

BOOK REVIEW

The History of the Cold War, Thirty Years After

Lorenz M Lüthi. *Cold Wars: Asia, the Middle East, Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 756 pp. \$75.00 (paperback).

Thirty years ago, the Soviet Union disintegrated and the last pillars of the Cold War collapsed. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union could no longer support friendly regimes across the globe. Moscow's military fragmented, as the Soviet empire broke apart into numerous independent pieces. Soviet control over Eastern Europe receded, and the former satellite states in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia began their efforts to join the European Union. Most stunningly, the Federal Republic of Germany absorbed its Eastern neighbor within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The Warsaw Pact ceased to exist.

So much has changed since then, including the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. For scholars, the archives have opened in many formerly closed societies, as well as the countries more traditionally accessible to scholarly researchers. In some cases, including Russia, archives have opened and closed again. Historians have also moved beyond the archives, to extend their research into new topics, including social identities, public cultures, and especially group ideologies.

Perhaps more than the archives, the perspective of three decades has given scholars a broader view of the Cold War. What was it really all about? How did the Cold War change over time? What were its lasting effects? These are very different questions from the ones that motivated decades of Cold War research (and traditional graduate student training): Who started the Cold War? How did we avoid nuclear disaster?

The profile of Cold War historians has also changed. The first generations of scholars in the field, at least as recognized by the U.S. academy, were largely experts on the United States or the Soviet Union, or both. A number of historians of Europe, Latin America, East Asia, and other regions also wrote pioneering books, but they were a distinct minority. For most of the twentieth century, the study of the Cold War revolved around the superpowers, and those who studied them.

That is not true any longer. Three decades out, Cold War historians have expertise, experiences, and especially language skills that take them far beyond

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Washington, Moscow, Berlin, and even Beijing. Two of the leaders in this globalization of Cold War scholarship, Odd Arne Westad and Lorenz Lüthi, have recently published new surveys of the topic. Their books fundamentally rewrite this history on a larger world canvas, with powerful implications for how we think about the present.

Westad's *The Cold War: A World History* provides a detailed and compelling account of a system of international relations that emerged in the nineteenth century with the spread of nation-states and the emergence of new military and industrial technologies. The United States and the Soviet Union rose early in the next century to replace British imperial predominance and offer alternative political orders—liberal capitalist and communist—for managing the world. Westad explains how diverse actors, from China and Vietnam to Cuba and Afghanistan, exploited the Cold War system to their advantage—acquiring resources from the superpowers, diverting their reform efforts, and boldly challenging them at times.<sup>1</sup>

Lüthi published his book, *Cold Wars: Asia, the Middle East, Europe*, three years after Westad's, and it offers a fascinating and worthwhile alternative. The two books do not contradict, but they take very different approaches. Westad begins by reflecting on his Norwegian boyhood, divided by the Cold War; Lüthi opens with Richard Wagner's opera, *Die Walküre*, and its nesting of separate but interconnected stories that overlap at key moments. Westad's account is global, but it remains anchored in the superpowers and the most dangerous conflicts between them; Lüthi builds his narrative around different regions and their particular dynamics. Westad sees a single Cold War with many adjacent pieces; Lüthi envisions many Cold Wars with different beginnings and endings.

Lüthi's book opens with two chapters on the decline of the British empire in the mid-twentieth century, and the power vacuums that decline created, particularly in the Middle East. The author discusses how the United States and the Soviet Union sought to replace British power, but he points out that the alliances they formed were "rash," "improvised," "shoddy," and "unsound" (36). The Suez Crisis of 1956 exemplified how frequently the countries in the same bloc had radically different goals, and how poorly they coordinated their actions. Lüthi is particularly strong in analyzing how the Arab League, formed in 1945, stepped into the breach and created an independent political force to challenge and exploit the two superpowers where possible. Instead of seeing Cold War divisions come to the Middle East after the Second World War, Lüthi argues that the region remained fragmented until the late 1950s.

He similarly questions orthodoxies about Cold War divisions in Asia. Lüthi writes persuasively of a three-way dynamic in the region between China, Vietnam, and India. The leaders of these three countries jockeyed for independence from the superpowers and for predominance around their contested territories. They also struggled with the challenges of state-building and power

1. Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (New York, 2017).

projection abroad. Lüthi offers compelling details about the growing tensions between China and Vietnam, leading to war in 1979. By that time, Cold War divisions meant little in the region.

It is worth noting that Lüthi's account of Asia gives very little attention to Japan, which Jennifer Miller and others have described as a postwar democracy largely defined by the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> Lüthi is also particularly critical of India, which he claims was "barely ready for independence in 1947" (163). He seems to blame leaders in New Delhi almost exclusively for provoking the conflict with China in 1962, and radicalizing Pakistan after the 1971 war. He cites Australian diplomats who claimed India had turned Pakistan into a "Middle Eastern" country. Lüthi writes: "India had alienated anti-communist countries in Southeast Asia with its 'patronising attitudes' and Arab countries with its war against a fellow Muslim country" (179).

