There was an adage among observers during the last half of the twentieth century that the Cold War was not very cold at all. If the two superpowers fell short of engaging in full-scale nuclear war, the myriad smaller proxy wars in which they fought wracked the period with a tremendous amount of violence and insecurity. Americans and Soviets trained, funded, armed, and fought alongside local forces and against others in ferocious civil and regional wars in places such as Korea, Vietnam, Guatemala, Angola, and Afghanistan. Although the superpower rivalry ended over a decade ago, its effects on the “periphery” are still being felt.

This is the central message of Odd Arne Westad’s *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*. The photograph on the book’s cover, of Mujahideen soldiers standing on the wreckage of a downed Soviet helicopter, indicates the theme clearly enough. Many of the central issues occupying current policy debates—from the threat of nuclear proliferation and international terrorism to the aggressive foreign policy and massive military budget of the remaining superpower—are direct products of the Cold War. More specifically, argues Westad, it is the frequent interventions that the United States and Soviet Union made in the third world that account for the pernicious global legacies of the Cold War.

What drove the Soviet Union and the United States to interfere so frequently in the politics of the third world? Westad, a diplomatic historian of modern East Asia, answers the call brilliantly in a study that synthesizes much of the voluminous literature on the international history of the Cold War and introduces a variety of newly available archival sources. Westad argues for the primacy of ideology in driving the superpowers to intervene in the third world. He is neither content with existing scholarship that privileges material...
interests as the determining factor in the makings of Cold War international relations nor with seeking to rebut the exceptionalist claims of those who excuse third world interventions as inconsequential. Rather, Westad shows how a variety of factors led the United States and the Soviet Union to view the third world as an arena of global struggle.

The origins of American and Soviet Cold War ideologies occupy the first part of Westad’s study. According to Westad, both nations saw themselves as embodying universal values of progress and modernity. In a chapter whose themes will be familiar to students of American foreign relations, Westad notes how U.S. Cold War strategy was part of a long tradition of intervening in the affairs of non-white people. Although the United States was born of an anti-imperial struggle, in the nineteenth century the young republic quickly proved itself to be “an interventionist power that based its foreign policy on territorial expansion.” This “empire of liberty” matured in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the overseas imperialism that accompanied victory in the Spanish-American war. By the eve of World War I, the United States had become, by virtue of its growing economic power, the “protector and balancer of a capitalist world system.” The simultaneous victory in World War I and the success of the Russian Revolution made anticommunism a priority at home and abroad, but it was not until the end of World War II that the Soviet Union was perceived as a threat to the “world market” and the American way of life.

In a similar way, Soviet Cold War ideology was a continuation of the nineteenth century expansion of the Russian empire and the modernizing, universalistic claims of Marxism. Despite Stalin’s determination to consolidate the Revolution at home, by the 1950s and 1960s, Soviet leaders were increasingly looking to the third world as a means of spreading communism and successfully confronting the United States. Westad makes clear the similarities between the two camps: both sides drew on the central discourses of modernity (universalism, rationality, progress, science, and freedom); both saw “their mission as part of a world-historical progression” toward either a completely capitalist or communist world; and each side increasingly viewed the other with hostility. This symmetry, according to Westad, accounted for the intensity of the early Cold War years.

However, another great development in the postwar period determined the makings of superpower interventions during the Cold War. If both the Americans and Soviets had come to believe in the destiny of their respective societies to transform the world in their own image, then decolonization provided the space in which each side could maneuver. After describing the
ideological origins of American and Soviet Cold War policy, Westad examines the wave of decolonization that began immediately after World War II. According to Westad, the anticolonial movements that fueled decolonization were “inextricably linked to the Cold War conflict.” For the leaders of the newly-independent states, the Cold War provided models—and money—for their development plans; for the superpowers, they provided opportunities to prove those models and gain strategic influence throughout the world. By following the trajectories of India and Indonesia, Westad illustrates particularly well the ways in which some anticolonial leaders created and capitalized on a “middle ground” in the early Cold War years. By remaining non-aligned and playing the superpowers against each other, many new states were able to craft out a measure of independence in an increasingly bipolar world.

