Odd Arne Westad’s *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* makes several valuable contributions to the field of international history, not least of which is his provocative argument. As his title suggests, Westad has two projects: first, to explain the intricacies of an area of Cold War history that has been largely neglected; and second, to describe the emergence of the modern world and its attendant problems of terrorism, rogue states, and political instability.

Westad’s historical argument focuses on the ideology of policymaking elites. According to Westad, “The United States and the Soviet Union were driven to intervene in the Third World by the ideologies inherent in their politics.” Far before World War II, the United States sought to expand its vision of liberty to the wider world. The American elite saw its ideology as the way of the world, the definitive conclusion of natural historical processes. This fervor drove American foreign policy to its interventions in Cuba, the Philippines, Haiti, and World War I. In the postwar era, according to Westad’s narrative, a sense of insecurity vis a vis the Soviet Union drove further interventions in order to secure America’s future alongside these concerns. On the other hand, the Soviet Union sought to establish an “empire of justice,” drawing on the spirit (if not the spirituality) of reformers in the late Russian Empire as well as Leninist theory. Like policymakers in the US, The Soviet elite shared the concern over security in the postwar era.

Both superpowers saw the Third World as a crucial battleground in the struggle for dominance. Westad goes so far as to suggest that they saw it as the crucial battleground, even as both American and Soviet ideology claimed to be anti-imperialist. “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,” he claims. He catalogues a long train of abuses at the hands of American and Soviet policymakers, demonstrating how their sense of insecurity left the Third World in ruins and the First World facing grim prospects. Westad’s source base concerning both sets of policymakers is adequate to the task. A great deal of attention is given to official government documents, but also to unofficial memos, conversations, and interviews with the parties involved. His fluency in Russian is particularly useful here, as he explores several large archives that appear to be treasure troves of information. He also relies in great part on public documents: radio broadcasts, official speeches, and monographs written by the academic wing of the policy
establishment. The geographic span of the work is impressive, taking us from the downfalls of Arbenz in Guatemala and Mossadeq in Iran to Cuba, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Somalia, South Yemen, Afghanistan, Angola, Mozambique, Rhodesia, Nicaragua, and South Africa. His text is truly a work in “international history.”

Nonetheless, there are several serious problems with Westad’s methodology and perspective that taint this otherwise excellent book. The first is Westad’s broad claim. Westad’s focus on the Third World as the central battlefield of the Cold War overlooks events in Europe, which he seems to neglect. Also absent is serious attention to the agency of elites in countries that did not subscribe to either ideological pole, such as Charles De Gaulle’s government in France. Furthermore, little attention is paid to the populations of the countries subject to these interventions. These populations and their elites become little more than victims in Westad’s book, helpless human projectiles buffeted back and forth between a bipolar ideological world.

While this reviewer welcomes a discussion of elites and their ideologies, Westad fails to treat these groups with equal attention. Personal papers and correspondence appear to have been consulted to a far greater degree in the Soviet collections. This complicates his chapters when Soviet policymakers are under examination, but its lack is felt in the chapters covering the American elites, who Westad seems to conflate into a monolithic composite. Perhaps if he had taken greater care to examine the interests of these elites and the differences between personal, ideological, and bureaucratic rivals, his view of ideology’s role would have been complicated on the American side as well. These ideologies were hardly simple, and by relying on narrow segments of evidence his broadly conclusions are on somewhat shaky ground.

Indeed, these gaps in methodology may have been intended to buttress Westad’s broader political message—his commentary on contemporary American foreign policy. Westad makes no attempt to hide his personal views throughout the Acknowledgements, Introduction, and Conclusion. The last is particularly galling: “Seen from a Third World perspective, the results of America’s interventions are truly dismal. Instead of being a force for good—which they were no doubt intended to be—their incursions have devastated many societies and left them vulnerable to further disasters of their own making,” he writes. This is undeniable in many cases, but one wonders if Westad overstates his case. America’s direct and indirect military interventions in the Third World during the Cold War were rarely pleasant, but American foreign policy was not solely focused on military matters. The emergence of high-yield crops from American scientists as well as American and Soviet contributions to disease eradication were extremely helpful to the Third World.
Westad also rarely takes the Soviet Union to task. He might undoubtedly argue that this was because the U.S. was the victor of the Cold War, and to the victor go the spoils of history. Yet it worth noting (and Westad does, to his credit) that American intervention in Afghanistan was key to sapping the Soviet Union’s strength, thus bringing down a brutally oppressive series of regimes across Asia and Europe. Whether or not this geopolitical calculus is moral or not is beyond the scope of this review, but it is certainly contested. Westad’s analysis of Islamic terrorism rising out of America’s interventions abroad is biting, but if it rings true, it is slightly off-key. America’s support for Israel and its role in overthrowing Mossadeq and installing the Shah were certainly important factors in the rise of Islamic terrorism. However, it is possible that the ideology espoused by Islamic fundamentalists was bound to conflict with the comparatively liberal culture of the United States, regardless of its interventions.

In fact, even if Islamic terrorism does stem in part from American interventions, it is worth noting that several of these—Afghanistan in the 1980s, Kuwait in 1991, Somalia in 1992, and Kosovo in the 1990s—were in defense of Muslims in the developing world. Furthermore, it is also interesting to note that one of Osama bin Laden’s reasons for declaring jihad against the United States stemmed from that mystical creature that Westad approves of so glowingly: multilateral intervention. When the United States used Saudi Arabia as a base in its U.N.-mandated intervention during Operation Desert Storm, bin Laden took his homeland to task for allowing infidels to share the same soil as the land of Mecca and Medina. Westad’s mark may seem easy, but the story is far more complicated than he allows. It is unclear that he would have been satisfied with any of option that United States undertook while weighted with the burden of superpower status.

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