

Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization and the Third World Order

By Jeffrey James Byrne

New York: Oxford University Press, 2016; 388 pp.

Reviewed by Dina Matar

Dm27@soas.ac.uk

Research on the international history of the “Third World” has proliferated since 2005, with the publication of several books adopting a diversity of approaches and methods, focusing on the rhetoric and cultural politics of liberation and de-colonising movements and providing alternatives to the nation-state framework favoured until then. Departing from, but also embracing this scholarship, Jeffrey James Byrne’s *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization and the Third World Order* offers a conceptually-refreshing narrative that re-focuses attention to the statist, regional and global politics of liberation movements and South-South diplomacy in the mid-20th century. Drawing on unprecedented access to Algerian foreign ministry archives, an impressive corpus of primary materials from archives in half a dozen other countries and wider-ranging interviews, Byrne charts the evolution of the ‘Third World’ project from the first Bandung Conference in 1955 to 1965 while focusing on Algeria’s de-colonising tradition and relevance to the worldwide network of revolutionary and guerrilla movements and the Third World’s ‘Cold War’.

In making his argument, Byrne first examines the changing politics and international strategies of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) during its war with France, including its adoption of more encompassing visions of “decolonization” that necessitated socio-economic transformation on a global scale while continuing to embrace Marxist/Leninist/Fanonist/Maoist/Guevarian ideas. Drawing on a corpus of evidence, Byrne shows that after independence the Algerians played a leading role in Arab-African affairs as well as the Third World project that challenged structural inequalities in the international system and the world economy through initiatives such as the Non-Aligned Movement and the Afro-Asian movement. However, departing from the thrust of much of the scholarship on Third World liberation movements, Byrne does not focus as much on the ideologies of de-colonisation processes as on practical diplomacy - the strategies and practices de-colonising entities and newly independent states, such as Algeria, engaged with. These practices, as he writes, not only served to pit the superpowers against their second-tier powers, but also pitted these latter powers against one another, thus exposing a ‘multi-polar Cold War outside of the Western hemisphere’ that ‘began well before the period of détente and Nixon’s visit to China in the early 1970s’ (Byrne: 9). As such, Byrne offers a corrective to the dominant narrative of the Cold War as simply being ‘out there,’ or as a reality of realpolitik that wanted to crush the aspirations of anti-colonial leaders. Instead, he underlines how these leaders were also involved in different diplomatic strategies of their own, or, as he calls it, South-South diplomacy.

Byrne’s major contribution to recent international history scholarship is his attention to Algeria’s efforts to build South-South relations which he claims eventually led to the transformation of the transnational, subversive nature of anti-colonial internationalism into a relatively conservative state-centric postcolonial order. It was through such efforts that “Third Worldism”, as an ideology and as a practice, evolved from a form of transnational resistance that undermined the authority of the colonial state into a regimented and orderly diplomatic process that reinforced the authority of the postcolonial state. Decolonisation, in this perspective, was a process that did not simply discard the colonial project, but one that also recuperated and rehashed many of the developmentalist and governmental politics of the West. Such an argument would not stand easily with the rhetoric of the anti-imperialist movements and Third World de-colonisation and liberation movements, but Byrne provides ample support for this argument through his meticulous citations and attention to records, diplomatic documents and archives as well as interviews with key officials, which suggests the recognition of Algeria’s leaders of the need to translate rhetoric into practicable policies.

The narrative Byrne weaves together begins with a well-structured introduction that sums up the argument the book offers before he goes on to chart the evolution of Third World project and the transformation of Third Worldism from a transnational mode of cooperation that subverted the authority of the colonial state into an international collaboration that defended the authority of the post-colonial state. In subsequent chapters, Byrne focuses specifically on Algeria’s central role in this transformation through its practicable policies and which have earned the capital Algiers the nickname “Mecca of Revolution”, coined by Cabral, the national liberation leader from

Portuguese Guinea-Bissau in the 1960s. Overall, the book's structure is coherent and fluid, beginning with the chapter titled 'Method Men' in which Byrne details how the Algerian nationalist movement evolved in tandem with the Third Worldist movement while showing that both the FLN's revolutionary strategy and the effectiveness of the Third World outlook worked with and not against the new structures of international power in the Cold War era. The subsequent chapters move on to trace how Third World actors adopted the more provocative strategy of pitting the Soviets against the Americans, underlining that the Cold War was fought elsewhere before addressing how the FLN began to integrate itself into the Third World movements, opening up new diplomatic channels in the Southern Hemisphere, in particular Cuba, as France renewed its military and political offensives in the country. These moves culminated with the GPRA (provisional Government of the Algerian Republic) attaining the pinnacle of its Third Worldist diplomacy when it participated in the first non-aligned summit in Belgrade as a sovereign government. In later chapters, Byrne addresses local struggles over the meaning of liberation and Algerian leader Ahmad Ben Bella's ambition to pursue a 'sweeping globalism' intended to make Algeria a superpower, as he often called it, through translating Third Worldist rhetoric into a largely successful and practicable foreign policy doctrine. It was this doctrine that saw Algeria contribute to the founding of the Organization of African Unity in Addis Ababa in 1963, advocate the expansion of the Third World coalition into Latin America and sympathetic states in Europe, such as Yugoslavia, support moves for Maghrebi and Arab unity and provide a model of liberation ideology and practices to the Palestine Liberation Organisation. The coup that deposed Ben Bella in June 1965 and brought in a new era under his rival Boumedienne would obviously be a turning point in Algeria's and the Third World history. As Byrne put it in his concluding chapter, "Thus, ten years after the original Bandung Conference had made such a vital contribution to the FLN's survival and eventual victory, Algiers became a place where "Afro-Asianism" dies as a relevant organizing theme in international affairs," (Byrne:286).

Byrne does not delve deeply into the post-1965 era nor into the external conditions that would undermine Afro-Asianism and South-South diplomacy, but he nevertheless offers a credible argument that the Third World project, initially a subversive phenomenon outside the boundaries of the state, was embraced by newly independent countries, such as Algeria, but that these countries proceeded to strengthen their legitimacy through statist approaches. In this book on international history, Byrne provides scholars interested in post-colonial history and diplomacy with provocative ideas about revolutionary movements. Importantly, he suggests that revolution, as the Algerian case shows, need not only be disseminated as an idea, but as a skill that required the adoption of a hybrid of various 'outside ideological influences with supposedly authentic indigenous identifiers' (p.8) in order to translate rhetoric into practicable policies. In this way Byrnes gives a convincing explanation of why the nation-state model prevailed.

Word count: 1,234