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

Roundtable Review

Reviewed Works:


Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux
Reviewers: Jerald Combs, William Hitchcock, David Painter, Natalia Yegorova

Stable URL: http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/GlobalColdWar-Roundtable.pdf

Your use of this H-Diplo roundtable review indicates your acceptance of the H-Net copyright policies, and terms of condition and use.

The following is a plain language summary of these policies:

**You may** redistribute and reprint this work under the following conditions:

- **Attribution**: You must include full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.
- **Nonprofit and education purposes only**: You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- **For any reuse or distribution**, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.
- **Enquiries** about any other uses of this material should be directed to the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.

H-Net's copyright policy is available at http://www.h-net.org/about/intellectualproperty.php.

H-Diplo is an international discussion network dedicated to the study of diplomatic and international history (including the history of foreign relations). For more information regarding H-Diplo, please visit http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/.

For further information about our parent organization, H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online, please visit http://www.h-net.org/.

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.

http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/

5 October 2007
This past June, I attended the SHAFR annual meeting, which convened in the suburbs of northern Virginia. I have always enjoyed going to SHAFR because I see old friends, meet new friends, and get the inside scoop on developments in our field. This year, I was impressed with the talent and poise of a crop of outstanding graduate students (a number of them from Temple, I am proud to say). There were also thoughtful plenary sessions on topics such as the relationship between the media and historians, and the practice of biography in diplomatic history. That said, I was dismayed by what I felt to be a narrowing of the range of topics at the meeting. It seemed to me – and here I exaggerate only a little – that the conference was devoted almost exclusively to the history of U.S. foreign relations between 1961 and 1974. America’s travails in Vietnam received the lion’s share of the conference’s scholarly focus, and it seemed that every hair on Henry Kissinger’s head had a dozen scholars affixed to it. There seemed an air of the ancien régime about the proceedings. Over the past fifteen years, SHAFR, I thought, had moved in exciting new directions, both methodologically and conceptually. But this meeting struck me as a reversion to an earlier set of concerns and approaches: the biography of a small number of decision-makers; a stress on U.S. actions in the world, rather than the interplay and interchange of the U.S. with the world; and a conceptual plainness that seemed, well, a little old hat.

I was surprised by this because I have the impression that our field – and here I am really thinking about “our field” as the international history of the 20th century – is in the midst of a period of dynamic change and expansion. As teachers and scholars, we are sensitive and alert as never before to the interconnection between national histories and global processes, whether economic, technological, ideological, environmental, migratory, or military. The history of the cold war, it seems to me, has profited especially from these broader perspectives, and Arne Westad has done a great deal to push the field in this direction. For example, the extraordinary meetings that he and Professor Mel Leffler have been convening as part of the forthcoming multivolume Cambridge History of the Cold War have showcased an astonishing array of scholars whose work sheds new light on the cold war, drawing on archives in many countries and benefiting from the conceptual advances that our peers have been making over the past two decades. There are far more chapters in...
that collection that are transnational than national in focus. Crossing boundaries has become normative practice in the writing of cold war history.

Now comes Arne Westad’s new book, *The Global Cold War*. The word “landmark” is a cliché and overused, but surely this book deserves that term. *The Global Cold War* is the most original and path-breaking work of cold war history to have been published since the end of the cold war itself. It is a rich, exacting, impressive, complex and ambitious book that shows how far our field has come and suggests the directions we might travel in the future. It is also exhausting, intimidating, and not always an easy read.

Westad has consulted an extraordinary range of archives from Moscow to Beijing, Berlin to Belgrade, Pretoria to Rome and beyond. He has mastered a vast, multilingual secondary literature, making the book a model of the new international history. Yet even more important than this global mining effort is the conceptual scheme at work here. The book is profoundly revisionist, swinging the scholarly pendulum sharply away from what some have seen as a return to orthodoxy evident in the recent work of John Lewis Gaddis (in his not-very-new *The Cold War: A New History*) and Marc Trachtenberg (whose excellent volume, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-63*, is essentially limited to a focus on trans-Atlantic diplomacy toward the German problem). Unlike these two leading cold war scholars, Westad operates on a truly global scale. He has shifted the story of the cold war from Europe to the periphery. Westad articulates two broad theses: that the cold war must be seen as a part of a century-long ideological contest between two powerful, ambitious, imperial states; and that the cold war was not only (or even principally) a bilateral military-strategic contest centered on Europe but should be seen more broadly as a multifaceted contest of social and political ideals located in the Third World. With this double-barreled argument, we are dealing with a very different sort of cold war history from what we have become accustomed to.

