



STEIN TØNNESSON

## BOOK REVIEW

## Asianizing the Cold War

Heonik Kwon. *The Other Cold War*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. xiv + 211 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$50.00 (cloth).

If we consider the Cold War to have lasted from 1945 to 1989, and to have consisted in a superpower arms race and military standoff in Europe between a Western and an Eastern camp, then Cold War history would gradually lose much of its relevance as a basis for understanding the twenty-first-century world. The Cold War would become a special interest for historians of the twentieth century and lose attention from social scientists. Heonik Kwon is a significant player in a broad attempt to make Cold War history more relevant to our contemporary world by widening its spatial, temporal, social, and conceptual scope. He did this already in his *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (Cambridge University Press, 2008) and makes it his key concern in the volume under review. His effort is part of the programmatic trend shaped by Odd Arne Westad's *The Global Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2005) and Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad's three-volume *Cambridge History of the Cold War* (2010).

First, Kwon widens the spatial scope of Cold War history by Asianizing if not globalizing it. He pays scant attention to the areas where the Cold War constituted a "long peace" and instead emphasizes the countries where it was fought as real war, with massive numbers of casualties. This is his "Other Cold War." Second, Kwon prolongs the temporal scope of Cold War history by accentuating the role of memory. This is the most convincing, innovative, and touching aspect both of Kwon's present and previous work. The ghosts of the dead continue to wander, keeping families, villages, and nations divided. People in Korea, Vietnam, and Indonesia make efforts to put their ghosts to rest by reconciling the dead with each other as well as with the survivors. Europeans, Asians, and Americans remember the Cold War differently. For most Europeans (but not the Greeks), it was a war that did not happen. For Americans, it did happen, with heroic soldiers losing their lives in distant places (p. 149). For many Asians it was a real war that tore societies apart, with not just soldiers but civilians as well being killed. Third, Kwon lends support to Stephen Whitfield, E. P. Thompson, Clifford Geertz, and others who have added aspects of social

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and cultural history to Cold War history's predominantly geopolitical focus (pp. 84–86, 99, 140–48). Fourth, Kwon also widens the conceptual field of Cold War history by linking it to theories of cultural globalization, postcolonial criticism, and post-socialist transition. He criticizes these theories for ignoring the continued importance of the bipolar Cold War experience and claims convincingly that engagement of Cold War historians with these bodies of theory may be beneficial both for Cold War history and social theory.

This is without any doubt an important book. It is part of a general reorientation of Cold War history, reflecting the concerns of a world where Asian, African, and Latin American experiences are taking center stage, no longer as a “third world” but as multiple ways out of war and poverty. Kwon's book is at the same time a persuasive plea for merging diplomatic, political, and social history with the use of concepts and methods drawn from anthropology. Kwon makes it difficult for future historians to ignore the role of the dead in the lives of the living. The examples he provides of how local people in the Korean Jeju island and southern Vietnam are finding new ways to commemorate and reconcile past enemies are immensely illustrative and moving (pp. 89–97, 103–12).

While Kwon's approach no doubt represents a forceful, justified, and promising venue for invigorating Cold War history, I'm not equally convinced that it is fruitful for the study of Asian, African, and Latin American history as such. I accept Kwon's realization while working on his *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) that he could not write the history of a Vietnamese village “without contextualizing it in global history” (p. 134). The fact, however, that these villages were affected by the global Cold War does not mean that their internal divisions should be seen through a Cold War lens. Kwon admits that the very term “Cold War” derives from a “particular regional point of view” (p. 18). It reflects the European experience and is therefore a misnomer in Kwon's Asian or global context. If new generations shall be made to see the Chinese Civil War, Korean War, Indochina Wars, and Indonesian massacres rather than the Berlin and Cuba crises, NATO, the Warsaw Pact, the Berlin Wall, and the arms races as the central features of Cold War history, then teachers will have to constantly explain to their students why a term derived from the European experience is used to characterize Asian events. This will be even more difficult to explain if African or Latin American events are used as Cold War definers.

Kwon sometimes resorts to the term “binary history” as an alternative to “Cold War history.” He tends to see the division of Asian, African, and Latin American societies in two hostile camps and the enormous suffering caused by it, at once as a consequence and a defining characteristic of the global Cold War. Yet it can hardly be both. It could make more sense to look at how Asia, Africa, and Latin America were affected by the Cold War than to redefine the Cold War as Asian, African, and Latin American. A uniquely Cold War lens might distort instead of explaining the patterns of conflict in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The post–World War II violence in Asia and Africa followed from a long period

of warfare that had as much to do with the rise and fall of European colonialism and contradictions internal to Asia and Africa as with the struggle between the global superpowers. Neither capitalism nor socialism was imposed on Asia, Africa, and Latin America. They were embraced by rival local groups. The history of the conflicts among these groups was not as binary as a Cold War lens might lead us to assume, but rather involved many different actors and a range of ideological programs. The “Cold War” is but one aspect of Asian, African, and Latin American history in the post–World War II period, with the worst violence happening in those countries where rival attempts at postcolonial state building converged with the binary Cold War pattern. The Latin American experience differs from that of Africans and Asians in that the European role had been drastically reduced long before, so the dominant foreign presence was that of the United States. For Asians and Africans seeking to reconcile the spirits of their divided ancestors, it might be preferable to remember their struggles not primarily as “Cold War,” but rather as rival, sometimes even complementary, attempts to meet the challenges from modernity. There were several reasons why these struggles turned so immensely violent, of which the Cold War was one.