

The “Cold War” and Other Frames: On the Challenges of Writing Global History

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This essay is part of a forum on new histories of the Cold War. All [contributions to the forum can be found here](#).

What is global history and how do we go about writing it? What does it mean for our understanding of the so-called Cold War, and for its historiography? These are the challenges that the books in this roundtable take up, as three regional specialists turn their hand to the telling of a century of simultaneous connections between far-flung regions of the world. The precise rationale of global history remains contested, but its mainstays are a focus on exchange and entanglements across borders, and on the global as a frame for the local, conditioning political phenomena on different scales. This is the approach pursued by all three authors, Paul Thomas Chamberlain, Lorenz Lüthi, and Kristina Spohr, who weave together threads of elite decision making, party politics, and resistance movement strategies from Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Europe, capturing multiple perspectives on unfolding events. The results are impressive: three painstakingly researched, carefully assembled, and eminently readable narratives of transcontinental conflict and conciliation in the twentieth century.

In their precise forms and focuses, two of these works compare closely, given their explicit objectives to bring in decolonization as a concurrent process, to center the agency of small and middle powers in the “Third World,” and thereby to illustrate the complexity of the Cold

War and its theatres. In his study identifying the most violent trajectories of the global Cold War, Paul Chamberlin successfully demolishes the west-centric myth of the “long peace,” revealing patterns that drove the spread of bloodshed along the postcolonial Eurasian rim. For his part, Lorenz Lüthi relates the “cold wars” in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, connecting systemic with structural change at regional and national levels, and highlighting horizontal connections across these. By contrast, Kristina Spohr’s study of the transitional years of 1989–1992 focuses on the European theatre, and on the actions and motivations of state leaders. In this respect her account may conform more closely to the earlier approaches from which her fellow authors seek to depart; yet Spohr’s goal is arguably different, scrutinizing the end of the Cold War and its global legacies, both “post-square” and “post-wall.” Moreover, Spohr shares with Chamberlin and Lüthi their use of a rich archival base, ranging in her case from the United States and Russia to Germany, Britain, France, and Estonia, and extending in Lüthi’s work to Australian, Austrian, Bulgarian, Canadian, Chinese, Indian, Serbian, and Swedish sources. Chamberlin is the most reliant on U.S.-based collections of the three, but he also incorporates non-governmental organization records, oral histories, eyewitness accounts, and interviews.

1. Cold War?

For me, three broad questions are thrown up by a comparative reading of these ambitious works. The first relates to the very frame of the Cold War itself: how helpful is it, and how does this vary across the regions considered? All three authors build on recent revisionist global and regional histories to offer an “inclusive” understanding of the Cold War, whose utility lies in its reach. Dispensing with conventions on bipolarity, they show that the Cold War brought into close contact an array of actors. Indeed Chamberlin and Lüthi prefer to add a third superpower to the “core”—China and Britain (until 1956) respectively—while Spohr juxtaposes the United States with China from the outset by relating the aftermath of Tiananmen Square as marking Beijing’s exit from the Cold War. The three scholars are also careful to spotlight political phenomena which did not originate with the superpower clash itself. Lüthi is emphatic about conflicts in the Middle East with “roots in the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Western colonialism, and the Arab–Israeli antagonism” and commendably dedicates entire sections to the alternative ideologies that fired imaginations across the “Third World,” notably Afro-Asianism and non-alignment. Chamberlin and Spohr similarly provide granular detail on state-opposition dynamics across Europe and Asia, discussing Chinese politics at either end of the century in turn.

Yet this attention to detail ironically casts some doubt as to whether the Cold War frame is the most useful for analyzing such geopolitically disparate cases. Even by these scholars’ own accounts, there appear other persuasive frames which could be considered at least complementary. Recent international relations scholarship has illuminated the racialized constitution of the world order,[1] and its maintenance through imperial capitalism, which was formative of the European and American political projects under study here. How might

attention to the “global color line” have informed analysis of western players’ attitudes towards Egypt’s Suez nationalization, or the so-called “rogue states” of Iraq and North Korea for example? How might Spohr have conceived of the west’s selective liberal humanitarianism in this light?

