

## BOOKS

# Cold War World

A new history redefines the conflict's true extent and enduring costs.

BY PATRICK IBER

“CONSIDERING HOW LIKELY we all are to be blown to pieces by it within the next five years,” George Orwell wrote in late 1945, “the atomic bomb has not roused so much discussion as might have been expected.” Orwell was grappling with the political implications of the new weapon, about two months after the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki killed more than 100,000 people. If atomic bombs were cheap to build, he thought, they might level differences in power between nations. But since the costs of production were so high, he anticipated instead the creation of only a few atomic superstates. In fact, Orwell reasoned, the atomic bomb might actually serve to intensify political inequality,

by robbing the exploited classes and peoples of all power to revolt, and at the same time putting the possessors of the bomb on a basis of military equality. Unable to conquer one another, they are likely to continue ruling the world between them, and it is difficult to see how the balance can be upset except by slow and unpredictable demographic changes.

It was a situation of “cold war,” he wrote, in one of the first uses of the phrase. And, he concluded, “it is likelier to put an end to large-scale wars at the cost of prolonging indefinitely a *‘peace that is no peace.’*”

Orwell’s imaginings eventually took him to the world he fictionalized in *1984*, but his analysis of the coming Cold War proved cogent. Only a few countries gained atomic weapons. Hostile powers, principally the United States and the Soviet Union, did not attack each other directly, fearing mutual destruction. They did, however, develop semipermanent war economies, as they vied for influence in countries across the world. What came to be called the “Third World” experienced these power struggles as a continuation of European imperialism. The Cold War, as it was fought in Korea, in Indonesia, in Cuba and Chile and Angola, was hardly “cold.” It did not

entirely rob people of the power to revolt, but it certainly constrained political choice and limited sovereignty.

Despite its global scale, historians of the Cold War tended to focus on diplomatic decision-making in the U.S. and the USSR. Since the beginning of Cold War studies, two basic schools of thought contended to define the narrative. The first school, based in the United States and essentially nationalist, held that Stalin was primarily responsible for the conflict. His was an evil, totalitarian regime that America was morally bound to oppose. Herbert Feis and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., both of whom had worked for the U.S. government, set down these lines of analysis in the 1950s and ’60s. This “orthodox” interpretation has never really disappeared: The opening of Soviet and Chinese archives in the 1990s brought renewed focus on Stalin’s paranoia. The Cold War’s end with the apparent victory of the United States and liberal capitalism gave the orthodox view a boost, in works like John Lewis Gaddis’s 2006 history, *The Cold War*.

The second school of thought, almost as old, is critical of American behavior rather than Soviet actions. In this “revisionist” interpretation, blame for the conflicts of the Cold War lies with capitalism and its defenders. America’s need to restore global markets after World War II, and to control the extraction of natural resources, led it to encroach on Soviet defenses. America assumed it would emerge from the war as the dominant global power, and in its efforts to engineer that outcome created the Cold War. William Appleman Williams pioneered this interpretation in 1959. It rose in influence during the Vietnam War and can still be seen, for example, in the writings of Noam Chomsky. To simplify enormous and complex bodies of scholarship to their barest essences, orthodoxy held communism primarily responsible, while revisionism blamed capitalism.

But the Cold War, as Orwell foresaw, would reach far beyond the two principal actors. While historians have been pushing beyond the “orthodox” and “revisionist” binary for some time, it is Odd Arne Westad, a professor at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, who has most successfully constructed an account of the Cold War that is truly global in its scope. In his Bancroft Prize-winning book, *The Global Cold War*, published in 2005, Westad contended that the conflict shaped the internal politics of every country in the world. Any advance for U.S. interests, no matter how far-flung, was seen as a setback for Soviet interests, and vice versa. For many countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, the Cold War heralded the final stage of European colonial control. Civil wars in Korea, Ethiopia, and Nicaragua took on international dimensions and attracted international support. At every table of government in every country around the world, there was an empty chair, potentially to be occupied by the power of the U.S. or the USSR. The Cold War belonged to the whole world, not just the superpowers armed with atomic weapons.

