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Review: "The Cold War: A World History" by Odd Arne Westad

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The Cold War: A World History

By Odd Arne Westad, London: Allen Lane, 2017. Pp. 710, Paperback £10.99, ISBN: 978-0141979915

REVIEWED BY PAUL SPRUTE

Now out as an affordable paperback, it is high time for this journal to review Odd Arne Westad's contribution to the 'grand narratives' of the Cold War. After all, the Norwegian historian, now the S.T. Lee Professor of U.S.-Asia Relations at Harvard University after a long stint at the London School of Economics, has authored the definitive study on the globalized nature of the Cold War, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* of 2006.[1] His work contributed more to the reevaluation of the Cold War as a truly global force and power system than any other in the field, and opened it up to most different research perspectives, not the least inspiring studies published in this journal.[2] It is thanks to Westad that John Lewis Gaddis's famous dictum describing the Cold War as *The Long Peace* now seems rather odd.[3] Instead, current research stresses how many, often violent conflicts and dynamics of political rule in the Third World were enabled and perpetuated by cold war ideologies, logics, and supplies, but also had major repercussions on the wider course of the Cold War that are still felt to this day.

Westad's latest work of a compact 700 pages stays true to these primary concerns, yet goes further by integrating the findings of his different case studies on *The Global Cold War* into the grand panorama of a conclusive historical master narrative, "World Making" as his introductory chapter is aptly called. Westad describes the Cold War as the last great international system, "in the sense that the world's leading powers all based their foreign policies on some relationship to it" (p.1). Yet, the author also acknowledges that the Cold War "influenced most things, [but] it did not decide everything" (p.627), pointing to diversities and hybridities beside the Cold War, namely in decolonization.

Westad's main argument is that the Cold War was born from the global transformations of the late nineteenth century and was buried as a result of tremendously rapid changes a hundred years later. As an acute global rivalry emerging from both World Wars, the Cold War was overtaken by new divides in the 1970s

[1] Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[2] Hannes Schweikardt, "Interpreting the 'Thaw' from the 'Third World': The Guyanese Writer Jan Carew on Modernization and Trauma in the Early 1960s Soviet Union," *Global Histories* 3, no. 1 (April 2017): 19–38; Immanuel Harisch, "Bartering Coffee, Cocoa and W50 Trucks: The Trade Relationships of the GDR, Angola and São Tomé in a Comparative Perspective," *Global Histories* 3, no. 2 (October 2017): 43–60.

[3] John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

and 1980s. While economic, social, and technological transformations had caused the Cold War's durability, they eventually made it obsolete. Especially the Soviet Union could not uphold its promise of social and economic improvements and engage in futile wars at the same time, as it ultimately had not found a political, economic, or social system that was fit for its purpose.

In Westad's view, the Cold War's significance lies in this slow defeat of the Leninist left, as well as the advent of US hegemony and the many violent changes in the Third World. These processes of change were complemented by the coming into existence of a multitude of new states as an important context. Westad points to nationalism as an enduring force and substantial challenge to the universalist ideologies of communism and US capitalist freedom. Importantly, Westad shows how those ideologies, and indeed all parties in the Cold War were rooted in competing but related concepts of modernity which had originated in the age of European expansion and centralized the primacy over nature, mechanization, and the nation. This basic observation provokes the author to debate a whole set of commonalities between the United States and Russia. According to the author, "a sense of destiny [played] essential roles in Russian and American expansionism," and both were "engaged in projects to globalize Europe" from its fringes (p.15). Westad further highlights how both (Soviet) Russia and the United States acted as global anti-systemic powers, challenging the European status quo from different directions.

As the result of the end of the Cold War, US power was solidified, and Communism defeated. Yet, Westad also stresses the central importance of the rise of Asia and China's peculiar path in particular, "the democratic consensus that had become institutionalized in the European Union," as well as the political and social polarization in Latin America as central feats and outcomes of the Cold War (p.17). Illuminatingly, Westad emphasizes how the ideological Cold War disappeared only in part as the US side hardly changed: In consequence, he argues that the United States still finds itself in a 'permanent Cold War' against all its opponents due to its "absolute historical purpose" (p.619). Reflecting on the persistence and ubiquity of the Cold War, Westad points out that the "many ills of this world" are one key to its understanding: "As injustice and oppression became more visible, people—and especially young people—felt the need to remedy these ills … Cold War ideologies offered immediate solutions to complex problems" (p.628). The devastation and cynicism evoked by the Cold War showed how such sense of mission got perverted for the sake of power, influence, and control, Westad concludes.

The author develops these findings over the course of 22 chapters roughly aligning in a chronological order and focusing on the developments in specific regions or individual relations between Cold War actors. A particularly insightful chapter deals with "The Cold War and India," the 'dark horse' of Cold War studies as the

author has suggested elsewhere,[4] in which Westad has integrated more primary research than in any other part of the book. The Indian case file is especially interesting as the Indian state constituted itself in explicit opposition to both ideological and political centers of the Cold War, yet ultimately had to reckon with it as the central fact of the international sphere. The Indian case also highlights to the reader how the politics of development surges in the Cold War context, an aspect that David Engerman has stressed recently[5] and that Westad could have spelled out even stronger and more systematically.

One of Westad's great strengths is his ability to condense complex chains of events into readable and engaging prose. He ably zooms in and out between macro and micro perspectives to make the lived experience of the Cold War palpable for the reader, notably by weaving testimonies from ordinary people into his narrative. His clear and sober style of writing, interrupted by the occasional quip and the rare reference to personal experience, is easy to follow, giving all the more space to the many different histories Westad has to share.

In conclusion, *The Cold War: A World History* is a compulsory read for anyone engaged in their very own world-making for the second half of the past century up to today. Notably, Westad has never shied away from engaging with the present moment from a historical perspective to enlighten the reader about "The World the Cold War Made," as the concluding chapter is entitled. In fact, there is little reason to criticize *The Cold War* on its own terms. Yet, the interested reader should be aware that Westad is going for the straightforward narrative and no feats of postmodern legerdemains can be expected. While Westad addresses questions how wider social living environments were impacted by the Cold War, including references to the influence of culture and arts, he ultimately remains bound to the hard facts of international history.

One could have hoped for a more decisive reexamination of the Cold War from its margins, engaging in even more depth with the possibilities and restrictions that the global Cold War meant to Third World actors. Yet, such detours might have diluted the central aim to suggest a grander narrative of the age of the global Cold War and may be left to another crop of case studies. Here, it is reassuring that Westad has incorporated some of the criticism levelled against him in the past, notably in the case of the Cuban intervention in Angola, as he attributes the Cubans with considerably more agency in this work (pp.482–484) than in *The Global Cold War*.[6] Future works will surely continue to use Westad's writing as a

[4] Odd Arne Westad and Michael Cox, "The Cold War: A World History," London School of Economics: Public Lecture Podacst, January 9, 2018, http://www.lse.ac.uk/lse-player?id=3961.

[5] David C. Engerman, *The Price of Aid: The Economic Cold War in India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

[6] See: Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 207–249; For the criticism levelled against Westad and alternative perspectives, see: Piero Gleijeses, "The View from Havana: Lessons from Cuba's African Journey, 1959–1976," in *In from the Cold: Latin America's New Encounter with the Cold War*, ed. Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spenser (Durham: Duke University Press,

starting point and central reference in order to further and occasionally rebalance it—the maximal impact a historian may hope for.

2008), 112–133; Christine Hatzky, *Cubans in Angola: South-South Cooperation and Transfer of Knowledge, 1976–1991* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), 181–188.