

Jeffrey Womack
Buzzanco – Empire, War, and Revolution

Westad, Odd Arne. *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of our Times*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Odd Ane Westad's recent book, *The Global Cold War*, examines the relationship of the Cold War Soviet Union and United States to the Third World, focusing on both the ways in which the Cold War powers intervened in the affairs of smaller nations and the responses of those countries to intervention. The author argues that Cold War interventions were driven by the ideologies of the two powers, who "needed to change the world in order to prove the universal applicability" of their societal and governmental systems.¹ Westad specifically contrasts this view with "European expansion," maintaining that, while the Cold War interventions definitely represented an extension of colonialism, "Moscow's and Washington's objectives were not exploitation or subjection, but control and improvement."²

The Global Cold War defines the United States and the Soviet Union as ideological models, neither of which could tolerate the existence of the other. Westad maintains that the United States defined itself according to several core principles: an opposition to the power of government, an institutionalized fear of collectivism, a mania for progress "science" and rationalism, and a fear of "foreigners" who, by and large, could not be trusted with the freedoms enjoyed by Americans. Soviet leaders, according to Westad, paralleled their American contemporaries in these last two areas; like their American counterparts, the Bolsheviks saw themselves as the vanguard of a rationally ordered, progressive new world, and they did not trust the inhabitants of other nations to properly realize the Communist vision. Unlike the Americans, however, the Communists favored collectivism and a powerful central government that

¹ Westad, 4.

² Westad, 5.

could ensure that all of the members of a society could smoothly “become little wheels in the great machine that would produce Soviet socialism.”³

Westad’s book is ambitious. The author attempts to frame events across the breadth of the Cold War and throughout the Third World in terms of an overarching narrative, with the United States and the Soviet Union locked in a struggle for the shape of the future. Westad did a good job of illustrating several of her arguments; the author successfully demonstrated, for instance, that the United States consistently had the upper hand in its confrontations with the Soviets.

The author’s master narrative, however, seems problematic, at best. When Westad examines the relationship between the United States and Iran, for instance, the author devotes one line to the economic ties between the two countries—“the autocratic regime of the monarch made sure that the crucial deliveries of Iranian oil to the West continued”—and follows it up by suggesting that the real interests of the Nixon administration lay in the fact that Iran was viewed as “instrumental in preventing a turn toward Communism in the Third World.”⁴ That particular analysis, in my mind sums up the problem with this book: *The Global Cold War* is always in a rush to talk about a U.S. versus Soviet showdown to the exclusion or marginalization of every other factor, and it does so in spite of the author’s insistence on American supremacy throughout the conflict. Westad may believe that the United States supported the Shah to defend the Third World against the Reds, but I have a hard time turning my gaze away from that oil.

³ Westad, 48.

⁴ Westad, 289.