With his latest book, a wise and observant history titled simply *The Cold War*, Westad aims to bring this global view

ILLUSTRATION BY GUY BILLOUT



of the conflict to a wider audience. The new book provides a more comprehensive account of the Cold War than his earlier work, tracking its repercussions in every corner of the world, and spends less time in debates with other historians. It also arrives at a moment when we must grasp the dynamics of the Cold War if we want to understand some of today's most urgent developments, from North Korea's acquisition of long-range nuclear missiles to the rise of socialist movements in Western democracies. Although the Cold War is receding into the past—roughly half the world's population is too young to have memories of it—we are still living in its shadow and trying to discover the possibilities created by its end.

**UNLIKE A SHOOTING WAR**, with an opening battle and a closing treaty, the Cold War's beginning and end have always been shrouded in mist. There is general agreement that it started between 1945 and 1948, and ended between 1989 and 1991. Tensions ran especially high from the end of World War II in 1945 to the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, then relaxed somewhat, only to rebound in the 1980s. But throughout those four-plus decades, the threat that atomic warfare would destroy human life loomed large.

Westad has long argued that we should take a broader view of the roots of the Cold War. For him, its distinctive feature was the competition between capitalism and communism. In his earlier book, he placed the beginning of the Cold War in the Russian Revolution of 1917. In this sense, Westad's concept of the conflict mirrors what the British historian Eric Hobsbawm described as the "short twentieth century"—the period, lasting from 1914 to 1991, marked by global competition between capitalist and communist states. In Westad's view, capitalism and communism presented two opposing visions of modernity, each rooted in the transformation in the early twentieth century of the United States and Russia into empires with international missions:

The competition was for the society of the future, and there were only two fully modern versions of it: the market, with all its imperfections and injustices, and the plan, which was rational and integrated. Soviet ideology made the state a machine acting for the betterment of mankind, while most Americans resented centralized state power and feared its consequences. The stage was set for an intense competition, in which the stakes were seen to be no less than the survival of the world.

With its early start date and its focus on ideology, Westad's new history of the Cold War follows many familiar beats, but includes some unexpected fills. Cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union during World War II,

never carried out with much trust, deteriorated into postwar conflict as the USSR expected capitalism to experience a crisis, and America feared the same. Tensions heightened as the United States attempted to contain Soviet expansion, and the USSR constructed a defensive perimeter in Eastern Europe. The new states of the Soviet bloc excluded hostile forces from government—which meant suppressing the right, splitting the left, and putting loyal Communists in charge of minority governments that would necessarily have to depend on Moscow and rule by force.

In Western Europe, the United States faced a similar challenge. Needing to ensure a return to viable capitalism, administrations from Truman on also split the left, ignored the crimes of the right, and worked to bar Communists from power. The United States, however, could accommodate a broader range of outcomes in Europe than the Soviets could. It tolerated countries in which the moderate left operated

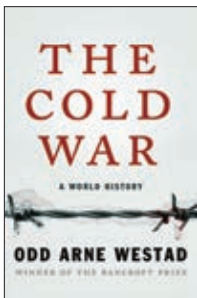
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## **We are still living in the shadow of the Cold War and trying to discover the possibilities created by its end.**

democratically and built up the welfare state, because doing so undermined the appeal of communism by proving that capitalism could provide public services and a social safety net. But if Communists threatened to gain too much influence in Western Europe, America attempted to undermine their success through covert action—as it did in elections in France in 1947 and in Italy in 1948. Meanwhile, the dictators and military governments that the United States propped up in Greece and Spain burnished their "democratic" credentials by appealing to anti-communism.

Throughout the emerging "Third World," by contrast, the United States allowed governments very little leeway to experiment with even non-Communist paths to social democracy. In 1953 and 1954, when elected governments tried to nationalize British-owned oil in Iran and distribute American-owned land in Guatemala to peasants, they were overthrown by the CIA. Similarly, the Soviet Union could not abide political reforms within its sphere of influence: A more open socialism in Hungary was crushed in 1956, when Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest.

