial expansion at the expense of less powerful, ethnically different peoples, large doses of racism; ideologies of exceptionalism and mission that facilitated and justified this expansion in the name of expanding the realm of freedom; and strategic considerations reinforcing the drive behind American economic and political expansion.²

The Soviet Union was heir to a similar legacy of expansion, and took over an empire that contained many non-European peoples. The Czarist elite justified Russian expansion as spreading civilization to “backward” peoples, and Westad argues that their Communist successors defended the expansion of Soviet power in similar terms. Indeed, after the failure of revolution in Europe following World War I, Lenin looked to the anti-imperialist struggles of the peoples of the Third World as the key to the eventual defeat of capitalism. Although direct Soviet involvement in Third World affairs declined under Stalin, who concentrated on problems closer to home, the example of a successful anti-imperialist revolution inspired Third World revolutionaries, and Soviet victory in World War II enhanced the prestige of the Soviet model of development. Following World War II the Soviets provided assistance to Communist-led movements in China, Korea, and Vietnam, and in the 1950s the Soviets looked to the Third World as an arena where they could exploit divisions among their capitalist rivals and gain new allies in their uneven struggle with the United States.³

The era of decolonization, roughly 1945-1975, provided a window of opportunity for the Soviet Union and a window of vulnerability for the United States and its allies. Decolonization not only redrew the political map but also challenged Western domination of the Third World. At the end of World War II, most Third World countries outside Latin America were still colonies or mandates of Western European countries or locked in some

² Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*; Walter L. Williams, “United States Indian Policy and the Debate Over Philippine Annexation: Implications for the Study of American Imperialism,” *Journal of American History* 66.4 (March 1980): 810-31; David S. Painter, “Explaining the History of U.S. Relations with the Third World,” *Diplomatic History* 19.3 (Summer 1995): 525-48.

³ Michael Cox, “The Soviet-American Conflict in the Third World,” in Peter Shearman and Phil Williams, eds., *The Superpowers, Central America, and the Middle East* (London: Brassey’s Defence Publishers, 1988), 171-85.

sort of unequal relationship with a Western European nation. Therefore, U.S. and Soviet policies toward the Third World were often significantly shaped by the fact that the main colonial powers were key U.S. allies in the Cold War. In addition, many independence movements, radicalized by years of colonial control and repression, sought more than mere political independence. They also wanted to free their economies from foreign control, to eliminate all vestiges of colonial rule within their societies, and to challenge the West's cultural hegemony.⁴ Because they were usually fighting against Western, capitalist control, many Third World movements took on an anti-Western and/or anti-capitalist tinge, and in many movements Communists played an important role. Thus Third World liberation movements had the potential to bring to power groups hostile to Western capitalism and sympathetic to statist formulas for rapidly modernizing their economies.

While most conflicts in the Third World were largely indigenous in origin and their outcome shaped more by their internal histories and characteristics than by U.S. and Soviet intervention, instability and conflict in the Third World fed Soviet-American rivalry. Both sides sought allies in the Third World, and Third World elites often looked to either or both of the superpowers for support in their internal struggles (pp. 397-98). The Cold War made decolonization more difficult and more violent, and in Latin America, most of which had achieved independence in the nineteenth century, and in countries that had avoided becoming colonies, such as China, Iran, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan, the Cold War polarized efforts at political, economic, and social change.

From the end of World War II until the early 1970s "the United States intervened repeatedly to influence the processes of change that were taking place throughout the Third World (p. 110). Driving U.S. intervention was a "combination of ideological predilections, racial stereotyping, Cold War political and strategic aims," and the revolutionary situations that existed throughout the Third World in this period (p. 111). In addition, while the bulk of U.S. trade and investment was with Europe, the Third World was important as a source of raw materials and as a potential market, and later as a location for U.S. manufacturing investment. In addition, the voracious appetite of the U.S. economy for oil and other raw materials, coupled with their uneven distribution among the nations of the earth, increased U.S. interest and involvement in the Third World, where many of these raw materials were located. U.S. leaders also recognized that access to Third World resources was very important to the economic health of key U.S. allies.