After establishing a framework for understanding Cold War ideologies and decolonization, Westad then describes the ways in which the politics of intervention played out in a variety of locations. Proceeding chronologically, Westad points to the Cuban Revolution and the Vietnam War as the key challenges that the United States faced in maintaining hemispheric hegemony and containing communism in Southeast Asia. All of this is fairly familiar, and it is not until discussing the Cold War interventions in Africa during the 1960s and 1970s that Westad comes into his own. It was here—in South Africa, Angola, Ethiopia, Zaire, and Guinea-Bissau—that the Cold War really took shape. Detailing the way in which Moscow and Havana cultivated allies among anticolonial leaders who became disenchanted by the American model, and maintaining a keen focus on the human costs of intervention, Westad notes how Cold War politics served to influence the development of these young nations.

Moving through the 1970s into the 1980s, Westad documents the ways in which détente quickly gave way to increasing intervention: for the United States in Latin America and for the Soviets in Afghanistan. Rather than a change in goals toward the third world, Ronald Reagan’s election signified a “change in method,” one in which the United States relied ever more on counterinsurgency and support for right-wing regimes in its battle for the third world. Soviet intentions and involvement in Afghanistan, coming fresh on the heels of Soviet success in Africa, demonstrated that ideological, not simply material and strategic factors, were at the heart of the Cold War in the third world. The Afghan war, while seen as vital to national security and prestige in the minds of Soviet leaders, nevertheless served mainly to drain tremendous amounts of manpower and resources that could have been better used at home. By the mid-1980s, Soviet leaders had become aware of their failure in Afghanistan, yet feared pulling out for risk of abandoning
their allies. Ultimately, Westad contends that changes in the international economy and the political leadership of the Soviet Union, not Reagan’s policy of escalation, did the most to end the Cold War.

In the concluding chapter, Westad notes that “the tragedy of Cold War history…was that two historical projects that were genuinely anticolonial in their origins became part of a much older pattern of domination.” For Westad, the Cold War was not simply a matter of East versus West but of East and West versus South. This is something not to be forgotten when thinking about the American “victory” in the Cold War. “Seen from a Third World perspective, the results of America’s interventions are truly dismal. Instead of being a force for good… these incursions have devastated many societies and left them more vulnerable to further disasters of their own making.” According to Westad, the triumphalist narratives of American victory in the Cold War serve to cloak not only the very dark history of the period but also the ways in which current American foreign policies are also based on a misguided “ideology of interventionism.”

Westad’s contributions to Cold War history are numerous, and this Bancroft-winning book is worthy of acclaim. In particular, Westad should be commended for helping to shift Cold War history south (to the third world) and forward (to the 1970s). Along with recent works by Piero Gleijeses and Jeremi Suri, The Global Cold War represents the best of the “new Cold War history,” which attempts to use archival material from the newly-opened eastern bloc archives and recently declassified material from the west in order to reinvestigate the recent past. Nevertheless, certain aspects of the book are wanting. Particularly strange is the way in which Westad studiously avoids questions of political economy. While stating in the introduction that Cold War interventions were more about control than domination, Westad focuses almost exclusively on military interventions. Because of the tremendous scope of the book, it would have made the text too unwieldy to include detailed assessments of the myriad economic arrangements that permeated North-South relations during the Cold War. All the same, however, a greater attention to foreign and development aid assistance, for instance, could have revealed a more subtle but no less significant aspect of Cold War interventionism and perhaps shown that material interests were as important as ideological factors in the story. Additionally, Westad largely eschews intra-bloc relations, even though the literature on the European alliance system and Warsaw pact politics has demonstrated that the Cold war was more of a multi-polar than bipolar system. Furthermore, a greater attention to the roles of international
organizations and the voices of non-elite actors could have rounded out the work.

On the whole, these criticisms pale in comparison to the contributions that Westad has made. By both synthesizing existing literature and uncovering new sources, Westad has gone a long way in reorienting Cold War studies and, by implication, our understanding of the contemporary world.

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