In this, Orwell's predictions of the nature of Cold War conflict were imperfect. In general, the superpowers did not threaten poorer countries with nuclear annihilation: They simultaneously courted them in a battle for allegiance and undercut efforts at reform that threatened the superpowers' interests. Some of our present global inequalities, as well as the political instability of poorer countries, can be attributed



**THE COLD WAR: A WORLD HISTORY**  
BY ODD ARNE WESTAD  
Basic Books, 720pp., \$40.00

to Cold War superpowers forcefully vetoing attempts by the world's poorer nations to solve their national problems through democratic means.

**BY DEFINING THE** Cold War so widely, both geographically and chronologically, Westad invites questions about what the “war” does and does not encompass. Surely not everything between 1917 and 1991 can be described as the result of the Cold War; that period, after all, includes the World War II alliance between the U.S. and the USSR. Nor did all historically significant changes that occurred in the period of the “high” Cold War after 1945—such as the destruction of European empires and the proliferation of postcolonial states—directly result from the conflict. But Westad’s argument might be summarized by insisting that the Cold War needs to be understood as a struggle for hegemony, not just power. Both superpowers attempted to gather influence and to secure commitments to their way of seeing and interpreting the world. And that means that even the phenomena that are not reducible to Cold War tensions were affected by it.

Consider the process of decolonization that accelerated in the years after World War II. The United States nominally took an anti-colonial position. It supported decolonization—as it did in Dutch Indonesia—if it thought the brutality of colonial rule might make communism look attractive by comparison. But in other cases, such as Vietnam, a French colony until 1945—America simply took over colonial projects from weakened European allies. The Soviet Union, for its part, generally lined up behind forces of national liberation (except in its sphere of influence), if only because they had the potential to undermine its rival. Some countries, like India, tried to reject Cold War politics altogether, mixing democratic elections with economic planning and formally establishing the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961. Decolonization, in short, was not specifically a Cold War phenomenon, but the way it played out in many countries was certainly shaped by Cold War tensions.

In a work as sweeping as *The Cold War*, even major events and controversies get passed over relatively quickly. But Westad brilliantly reduces topics that have generated books upon books to their most essential qualities. Take the question of the extent to which U.S. foreign policy was designed to



Khrushchev and Nixon, 1959. Earlier histories of the Cold War tended to overlook its global scale.

protect capitalism. When the CIA overthrew the government of Guatemala in 1954, for example, was the agency doing the bidding of the United Fruit Company, the U.S. corporation whose holdings were being confiscated? Or did it fear that Communists, who had gained administrative and advisory roles in Guatemala’s new government, were building up too much power in America’s sphere of influence? Westad argues that the purpose of U.S. foreign policy was not the defense of particular American companies and their interests, but a much larger project: “the expansion of capitalism” itself, which would “promote access to raw materials and future markets for the United States and its allies.” To this end, America was willing to sacrifice short-term economic interests and the defense of particular companies; soon after the CIA staged its coup in Guatemala, for example, United Fruit was subjected to antitrust rulings at home.

Cold War tensions, though reduced in the 1970s, rose again in the 1980s. But they did so against a background of continued consumer shortages in the Soviet sphere. (There are a few decent Communist jokes in the book: “A woman walks into a food store. ‘Do you have any meat?’ ‘No, we don’t.’ ‘What about milk?’ ‘We only deal with meat. The store where they

have no milk is across the street.”) At the same time, economic recovery in the capitalist world, combined with increasingly globalized telecommunications, advertised the West’s advantages far more effectively than any propaganda. Soviet reforms intended to open up the Communist system instead brought it down. For the people of the Soviet bloc, it really was a moment of liberation. But for who else, and for how long?