Westad provides astute and succinct analyses of such important issues as the U.S. response to decolonization in Southeast Asia, U.S. policy in the Middle East, the United States and African decolonization, U.S. efforts to maintain a sphere of influence in Latin America, and the impact of U.S. economic power on the Third World. With the exception of Vietnam, the United States was able to limit communist gains in the Third World, but its policy of confronting revolutionary change in the Third World radicalized many Third World

⁴ S. Neil McFarlane, *Superpower Rivalry and Third World Radicalism: The Idea of National Liberation* (Baltimore: 1985); Hedley Bull, "The Revolt Against the West," in Adam Watson, ed., *The Expansion of International Society* (New York: 1985), 217-28.

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movements and regimes and pushed them into close association with the Soviet Union, which willingly provided military and economic assistance. By the end of the 1960s, Westad concludes, U.S. policy had in many ways, both positive and negative, played a key role in creating the Third World as a separate and distinct entity (p. 157).

Westad's masterful coverage of the 1960s underlines the importance of that decade for the Cold War in the Third World. Although the survival of the Cuban Revolution and the stalemate in Vietnam were defeats for the United States, other events such as the Sino-Soviet split, the 1964 military coup in Brazil and the general turn to the right in Latin America, the counter-revolution in Indonesia in 1965, the overthrows of Ben Bella in Algeria in 1965 and Nkrumah in Ghana in 1966, and the waning of Nasser's power following defeat in the 1967 War were probably more important in the long run. These defeats, followed by the dramatic exclusion of the Soviets from Egypt in the early 1970s -- as well as the Sino-Soviet split and the example of Cuban and Vietnamese resistance to U.S. power -- help explain why the Soviets played a more active role in the Third World in the 1970s.⁵

Westad argues that the 1970s and the early 1980s were the period "when superpower conflict in the Third World was at its peak and when developments in the Third World had most significance for the wider conduct of the Cold War" (p. 4). One big difference was that for the first time, the Soviets possessed the power projection capability to intervene in areas far from their borders. Drawing on new material mainly but not exclusively from Soviet archives, Westad provides a detailed analysis of Soviet intervention in Angola and Ethiopia in the 1970s and in Afghanistan in 1970s and 1980s. His work on Angola complements nicely the path-breaking studies of Cuban policy by Piero Gleijeses, while his work on Soviet policy toward Ethiopia and Afghanistan stands out as the key archivally based accounts of these important interventions.⁶ More high-level documents are available on Soviet policies on these matters than on U.S. policies, and Westad's analysis of U.S. policy is not as grounded in primary sources as his analysis of Soviet policy.

The Soviets were pulled reluctantly into Angola by the Cubans and by concerns about U.S. and Chinese involvement. Although they moved quickly to take advantage of the situation in Ethiopia, Westad shows that Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was primarily defensive in nature. Although each case was different, in all three cases, Soviet intervention seems to have been mainly motivated by ideological concerns. Contrary to US fears at the time, Westad found no evidence that Soviet intervention in Ethiopia and Afghanistan was motivated by a plan to control access to the Persian Gulf.

⁵ See also Cox, "Soviet-American Conflict in the Third World," 177.

⁶ Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Gleijeses, "Moscow's Proxy? Cuba and Africa, 1975-1988," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8 (Fall 2006): 98-146. doi:10.1162/jcws.2006.8.4.98. <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1162/jcws.2006.8.4.98>. Gleijeses's article also discusses Cuban involvement in Ethiopia.

