



Timothy Andrews Sayle. *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. 360 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-3550-9.

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“To keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.” This famous line, attributed to Lord Ismay, Winston Churchill’s chief military assistant during World War II and later the first secretary-general of NATO, has long been quoted as a pithy explanation of the purpose behind the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Timothy Andrews Sayle’s new history of NATO during the Cold War, *Enduring Alliance*, reveals the continuity of these overriding goals through major crises, across political lines, and even beyond the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union itself. But his greatest contribution is to reveal the unspoken danger between the lines of Ismay’s comment that NATO was meant to guard against: the fickleness of democratic voters to remain committed to the tough measures necessary to prevent another global cataclysm.

Sayle’s work takes the form of traditional diplomatic history at its most effective, focusing on the views and decisions of policymakers and how they influenced and were influenced by public opinion. He draws on wide and deep research in a host of government and institutional archives around the world, making this a true international history—one where American officials certainly play a starring role but share the stage significantly with their counterparts in various European capitals, especially London, Paris, and Bonn.

Sayle rightly points out that his book “is not a bureaucratic history of NATO organs in Paris or Brussels, nor one meant to hive off the history of NATO from the larger Cold War era” (p. 9). On the first point, while policymakers and their memoranda lie at the heart of Sayle’s narrative, he does not limit himself to following those on the official NATO staff but takes a wider view to include those who influenced the international policies of each of the key transatlantic allies. That said, his readers might have benefited from a fuller explanation of just how NATO worked: how its hierarchies of leadership and bureaucracy were organized and what its specific responsibilities were as an international organization. The reader comes away with little feel for who led NATO, how the role of the secretary-general related to that of the supreme allied commander, or how they interacted with the key officials in member governments.

On the second point, Sayle notably succeeds in integrating the history of NATO with the wider story of the Cold War. He emphasizes the inseparability of NATO from the key international developments of the decades following World War II, and in the process he adds a new dimension to many familiar episodes that defined the era, from the Suez crisis to those in Berlin and Cuba. His research and analysis are rich and detailed enough to be useful to historians of any individual period

of the Cold War or collectively across the entire era, as well as to historians of either American or European foreign policy.

Enduring Alliance focuses on a set of themes that it revisits throughout its narrative, which the author organizes chronologically from the negotiations to create a transatlantic alliance in the late 1940s through the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991. Sayle argues that NATO stood as the centerpiece of the “Pax Atlantica” that kept Europe and North America in a state of uneasy peace during a period of enormous danger and antagonism between the great powers after World War II. The key questions that lie at the heart of the book are why and how NATO survived for so long, and why it always seemed on the brink of collapse. To answer these questions, Sayle puts politics, not military developments, at the forefront of NATO’s history.

His answers are surprising. The greatest threat to NATO’s existence and to the security of Western Europe, he argues, was not a Soviet military invasion, which NATO leaders thought quite unlikely during most of the Cold War. Rather, *democracy* stood as the chief source of instability and danger for NATO. Far from the glue that kept the Atlantic allies bound by common values and ideals, the democratic nature of allied governments, Sayle argues, was the constant source of tension that threatened to break the alliance apart. He explains, “The allies did not maintain NATO because it was an alliance of democracies, but because it offered the best insurance against the dangers of democracy—a fickle electorate that, in seeking peace, might pave the way for war” (p. 2). Leaders of NATO member states viewed the maintenance of the alliance as the most effective means of “insulating themselves, and their citizens, from appeasement and ultimately a war that no one, on either side of the Iron Curtain, wanted” (p. 2).

Perhaps the thorniest issue plaguing relations between NATO leaders and their citizens was the deployment and potential use of nuclear weapons.

Sayle points out that nuclear weapons became a double-edged sword for NATO governments: on one hand, the key allies—especially West Germany—viewed a strong nuclear deterrent as essential to reassure their citizens against a feeling of acute insecurity that might lead to a push for appeasing Soviet demands. On the other hand, too heavy of a reliance on nuclear weapons became a political liability: “Where NATO governments believed nuclear weapons were a necessary evil, their citizens saw only evil” (p. 208). NATO’s “dual-track decision” of December 1979, which approved the modernization of the alliance’s intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) stationed in Europe while also calling for arms-control negotiations with the Soviet Union, sought to bridge this divide by pairing a strong nuclear deterrent with the goal of reducing such arms. The uneasiness that many European leaders, such as Margaret Thatcher and François Mitterrand, felt for the INF Treaty signed by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in December 1987—as well as their unwillingness to speak out publicly against the widely popular treaty—exposed the lingering gap that existed between them and their publics.

“Too often,” Sayle laments, NATO has been explained simply “as part of an American Cold War policy” (p. 248). Another theme that he emphasizes throughout his book is the prominence of the experience and lessons of the world wars, not just the Cold War, in the thinking of the architects and protectors of NATO. For such leaders as British prime minister Harold Macmillan, “war was not history but their life,” and the North Atlantic Treaty was as much a product of the world wars as of the Cold War (p. 6). The need for the Western democracies to guard against the pacific impulses of the public that had led to the appeasement of the 1930s propelled statesmen in Western Europe and the United States to seek to institutionalize a robust defense against future aggressors. Sayle’s argument thus cuts against a strict periodization to separate the world wars, the Cold War, and the post-Cold War into separate baskets—to avoid see-

ing “a firebreak between the postwar world and that which came before” (p. 6).

However, the author does not fully follow this prescription himself, ending the substance of his story quite sharply with the end of the Cold War and devoting only minimal attention to one of the most critical and perplexing periods in NATO’s history: its transition into the post–Cold War world and its assumption of “out-of-area” military interventions in the 1990s and 2000s. The final chapter of *Enduring Alliance* argues that the NATO alliance remained in place, essentially unchanged and untransformed, at the end of the Cold War. Sayle’s characterization of NATO’s transformation in 1990 and 1991 as merely “rhetorical” and “far less total than ... advertised” runs counter to important recent scholarship on this period (pp. 229, 231). The changes that NATO leaders adopted in 1990 at the urging of the George H. W. Bush administration revamped the alliance’s military posture and shifted its defining purpose toward a much more heavily political mission than had ever previously been the case.[1]

While Sayle reasonably points out the challenge of bringing his history of NATO closer to the present than 1991, due especially to the lack of declassified archival sources to match those from earlier decades, the significance of NATO’s role in global affairs since the Cold War’s end leads the reader to wish for more than the few paragraphs the author devotes to this vital period. NATO’s involvement in military interventions in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Libya—in addition to the schism between key NATO allies over the decision to invade Iraq in 2003—encompasses some of the most critical episodes in the alliance’s history. The early ending to Sayle’s history of NATO, along with the high quality of his research and the readability of his narrative, begs for a sequel.

Note

[1]. See Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *To Build a Better World: Choices to End the Cold War and Create a Global Commonwealth* (New

York: Twelve, 2019), 269–70, 281–86. Zelikow and Rice’s book was published several months after Sayle’s *Enduring Alliance*.

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