Sandrine Kott, Eva-Maria Muschik, and Elisabeth Roehrlich, eds.,
International Organizations and the Cold War: Competition, Cooperation, and Convergence. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025. 272 pages.
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Historiography long ago moved beyond the interpretation of the Cold War as a conflict fought exclusively between East and West. Scholarship produced over the past several decades has demonstrated that the Cold War era, conventionally bounded by the onset of the US-Soviet great power competition in the late 1940s and the collapse of the Soviet bloc at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, was far more complex and multilayered than that.[1] A wide range of actors participated in the international affairs of the time and their interactions were not solely antagonistic but involved diverse forms of cooperation, negotiation, and exchange.

International Organizations and the Cold War, a volume edited by Sandrine Kott, Eva-Maria Muschik, and Elisabeth Roehrlich, focuses on international organizations during the Cold War. It is a significant contribution to the broader reassessment of the period. The editors have each made substantial contributions in the past to scholarship on international organizations, internationalism, and the global Cold War. This collection is the outcome of a joint intellectual endeavor developed in the course of two conferences devoted to those issues. The first was organized online as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the second was convened at the University of Vienna, where Eva-Maria Muschik and Elisabeth Roehrlich are based. The chapters of the book originated as papers presented at those events, which were subsequently revised and expanded for publication.

The volume is built around the concept of internationalism. Not coincidentally, this structure links the book to the wider Histories of Internationalism series published by Bloomsbury, which explores "international cooperation and internationalizing ambitions in the modern world" (p. ii). The authors' central concern is the manner in which various actors transcended political, geographical, and ideological boundaries. As they argue, there is a certain paradox here: the Cold War and internationalism were not mutually exclusive phenomena but, in many respects, reinforced each other (pp. 4–6). Both of the opposing blocs aspired to appeal to states and societies across the globe, promoted universal models of social organization, and employed international organizations as vehicles for disseminating their respective visions. Indeed, some important international institutions emerged not despite the Cold War but because of it, including the International Refugee Organization, the International Atomic Energy Agency, and many

[1] See, for example, Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War. Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Westad is the series editor of the prominent *New Cold War History* series (https://uncpress.org/series/new-cold-war-history/) at the University of North Carolina Press, which supports authors with a similar approach. In the Czech scholarly environment, this new approach is represented primarily by the work of the Cold War Research Group, a research cluster affiliated with Charles University (https://cwrg.ff.cuni.cz/index.php/en/about).

others. Therefore, according to the editors, internationalism was not the antithesis of the Cold War, but one of its constitutive elements. These theses largely draw on Sandrine Kott's earlier research on this topic.[2]

The book's contributors distinguish between intergovernmental organizations whose members are states (such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization) and non-governmental organizations, which include professional, student, humanitarian, and other associations. Just as the Cold War blocs themselves were far from monolithic, the authors present international organizations as highly heterogeneous institutions in which different actors pursued their own interests and agendas. The international arena brought together not only state officials but also independent experts, civil servants, activists, and specialists whose objectives often diverged from those of their governments and the superpowers. By drawing on a wide range of sources, including organization archives, diplomatic records, personal papers, and other collections, the contributors paint a rich and nuanced picture of international organizations, along with the individuals who operated within them and frequently exercised a considerable degree of autonomy.

The authors' perspective challenges older interpretations that tended to view international organizations merely as extensions of superpower influence. In traditional Cold War narratives, such institutions functioned primarily as platforms for promoting official positions emanating from Washington and Moscow.[3] The contributors instead emphasize the institutions' active role in international politics. International organizations served not only as arenas of ideological confrontation and propaganda battles, for example during debates and voting on resolutions, but also as mediators of conflict and bridges connecting otherwise hostile political camps. The first sections of the volume explore those three functions – competition, mediation, and bridge-building. The following sections focus on global issues such as human rights and response to natural disasters, as well as on international organizations as fora where experts exchanged specialized knowledge and fostered transnational professional networks.

The individual chapters should be understood less as comprehensive histories of specific institutions than as illustrations of how the history of international organizations can be approached through the lens of internationalism. Likewise, the volume as a whole offers more of a starting point for further research than a definitive account of internationalism within Cold War international organizations. The potential of this approach has already been demonstrated in subsequent scholarship. For example, Mikuláš Pešta, together with Matthieu Gillabert and Lidia Leshykh, contribute a chapter on student internationalism and the International Union of Students (pp. 131–144), a theme that

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2 Sandrine Kott, *A World More Equal: An Internationalist Perspective on the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024).

3 For the traditional Cold War narrative, see, for example, John L. Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005); Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945–2006* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008); Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); Martin Walker, *The Cold War: A History* (London: Fourth Estate, 1993).

Pešta has subsequently developed in a monograph-length study.[4] The editors should also be commended for moving beyond a narrow focus on a handful of major organizations like the UN, and attempting to cover a broader spectrum of international institutions. Nevertheless, institutions in some important sectors are missing from the selection, particularly organizations concerned with international trade, finance, and military-security affairs.