For the Reagan administration “Third World left-wing radicalism was part of a global threat to the United States,” and “confronting the Third World was part of the greater project to restore American power that the New Right had embarked on in the 1970s” (p. 357). One result of the wave of revolutions in the 1970s was that for the first time in the Cold War there existed a large number of Communist-led regimes in the Third World. This situation led to a reversal of the typical Cold War pattern of the United States supporting Third World governments and the Soviets supporting insurgent groups. During the 1980s, the United States stepped up its intervention in the Third World, though the change was more in intensity than in aims. The Carter administration had opposed the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, aided the Salvadoran military, laid the groundwork for the U.S. Central Command, and provided covert military assistance to the Afghan resistance. The Reagan administration intensified these efforts and added others under the rubric of a “Reagan Doctrine” that sought to overthrow Soviet-backed regimes in the Third World. In addition, the Third World debt crisis enabled the United States, working with the Bretton Woods institutions, to impose market-oriented changes on Third World nations, in effect extending the Cold War into the global economy (p. 359-63).

Although the so-called “Reagan Victory School” claims that Reagan’s policies “won” the Cold War in the Third World by raising the costs to the Soviets and forcing them to withdraw, Westad argues that the “evidence indicates that at least up to early 1987 American pressure made it *more* (italics in the original) difficult for Moscow to find a way out of its Third World predicament” (p. 364).⁷ In addition, the direct economic costs of involvement in the Third World were fairly low; Westad estimates that Soviet military and civilian assistance to the Third World in the 1980s, including the costs of the war in Afghanistan, was “probably less than 2.5 percent of total state expenditures” (p. 401).

Rather than winning the Cold War, Reagan’s policies, and those of his successor, George H.W. Bush, prolonged conflicts and suffering throughout the Third World. Gorbachev withdrew from involvement in the Third World largely because of disillusionment with the course of Third World revolutions, a desire to decrease U.S. hostility, and a genuine belief in self-determination (pp. 380, 385). In a striking refutation of the maxim that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, U.S. military aid to the Afghan resistance, channeled largely through the Pakistani secret services, strengthened radical Islamist groups, many of which were hostile to the United States as well as to the Soviet Union, and sowed the seeds of future problems (pp. 351-53, 356).⁸

⁷ On the end of the Cold War, see David S. Painter and Thomas S. Blanton, “The End of the Cold War,” in Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *A Companion to Post-1945 America* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 479-500.

⁸ See also Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

The Soviet Union disintegrated and disappeared in 1991, and the differential impact of globalization makes it increasingly difficult to conceptualize the Third World as a distinct entity. In contrast, as Westad points out in a powerful and provocative conclusion, the United States, “an interventionist power for most of its existence,” has continued to use violence to try to control the Third World and has made intervention “into a permanent state of affairs” (p. 406). The results of U.S. intervention in the Third World, he concludes, have been “truly dismal.” “Instead of being a force for good – which they no doubt intended to be – these incursions have devastated many societies and left them more vulnerable to further disasters of their own making” (p. 404). The “negotiated surrender of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union,” Westad argues in a sharp rebuke to U.S. Cold War triumphalism, has blinded U.S. policymakers, pundits, and analysts to “the results of decades of disastrous intervention in the Third World” (p. 404).

Lest this conclusion seem too pessimistic, Westad reminds his readers of an alternative tradition, one “symbolized by the resistance to the war in Vietnam, the protests against intervention in Central America, and the opposition to the invasion and occupation of Iraq” (p. 406). The future, he believes, depends to a great extent on U.S. policymakers learning “the one big lesson of the Cold War . . . that unilateral military intervention does not work to anyone’s advantage, while open borders, cultural interaction, and fair economic exchange benefit all” (p. 465).

Winner of the 2006 Bancroft Prize in American History, *The Global Cold War* makes a significant contribution to Cold War history and to international history in general.⁹ Its unique combination of archivally based analysis of U.S. and Soviet policies toward the Third World and firm command of the secondary literature -- including a deep knowledge of the social, political, and economic histories of Third World nations -- make it required reading for all students of international relations.

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⁹ It is a shame that such an outstanding study contains a number of errors that should have been caught during the editorial process; the Dardanelles is referred to as the Straits of Hormuz (p. 59); U.S. counterinsurgency operative Edwin Lansdale’s name is misspelled as Lonsdale (p. 117 and in the index); and Nixon’s Latin American visit is misdated as occurring in 1957 instead of 1958 (p. 149). These errors appear in the later paperback as well as the original hardcover edition.