



Two-minute review

The Global Cold War

Author: Odd Arne Westad

Why you should read the book

You are interested in one of the defining conflicts of the 20th century, one that still frames our view of global politics.

You want to know if intervening in someone else's affairs (or country) is a good idea.

Why you should not read the book

The book assumes that you have quite a bit of historical background to the events and actors of the period – do not look for explanatory context here.

You would miss classics such as the Berlin Wall or the Vietnam War.

What you should learn from the book

This award-winning book has both some of the qualities and the flaws of the best academic history – at least seen from a non-academic perspective. With 407 densely packed pages of text and featuring countless countries, persons, and organizations, this is no easy read.

Yet is a highly detailed account of US-USSR interventionism in the third world, based on extensive archival research. So if you already know your way around the history of the Cold War, dig in, but otherwise you will find a good summary of all the main points in the introduction and conclusion. If you do not want to read everything, perhaps add the first chapter as well – it discusses the similarities between the American and Soviet ideologies, which is an important point in and of itself.

Beyond this detail, a second important quality of the book is that it makes your world bigger. The Cold War was mainly cold if you were happy to live in Europe and North-America. Beyond these regions the picture looks a lot warmer. As Westad points out, if you're looking from the south to the Cold War, you will see a good deal of continuity with the colonial period preceding it. More importantly, the book also shows how difficult it is to try to shape other countries (and organizations) after your own ideological model.

Both the Americans and the Soviets discovered that their control over events in the third world was largely an illusion. Local elites picked up these 'core' ideologies but used them to their own advantage, often keeping the principles in name but applying them in their own manner (sometimes with more success than the US or the USSR, sometimes with less). Often enough, the application of theoretical models in a rigid manner led to devastating cases of land reform and cultural destruction, which applies to the interventions of both the Russians and the Americans. As Westad notes in the conclusion, the US achieved its double goal of stable growth and stable democracy only in two countries where it intervened: South Korea and Taiwan, and that later case has only recently become a more recognizable democracy. The target for intervention was missed in about thirty other countries. In this

sense, the bulk of the book shows what happens when you apply an 'the goals outweigh the means'-approach to international politics.

Finally, the book also taps into the post-Cold War world, or at least claims that it offers an explanation for the world we inherited after 1989. The book sees the calm of the 1990's as a result of intervention-weariness in the US after the collapse of its arch-enemy, even though Westad describes the invasion in Iraq as a modified continuation of Cold War-style interventionism. Similarly, resentment after colonialism and post-colonial wars explains why many states preferred authoritarian governments over further ideological struggle. Yet in other cases that resentment was directed outwards, leading to the acts of terrorism seen on 9/11. Whether this causal relation is as strong as suggested needs further research, but Westad's conclusion are certainly food for thought.

The best bit

The Cubans. I highlight not one specific part, but every section where they appear is interesting. Starting from chapter five, the Cubans appear as one of the most influential actors in the Cold War. They were, famously, a nuisance for the Americans, but they also shaped much of Soviet foreign policy by supporting Communist factions in other countries, sometimes with more success than the Soviets and sometimes even against Moscow's wishes. They appear as a group that knew how to 'play' their superpower ally, and it is safe to say that African history would look rather different without them. A similarly interesting role is played by the South-Africans, but they feature less prominently in the book.

The most remarkable quotes

"It is easy, therefore, to see the Cold War in the South as a continuation of European colonial interventions and of European attempts at controlling Third World peoples. I have little doubt that this is how historians of the future will regard the epoch – as one of the final stages of European global control." (*Time will tell, but perhaps not the best idea to rely on the authority of books that have not yet been written.*)

"While their leaders sometimes chose to represent one imported ideology or another, there is little sign that the peasants themselves fought against anything other than a state [...] that was extending its grasp toward their villages." (*A reminder that ideology certainly matters, but is equally often window-dressing for power.*)

"As one CIA officer put in the summer of 2001: "Operations that include diarrhea as a way of life don't happen"." (*Which reveals an interesting new defensive strategy for American enemies.*)

The Global Cold War by Odd Arne Westad, Cambridge University Press, 2007. Review by Dr. Bram De Ridder, KU Leuven.