

Byrne, Jeffrey James: *Mecca of Revolution. Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016. ISBN: 978-0-19-989914-2; XVII, 388 S.

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When Amilcar Cabral termed Algiers the „Mecca of revolutionaries“ in 1969, he referred to the fact that not had only famous leaders of various liberation movements like Che Guevara, Yasser Arafat and Nelson Mandela visited Algeria in the early 1960s, but also that hundreds of Trotskyists, anarchists, and all sorts of revolutionaries from the Third World had met in Algiers in the following years to hold discussions, build up networks, and to study the Algerian experiment of revolutionary decolonization.

Although Jeffrey Byrne’s book „Mecca of Revolution“ paraphrases Cabral’s quote in the title, it is not really about this episode of revolutionary tourism in the 1960s.

Much broader in its scope and argument, Byrne’s work contributes to current discussions in diplomatic and international history by focusing on South-South relations and non-alignment policy in the dynamics of the Cold War. It describes the making of the „Third World as a political project“ (p. 6) from the perspective of the international relations and foreign policy of the Algerian liberation movement FLN (Front de Libération Nationale), and later its provisory government GPRA (Gouvernement provisoire de la République Algérienne).

Byrne enfolds this history in five main chapters, which cover the period from the formation of Algerian nationalism in the first decades of the 20th century until the overthrow of president Ben Bella in 1965 in a military coup d’état.

Throughout these chapters, Byrne engages with three levels of analysis: Firstly, Byrne analyses the Algerian Republic’s early foreign policy and international relations in the framework of decolonization and the global Cold War. Secondly, Byrne offers new insights into the dynamics and challenges of South-South relations and Third World al-

liances. Thirdly, he describes how the first generation of Algerian diplomats developed from guerilla fighters into statesmen, and at the same time kept on adhering to the revolutionary ideas and methods of the war against French colonialism.

On the first level of analysis, Byrne impressively shows how the Algerians developed a conception of decolonization that went beyond political independence and pursued a more revolutionary path instead. Far from adhering to an understanding of non-alignment as neutrality and political restraint, Algeria actively intervened in international politics as a proponent of national and socialist revolution. It is particularly interesting to see how attempts to acquire assistance from the great powers of the post-colonial world were sometimes hampered by the Algerians’ revolutionary commitment and desire for as much economical autonomy as possible. The Soviet Union, for example, was an important donor, indirectly providing weapons during the Franco-Algerian war and considerable development aid after Algerian independence. These good relations were put to the test, however, when the Algerian government banned the communist party in its attempt to establish a one-party-rule of the FLN. Similarly, American sympathies for the Algerian independence movement, especially within the Kennedy administration, were seriously strained when a high-ranking Algerian delegation visited Havana at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The Algerian-Cuban connection speaks to the second layer of analysis in Byrne’s book: the emerging relations between non-aligned and Third World countries in the international sphere. In contrast to most of the existing literature, in which the FLN’s and early independent Algeria’s ties to Nasser’s Egypt are emphasized, Byrne convincingly argues that Castro’s Cuba and Tito’s Yugoslavia can indeed be understood as Algeria’s most important and staunch allies in the international sphere. In a similar revision of common interpretations, Byrne reframes Algeria’s ambitions and policy in Third Worldism as being focused mainly on Africa, not the Arab World. Inspired by the Cuban example, Algeria’s militant political elite conceived of

their country's historical role as not only promoting a socialist transformation of society at home, but in spreading the revolutionary spirit all over the continent, in the Algerian case: Africa.

Already during the war for independence, the FLN's military wing and growing regular army ALN (*Armée de libération nationale*) – which were confined to Moroccan and Tunisian territory by French border fortifications – passed weapons and even ran training camps for African liberation-movements and leftist guerrilla groups. On the fundament of these good relations, Algeria remained not only an important actor in the continents regarding numerous interior conflicts, but its support for liberation movements also acquired legitimacy for its role as powerful voice and stakeholder in Third Worldist affairs such as Non-Alignment or Pan-Africanism after independence.

The third and final level of Byrne's analysis is concerned with the maturation and radicalization of Algeria's high ranking political and diplomatic personnel. Byrne's argument is dialectic in this regard. Although achieving more than one diplomatic victory, Byrne shows that independent Algeria's foreign policy was determined by ideological principles as much as by pragmatic considerations. Third Worldism, in other words, went far beyond mere rhetoric, it became the guiding idea and method in foreign policy. Despite all their revolutionary commitments and internationalist attitudes, however, Algerian political elites also quickly came to identify statehood and national sovereignty as the main vehicles of policy. In this sense, Byrne claims that revolutionary Third Worldism and the dynamics of decolonization led to a more state-centric world in the Cold War era.

As an important intervention in several ongoing debates in international relations and diplomatic history¹, Byrne's arguments will surely meet some scrutiny. Concerning the aforementioned observation of a more state-centric world order as an outcome of revolutionary Third Worldism, critics might point to the fact that this view could be determined by Byrne's main body of sources, internal documents from the GPRA and its foreign ministry, situated in the Algerian Na-

tional Archives in Algiers.² In addition, Byrne himself presents evidence that emphasizes the importance of alliances such as the Non-Alignment-Movement and the Organization for African Unity for Third World countries (p. 214).

Another likely point of critique will clearly be the absence of political Islam in Byrne's book. Probably many readers would have hoped for a more explicit discussion of Robert Malley's interpretation of Algeria's post-colonial history, where Islamism occupies a central role.³

A fascinating idea that Byrne introduces is the function of ritualized diplomacy as a source of legitimacy for post-colonial revolutionary governments. By spreading images of meetings with revolutionary celebrities like Che Guevara, the Algerian government hoped to mobilize domestic support for its international ambitions. As convincing as this idea might appear in serving as a motivation of Algerian diplomats, Byrne does not provide evidence to substantiate the actual potency of this political strategy. Finally, the book leaves its readers curious regarding how the story of Algeria's revolutionary Third Worldism continued after 1965. For example, Cabral's statement that Algiers was the Mecca of revolutionaries originally referred to the Pan African Festival, happening in Algiers in the summer of 1969.

However, these points do not constitute substantial weaknesses in Byrne's otherwise impressive work. Quite on the contrary, they reveal the innovative and thought-provoking nature of this book, which will certainly become a standard in discussions on the global

¹ See for example: Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War. Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, Cambridge 2007; Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution. Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era*, New York 2002; Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations. A People's History of the Third World*, New York 2007.

² As anyone familiar with these archives knows, the famous North-African hospitality can end quite abruptly when it comes to critical inquiries into the history of the independent Algerian state and the still ruling party FLN. Note for example that the former foreign minister of Algeria is its present-day president Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

³ Robert Malley, *The Call from Algeria. Third Worldism, Revolution, and the Turn to Islam*, Berkeley 1996.

Cold War, decolonization and Third World politics.

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