These two examples show the challenges of trying to cover so much. Lüthi's book is impressive because he probes so deeply into the regional dynamics of the Middle East and Asia. He goes well beyond bilateral accounts of the United States and Egypt, or Israel, or China, or India to analyze how the various countries interacted with one another and the superpowers over the course of four decades. His reading in the available archives and secondary literature is incredibly thorough. Nonetheless, certain parts of the regions he analyzes are flattened, ignored, or perhaps in India's case, stereotyped a little.

Lüthi is on his firmest footing for the third region he analyzes: Europe. His chapter on West European integration captures how insightful his regional approach can be. Cold War influences—the Soviet threat and U.S. containment—pushed West Germany, France, Italy, and eventually Great Britain together in a Common Market and a military alliance (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) that brought enduring stability to a formerly war-torn continent. Integration also seeded prosperity and policy cooperation around human rights, public health, and other issues.

This was not a global phenomenon, and Lüthi warns against generalizing about the Cold War from the West European experience. Instead, the unique geographical and historical characteristics of the region made integration possible: "The collective life experience and similarity in political outlook of the founding fathers was an important lubricant in the initial years of integration. The fusion of the heavy industrial sector, explored in rudimentary form in the 1920s, was equally decisive. The integration of the central backbones of the economies of the original Six predetermined the further path of integration" (380). Lüthi emphasizes that for all the U.S. assistance that was crucial for European integration, it remained a project aimed at economic independence from both the Soviet Union and the United States.

2. See Jennifer M. Miller, *Cold War Democracy: The United States and Japan* (Cambridge, MA, 2019).

Perhaps the most creative part of Lüthi's analysis of Europe comes in his chapter on the Vatican. Although scholars have given extensive attention to Pope John Paul II's anti-communist efforts in the late 1970s and 1980s, Lüthi shows that the Vatican influenced politics on the continent in previous decades. Popes John XXIII and Paul VI encouraged détente between East and West, opposed nuclear weapons testing, and supported human rights. Lower-level clergy became involved with anti-communist activism in Poland in the 1970s, setting the stage for John Paul II. "The Vatican," Lüthi writes, "seemed to have always been a step ahead of larger developments in the global Cold War" (486). Church leaders might have had divine inspiration; they certainly had intimate knowledge of their region and its many parishes.

The greatest payoff from Lüthi's regional analysis is his discussion of Cold War endings. By the late 1970s he shows how the Middle East, Asia, and Europe each transcended what were really short-term and largely superficial Cold War divisions. The Iranian Revolution, the Sino-Vietnamese War, and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) limited superpower influence and allowed local actors to assert leadership. Moscow and Washington were largely reactive to global dynamics slipping from their control.

In this context, Lüthi makes a stunning and powerful observation: the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which meant so much for the integration of the European continent, "had little meaning in Asia or the Middle East" (563). The escalating nuclear arms race in the early 1980s, new interventions in Afghanistan and Central America, and belligerent rhetoric between the superpowers actually prolonged the Cold War for another decade, according to this account. As they witnessed their exaggerated global ambitions come undone, Soviet and U.S. leaders doubled down.<sup>3</sup>

The Soviet Union only shifted direction when General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev realized his regime could no longer compete, and then he unwittingly, according to Lüthi, unraveled his government. The United States did not score a "knockout punch," or even achieve most of its goals. It simply outlasted its opponent, and then collected some of the apparent winnings (564).

In reality, the winnings were few because the smaller and middle powers had shaped the course of the Cold Wars, not the United States or the Soviet Union in this account. Lüthi sees superpower influence as effective only when it sought to "nudge pre-existing regional developments" (608). His conceptualization of global affairs is poly-centric, diverse, and anti-hierarchical. Place has power; distant interventions rarely succeed as intended. This is a history that surely speaks to our own uncertain, disorderly twenty-first century moment.

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3. For an excellent recent analysis of the Cold War in the early 1980s, see Simon Miles, *Engaging the Evil Empire: Washington, Moscow, and the Beginning of the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY, 2020).

Both Westad and Lüthi have a lot to offer readers who want to conceptualize the Cold War in systemic and regionally specific ways. Both bring out different dimensions of globalization. Westad and Lüthi take us a long way from the obsessions with origins and superpower competition to a richer understanding of the complex dynamics over a half-century of international change. This is precisely the perspective we expect from historians who can cross boundaries and see the period in more holistic terms thirty years after the fact. We can indeed only begin to understand the legacies of the Cold War in Afghanistan, the Koreas, Ukraine, and especially the United States when we question the inherited assumptions that still underpin so many of our current policies. This history matters more than ever. Lüthi's book is an enduring contribution.

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