Westad defies the conventional wisdom, which has long seen the cold war as centered on Europe and buttressed by alliances and nuclear weapons. If Europe was all that mattered, Westad asks, why would the superpowers have expended so much time and money in a contest for dominance on the periphery? Westad argues that it was on the periphery that the cold war stakes were highest. While Europe was frozen by the cold war into two stable blocs, the developing world appeared as a dynamic laboratory for new ideas about human progress. Both superpowers intervened there not merely to gain some tactical military advantage over one another but to carry out global schemes of modernization that were premised on their own positivist, technocratic faiths. From this perspective, the cold war in the Third World looks a great deal like the imperial rivalries that preceded it: “The Cold War,” Westad states succinctly, “was a continuation of colonialism through slightly different means [396].”

After two fascinating but necessarily brief chapters that place U.S. and Soviet cold war thinking into the broader context of American and Russian imperial ambitions and expansionist ideologies, Westad zeroes in on the peripheral conflicts of the 1970s and
1980s in illuminating detail. His chapters on Cuba, Vietnam, Southern Africa, Ethiopia, Iran, Afghanistan and Central America are based on vast archival work. The essential argument is maintained throughout: the United States believed that to protect its own interests and also to advance market capitalism and democracy, it had to reshape the developing world. This ambitious global effort provoked resistance and opened the way for Third World revolutionaries to reach out to the Soviet Union which, because of its own imperial ambitions and ideologically charged designs to reshape the Third World, happily responded with aid, weapons, and diplomatic support. The Third World became a site of great power conflict not by chance, but by design: it was, for both superpowers, the principal stake of the cold war contest.

Westad’s book introduces a subversive concept that cold war historians must confront: that the cold war is more properly understood as a North-South contest rather than an East-West one. Westad sees American and Soviet leaders as “high modernists” [33, 397] who spoke a common language of western superiority; it was peasant resistance to western ideologies, both U.S. and Soviet, that fueled peripheral wars which in turn further enmeshed the superpowers. Westad believes that Third World radicals and revolutionaries had as much to do in shaping the course of the cold war as did leaders in Washington and Moscow, and that is why the legacy of the cold war is most sharply felt not in the West but in the roiling and unsettled Third World. Here is international history at its best and most controversial.

Mind you, I am not at all sure that Westad is right. As a European historian, and someone who has spent some time trying to make France appear relevant in the history of the cold war, I am uneasy with Westad’s dismissal of Europe. He assumes that once Europe was frozen by the cold war, it was therefore frozen out of the cold war. Here, I urge a careful reading of Marc Trachtenberg’s judicious analysis of the way in which the cold war order was structured; he reminds us that the cold war order in Europe was no accident but was a carefully managed system premised on a clear set of rules and compromises based on a divided Germany. Getting the nations of Europe, including the Soviet Union, to agree and adhere to those rules, was not an easy matter, nor is it a diplomatic process that scholars should demote to the second tier, while dashing off to Pretoria to look for the real cold war. It is precisely because the cold war both started and ended in Europe that we cannot ignore the internal European dynamics of the conflict. The European-centered cold war may seem old news to us now because we understand how it came about and how that cold war came to an end; but familiarity should not breed contempt.

Another issue that we as a community of scholars will have to chew over is Westad’s argument that U.S. and Soviet development strategies were simply two sides of the same coin: each state was hawking its own variant of a brand of modernity and development to the rest of the world. These variants were both offshoots from the same stem of the European enlightenment, and therefore equally ambitious, equally megalomaniacal, and equally inclined to resort to cruelty and violence to achieve their ends. If I am reading Westad correctly, he believes that any one, especially historians, who views the United
States as having a legitimate moral mission to play in world affairs is delusional, and indeed is no different from the zealous Bolsheviks who believed that the use of power was justified by the beauty of their long-term millenarian goals (see paragraph on bottom of 403 to top of 404). From the perspective of Nicaragua or Ethiopia, this dual curse on both superpowers may seem compelling. As a historian of Europe, however, I am uneasy with it. U.S. and Soviet hegemony over Europeans during the cold war did not look the same to Europeans. The daily reality of life under these two regimes in Europe was starkly opposed, and the two systems really cannot be breezily equated. I dare say Westad would agree; but if he did so, he might open himself up to the criticism that he has too hastily conflated American and Soviet “high modernism.”

My expressions of concern do not in the least detract from my admiration for the truly Stakhanovite intellectual and archival effort that Westad has undertaken. In my mind, the book’s significance lies in its conceptual ambition, and I believe the book reveals that “the new cold war history” has finally arrived. This new history is global, as was the cold war; it is multi-lingual, as was the cold war; and it operates on a north-south axis as well as on an east-west one, as did the cold war. Westad’s book is a model that challenges us to continue to think and write globally.