Despite some excellent new scholarship on neutrality and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), wide gaps continue to render our understanding of this key Cold War phenomenon incomplete. Much of the literature on NAM can be more accurately described as pro-Soviet propaganda than scholarship. As the first comparative examination of neutrality and neutralism in the Cold War, this edited volume therefore makes a significant contribution.

Is there a meaningful difference between neutralism, neutrality, and non-alignment? The coeditors argue in the affirmative: “neutrality and neutralism or non-alignment did not share the same origins, history, and trajectory during the Cold War” (p. 2). While neutrality had a long and distinguished history, neutralism or non-alignment (used here more or less interchangeably) arose as a response to decolonization and the emergence of the Cold War.

In the opening chapter, Jussi M. Hanhimäki argues that the ideological dimension of the Cold War rendered neutrality in the conflict not “truly” neutral, in that all societies made decisions about the relationship between the state and the economy (p. 18). The European neutrals, moreover, were not content to remain passively on the sidelines but instead actively engaged in the key debates that came to define the ideological component of the Cold War rivalry and in doing so, helped to shape the contours of the post-Cold War world. In her essay locating the roots of non-alignment in European neutrality, Rinna Kullaa demonstrates, on the basis of research in Yugoslav, Russian, Finnish, French, and US archives, that Yugoslav-Soviet and Soviet-Finnish relations in the 1950s defined the parameters of neutralism as a foreign policy in the early European Cold War. This impressive multiarchival research affords Kullaa a unique vantage point from which to explore the emergence of NAM.

The Bandung Conference is the subject of Eric D. Pullen’s contribution, and he argues that although US policymakers sought to sow discord between the meeting’s participants, such conflicts existed independently of US machinations. The most noteworthy aspect of Pullen’s piece is his exploration of the relationship between diplomacy and propaganda as viewed from Delhi and Washington. Svetozar Rajak contributes a chapter on Yugoslavia’s vital role in NAM, exploring the shift from “passive neutralism to active un-commitment” (p. 72), a shift necessitated by the intensification of Soviet efforts to isolate Yugoslavia and neutralize its influence on the Communist bloc.

Jürgen Dinkel’s chapter can be considered revisionist in that he poses an alternate framework for understanding the emergence and later institutionalization of NAM. He argues that the movement should be viewed in the context not of decolonization or the East-West conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union but rather of the North-South conflict between the developed and underdeveloped worlds. And indeed, this was the context in which US policymakers tended to view the movement, understanding that it represented the desires of the Global South, broadly construed. Moreover,
whereas most scholars of non-alignment view the 1960s as its heyday, Dinkel demonstrates that it was the movement toward a more multipolar configuration of international relations in the 1970s that catalyzed the institutionalization of NAM. It is a persuasive argument that contributes greatly to our understanding of non-alignment as both a response to global developments and a driving force of those developments.

Swiss relations with Latin America is the subject of Ursina Bentele and Sacha Zala’s contribution. Situating their work in the context of both Latin America’s Cold War and Switzerland’s history of neutrality, the authors demonstrate that the Swiss engaged Latin America through either bilateral or multilateral channels, depending on the strength of Switzerland’s negotiating position. It is an interesting piece, though the authors unfortunately perpetuate one of the most pervasive myths in the scholarship on Cold War Latin America—that it was US hostility toward Fidel Castro’s Cuba and Nicaragua’s Sandinistas that drove those two regimes to seek out closer ties to the Soviet bloc.[3]

Other chapters focus on Austrian efforts to mediate the conflict in Vietnam, NAM’s support for Namibian independence, and the connection between the international economic agenda of NAM and the neutrality of Swedish foreign aid. Lorenz Lüthi contributes a somewhat confusing piece, the argument of which was difficult for me to locate. Christine Hatzky examines Cuban-Angolan civil cooperation and giving voice to the heretofore neglected Angolan perspective.

Though the geographic focus of the volume is weighted in favor of Europe, the editors obviously took pains to represent a variety of perspectives. These efforts should be applauded, as should the inclusion of scholarship based on impressive multiaxial research. For the most part, the authors do their best to juxtapose Soviet and US perspectives on neutrality and non-alignment, though due to the much greater accessibility of US archives than those of the former Soviet Union, a true balance is difficult to achieve.

Minor quibbles with the volume include the mixing up of Hal Brands and H. W. Brands in the introduction. H. W. Brands is the author of The Specter of Neutralism (1990), while Hal Brands penned Latin America’s Cold War (2010), a major reinterpretation. Some of the prose is a bit stilted, though this can readily be chalked up to the fact that for many of the contributors, English is not their first language. None of this should obscure the fact, however, that this volume makes a vital contribution to a field in desperate need of more substantive scholarship.

Notes


[3]. For a different perspective on Soviet relations with Cuba and Nicaragua, see Hal Brands, Latin America’s Cold War (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Robert P. Hager Jr. and Robert S. Snyder, “The United States and Nicaragua: Understanding the Breakdown in Relations,” Journal of Cold War Studies 17, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 3-35; and Michelle Reeves, “Extracting the Eagle’s Talons: The Soviet Union in Cold War Latin America” (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2014).

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