The struggles between imperial powers and national liberation movements—the process we somewhat vaguely term decolonization—present another obvious frame. Even as Lüthi and Chamberlin foreground the reach and toll of European empire, their analyses can at times hew closely to high politics, in which the declarations of independence of the mid-twentieth century are taken to mark the “end” of colonial interventionism. Yet in the Middle East for instance, neocolonial meddling has been routine. We know, for example, of British collaboration with the United States in their 1957 joint intelligence plan Omega. Its objective was to build up the Saudi monarch against Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser, and promote pan-Islamist conservatism against progressive pan-Arabism. This surely affects Chamberlin and Lüthi’s assessments of Islamist ideology as transcending the Cold War context, or as fomenting sectarian violence only from the 1970s on. We also know of France’s persistent influence in post-independence Syria and Lebanon, into the civil war and beyond. In so rightly highlighting the agency of small and medium powers then, there remains a risk that an interventionist great power is inadvertently presented as a bystander.

The third and perhaps most immediately compelling frame is U.S. empire. How might Lüthi’s account of the Egyptian-Israeli peace initiative—presented as taking the Americans aback—be nuanced by reference to the years of U.S. pressures on Egypt for a settlement (heavily weighted in Israel’s favor), including Henry Kissinger’s “shuttle diplomacy” between Egypt and Israel after the 1973 war? Chamberlin’s account is certainly an education in the brutality of U.S. interventionism in the Third World. To push him further on this, however: how much more strategic might the “Brzezinski concept” (489) of support for the Afghan mujahideen appear if placed more firmly in the context of decades of U.S.-Saudi collaboration against secular liberation nationalisms? Lastly, how differently might Spohr’s story of Saddam Hussein’s shock invasion of Kuwait read if more were made of his longstanding support by the U.S.? In the above three senses then, we might ask whether the Cold War framing can obscure what were in fact European or U.S. foreign policy objectives in a geostrategic location such as the Middle East.

2. Explanation vs Description

A second question arises regarding the explanatory frameworks employed in each case: what processes can we confidently pinpoint as having consistently and causally linked the different scales and actors considered by our authors as pertaining to the “Cold War”? For Chamberlin, “Each battlefront was made up of local struggles linked to one of three regional clusters of warfare that were in turn connected to the global networks of the Cold War” (14). Lüthi similarly describes an “eclectic method” with a double frame, encompassing “diffusion”

and “spillover effects” across regions (7). Spohr also employs the frame technique: “So, the European story has to be framed within another, global triangle – itself a continuation of the Sino-Soviet-American ‘tripolarity’ that was emerging in the later stages of the Cold War” (4). The construction of such complex and yet argument driven narratives is admirable, as is their flow and accessibility. One wonders however, amidst all this thick description, how we can be sure of recurrent explanatory factors, or whether the three scholars view such an approach as reductive. Do their global histories require a nimbler reader, prepared to draw some of their own connections and conclusions?

3. Sources and Silences

Thirdly and finally, which sources and methodologies can we use to conduct a genuinely *global* history, and what are the limits of such an endeavor? All three scholars provide models in terms of geographical and linguistic breadth, making use of the Cold War International History Project (Chamberlin), and working with the less commonly used archives of Australia, Canada (Lüthi), and Estonia (Spohr). These are combined astutely with relevant secondary literature. The sources, it has to be said, largely come from state archives and elites’ memoirs, and here an issue can arise in the treatment of such texts, and in the degree to which the positionality of their authors and indeed record keepers, is critically engaged. All three texts display at least some instances of the adoption of official U.S. perspectives gleaned from their sources, most notably the depiction of the U.S. and president George H. Bush as peace-loving by Spohr.

Sources and their archival assembly can also enable silences, as can their subsequent interpretation in history, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot so memorably demonstrated. The three authors say little of events in southern Africa and Central and South America, for example: was this also a matter of sources? The comparative dearth of non-state archival sources is certainly a factor in the top-down kind of narrative offered. Was there also room to highlight the dense popular networks involved in the contestation of imperialism, their counterhegemonic claims, and their persistence over time? This might have nuanced some of the presentations of ideology given in turn. In the end we hear more about Manichean sectarian ideologies, endorsed by various nation-states, than the trans- or pan-national solidarities articulated by grassroots actors. Was the Arab League, for all its significance, genuinely the main seat of pan-Arabist politics in the Cold War, and did the Afro-Asian summits represent the extent of this ideology and movement?

Ultimately, the scope of these three global histories makes it possible for any regional specialist to demand more of their authors and to identify further avenues for scholarly engagement. The questions posed here are intended to open up conversations around research agendas and methodology in our roundtable, but not at all to detract from the

achievements and contributions of the works under review. Each of them is sure to become an important reference point for students and scholars alike, and to inspire further research in the same ambitious and conscientious spirit.

NOTES

[1] Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda, and Robbie Shilliam, eds., *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line* (London: Routledge, 2015).