The volume is firmly situated within recent historiographical developments associated with decolonization studies and global history.[5] The contributors emphasize that the Cold War cannot be reduced to East–West competition alone. It must also be understood in the context of the tensions between the developed Global North and the developing Global South. Consequently, it devotes considerable attention to actors such as the Non-Aligned Movement and their roles in the international system. In this respect, the volume builds upon influential scholarship, particularly Akira Iriye's work on globalism, the proliferation of international and non-governmental organizations, and the emergence of an imagined global community in the post-war era.[6]

A particularly illustrative example is Christian Methfessel's chapter on the debates concerning the emergence of new states in former colonial territories (pp. 51–66). Earlier scholarship often emphasized the stabilizing influence of Western democracies and the broader international order, portraying the superpowers as generally hostile to separatist movements and border revisions. Methfessel seeks to integrate these perspectives by demonstrating that while the Cold War established the broader framework within which decolonization took place, international organizations (especially the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity) provided fora in which actors from the Global South could articulate and advance their interests. His chapter contends that those organizations influenced the shape of the emerging international order to a much greater extent than has traditionally been acknowledged. At the same time, Methfessel's contribution reveals a certain unevenness within the volume. Examining conflicts in Bangladesh, Biafra, and West Papua, he develops an argument that the influence of the superpowers within the UN was limited and the agency of postcolonial states was growing. In doing so, he engages directly with larger historiographical debates on decolonization and the global Cold War.

Trudy Huskamp Peterson's chapter on the archives of the International Refugee Organization (pp. 13–32) offers a fascinating account of how Cold War security concerns shaped archival practices and document management. Still, it is difficult to draw any broader implications from the chapter. A similar observation may be made regarding

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[4] Mikuláš Pešta, *Student Internationalism and the Global Cold War: The International Union of Students in Socialist Prague* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2026).

[5] For example, Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016); Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York, London: The New Press, 2007); Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

[6] See, for example, Akira Yriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

Michel Christian's contribution on the International Centre for the Child (pp. 117–130). While it provides valuable institutional history, its connection to the overarching conceptual and methodological concerns of the volume is not entirely clear beyond its concluding remarks.

The volume is further organized around three key concepts highlighted in its subtitle: competition, cooperation, and convergence.[7] Competition is perhaps the most familiar of the three and has long been associated with the role of international organizations during the Cold War. These international fora frequently hosted intense debates on issues ranging from human rights and energy policy to decolonization and economic development. Disagreements often culminated in contentious votes and vigorous diplomatic efforts aimed at persuading opponents either to support, abstain from, or veto particular resolutions.

Equally important, however, is the concept of cooperation. The contributors repeatedly demonstrate that even the superpowers had substantial incentives to collaborate in areas such as public health, scientific research, and humanitarian assistance. In many cases, practical concerns and shared interests outweighed ideological rivalries, which were often confined to the political sphere without impeding practical cooperation.

The third concept, convergence, receives comparatively less explicit attention in the volume, although it remains one of its most intriguing themes. According to the editors, international organizations facilitated mutual adaptation and exchange between political systems that publicly presented themselves as fundamentally incompatible. Through recurring encounters in international fora, experts exchanged knowledge, adopted certain administrative practices and technological solutions, and participated in forms of mutual learning that gradually narrowed some of the differences between the opposing blocs. However, while competition and cooperation are extensively discussed throughout the volume, convergence would benefit from further conceptual elaboration. One notable exception is Marek Eby's chapter on the World Health Organization (pp. 145–160), which demonstrates how Soviet and Western malaria experts influenced one another through transnational professional exchanges.

The final chapter, authored by Sandrine Kott herself, examines the history of anti-fascist traditions within international organizations (pp. 231–245). Here Kott develops one of her broader arguments: that the functioning of international organizations after 1945 cannot be understood solely through the prism of the Cold War. Other political and intellectual currents existed alongside the East–West conflict, which significantly shaped the post-war international order. One of the most important among them was the anti-fascist tradition. Kott argues that many international organizations were profoundly influenced by transnational networks of anti-fascists, social democrats, socialists, and trade unionists. These actors transcended the boundaries of the emerging blocs and, for several decades, fostered an alternative form of internationalism. Their networks predated the

[7] The aforementioned concepts are explored in detail on pages 7–9, while the individual contributions further refine and expand upon them.

Cold War and cannot be classified as exclusively liberal, Western, or communist. Rather, they represented a distinctive model of international cooperation. In Kott's interpretation, the United Nations and its predecessor, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), rank among the most significant institutional products of anti-fascist internationalism. Kott's chapter reinforces her broader contention that international organizations constituted an alternative space of globalization that cannot be reduced to another scene of the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Ultimately, *International Organizations of the Cold War* should be read as both a research agenda and a methodological guidebook. Rather than offering a comprehensive history of international organizations during the Cold War, it proposes new ways of conceptualizing their role and significance. At the same time, as noted above, it serves as a valuable reminder that the Cold War was not only an era of confrontation, but also a period of intensive negotiation, cooperation, and transnational interaction in which a remarkably diverse range of actors participated in shaping the international order.

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