**IF *THE COLD WAR*** has a weakness, it’s simply that it adds little to its groundbreaking predecessor, and lacks some of the older work’s most thrilling analysis. Published in 2005, *The Global Cold War* was deeply entwined with the idea that the conflict was fundamentally ideological. It devoted two brilliant opening chapters to explaining the self-conception of the major players. America’s vision centered on a belief in personal liberty, inseparable from private property, and a skepticism toward centralized power; while the Soviet Union’s vision was based on a rejection of the market. Each side believed that following its model would better humanity.

This reading of the Cold War reflected its own ideologically embattled times: Four years after the attacks of September 11, and near the peaks of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States was once again embroiled in a conflict that it presented as an ideological clash, this time between Western liberalism and “radical” Islam. The rhetoric of the “war on terror” wasn’t just an analog to the rhetoric of the Cold War: It

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allowed the United States to continue pursuing a neocolonial agenda in the Middle East and Central Asia. Westad reminds the reader that September 11 was a form of foreign intervention in the West—a reversal of the traditional pattern, and one that was likely to continue into the future.

If there has been a shift in Westad’s reading of the Cold War since 2005, it is toward the view that the West won because it was materially, not ideologically, stronger. The battle was waged over great ideas, but it was won on the fields of production statistics. It was capitalism’s ability to outpace Soviet growth at key junctures that made ideological victory possible. Certainly Westad’s subtle shift in emphasis makes sense in our era of heightened inequality and growing anxieties about capitalism’s stability. It used to be heterodox and radical to argue that the prosecution of the Cold War was underpinned by America’s desire to spread capitalism: Arthur Schlesinger Jr. described William Appleman Williams as a “pro-Communist scholar” for his critiques of U.S. diplomacy. But if you take

**“A SENSATION.”**  
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Westad's long view, it's clear that the Cold War was always defined by the struggle between capitalism and communism to allocate global resources. This perspective makes the old orthodox and revisionist debates about "who started it" in the 1940s seem just that: old.

The victory of American capitalism over Soviet communism did not, however, bring an end to the struggle over the global distribution of wealth. Among U.S. allies, those who conformed to American conceptions of free markets did not fare equally. It was a bargain that worked out relatively well for Western Europe, as well as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. But it didn't work out well for most postcolonial nations, or for most post-Soviet states, where living standards fell along with the Soviet Union. As the USSR dissolved, a kind of market messianism led the United States to overlook the complexities of postwar planning. It would do the same again in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, which it expected to be able to remake in its own image. The Cold War has ended, but this kind of hubris remains.

At the same time, the end of the Cold War has left us with a range of new political possibilities. The Cold War engaged the United States in a struggle between capitalism and socialism around the globe, while suppressing it strenuously at home. But nearly 30 years later, popular support for socialism is emerging as a serious political force in the West. A 2016 survey found that only 42 percent of millennials in the United States said they supported capitalism, versus 51 percent who say they reject it. Many young Americans today feel no visceral connection to the Cold War equation of capitalism-as-freedom. What form the socialism of the future will take, if any, remains the subject of intense political struggle. But it will be worked out in a fundamentally post-Cold War environment, in which the nightmarish aspects of Soviet communism no longer exist—either as a bogeyman to be used to suppress the left, or as a goad to inspire capitalism to defensive reforms. The political terrain has changed dramatically, opening up a space for ideas and movements that were unthinkable in the paranoia of an earlier era.

Westad, like any good historian, is aware that his analysis of the past is situated in its own place in history. He wonders whether future scholars may de-emphasize the Cold War as the most notable feature of the second half of the twentieth century, in favor of the economic rise of Asia, or some other historical development we have yet to recognize. One likely candidate, as seen from the present, is the climate change that imperils humanity's future. In their competition for resources, neither the Soviet Union nor the United States bothered to take care of the environment; but because capitalism won, it will be held responsible for the adverse consequences of its success. Even if historians of the future find other aspects of the twentieth century more important than those that we emphasize today, they too will be grappling with the complex legacies of the Cold War. Perhaps they will see it as that time in the twentieth century when human beings whistled past one graveyard while digging another. ☪

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