Book Reviews

Hamblin, Jacob Darwin. *The Wretched Atom: America's Global Gamble with Peaceful Nuclear Technology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

The earliest years of the Cold War were marked by the perils of the nascent nuclear weapons the United States utilized against Japan in the final days of the War in the Pacific. Once the U.S. unleashed the atom's potential in conventional warfare, the possibility of other nations developing similar technology increased exponentially. To prevent the further dissemination of nuclear technology, U.S. presidential administrations wielded the atom as a tool of statecraft to secure exclusive mineral rights and development contracts with developing countries they viewed as subordinate. In *The Wretched Atom: America's Global Gamble with Peaceful Nuclear Technology*, historian Jacob Darwin Hamblin examines how the U.S. employed rhetoric regarding peaceful nuclear technology, transformed pre-existing imperial economic structures, and reinforced racial hierarchies that favored white supremacy in the search for atomic domination.

Hamblin asserts an intriguing thesis in this work, claiming that "[t]he promise of civilian atomic energy was a formidable tool of state power in the late twentieth century because it took advantage of social aspirations, anxieties, and environmental vulnerabilities, especially in the developing world" (6). Hamblin structures his research chronologically and thematically, resulting in three sections that span from the end of the Second World War into the early twenty-first century. The first section, "Atomic Promises," highlights the immediate postwar decade and the shifting U.S. foreign policy around atomic energy. According to Hamblin, "a global scramble for uranium and thorium" ensued and the proliferation of peaceful nuclear technology, which promised to solve the subsistence concerns of underdeveloped nations, became a central promise of U.S. deals for mineral rights (23). The second section, "Atomic Propaganda," hones in on the consequences of diplomatic promises made in the 1950s and 60s about the benefits of nuclear technology, demonstrating the U.S. attempt to subvert decolonial initiatives with promised technology by wielding international organizations like the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to monitor and limit nuclear technological developments. Finally, the third section, "Atomic Prohibition," focuses on the appearance of what Hamblin refers to as "colored Bombs" after China attained its first atomic weapon, bringing to life the fear that the atom might be wielded by those deemed racially inferior by U.S. policymakers (165). This new destabilization of the nuclear order was accelerated as "the United States found itself relatively poor in oil resources, while Europeans no longer held the colonial stranglehold they once enjoyed" (191). Attempting to regain control over global energy production, the U.S. placed sanctions on governments such as Iran, where nuclear reactors could be used as leverage in diplomatic proceedings. Hamblin traces these tensions to modern-day concerns about Iran's nuclear programs and the continued attempts of the U.S. to stymie its progress. Ultimately, these themes highlight that "the promise of the peaceful atom has been used, abused, and exploited for decades… often leveraging the greatest fears and highest ambitions of people around the world" (10).

Methodologically, Hamblin relies on post-colonial theory to make his case. Hamblin prominently centers his theoretical approach on the claim that "[a]tomic energy was supposed to be a liberator, not a means of reinforcing the historical divisions of the world" (93). By focusing on Dwight Eisenhower's early attempts to appease developing nations in the Global South with

nuclear developments toward subsistence technology, Hamblin demonstrates the continuance of previously existing colonial power structures in these diplomatic dealings. In this manner, Hamblin argues that the U.S. was more heavily invested in maintaining its positive relationships with faltering colonial powers from Western Europe, outwardly fearing the potential that developing countries had as a "vehicle for neutralism and accusations of racism" (96). In the case of the IAEA, Hamblin states that "American diplomats feared the consequences of 'colored' influence… especially if it might mean introducing issues of racism and colonialism" (104). Hamblin highlights the process for selecting permanent board members for the IAEA, where a seat was promised to represent African and Asian countries, which ultimately "ended up as the Union of South Africa, the world's bastion of white supremacy…." (105). By focusing on the Cold War imperatives of the U.S. to maintain the international networks of imperialism, Hamblin makes a compelling case for the post-colonial power dynamics powering nuclear statecraft.

Hamblin makes excellent use of a variety of international sources. There is a bevy of published primary sources, such as the *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) series. One of the most striking aspects of this work is Hamblin's inclusion of archives from the IAEA, which constitutes one of the first extensive uses of this archive, and the World Health Organization (WHO), granting his study a multilateral international lens. This work forms a template for future historical inquiry from international perspectives on the debates surrounding nuclear technology and its potential to proliferate across the globe. International regulatory organizations have existed for decades to provide information and oversight, but their archives have scarcely been utilized for historical research. By including similar international archives in this conversation, historians can potentially offer a greater understanding of the conversations and policies that have fueled and limited the proliferation of nuclear technology.

Ultimately, Hamblin has contributed significantly to the growing historiography on nuclear non-proliferation and the environmental impact of nuclear technology. While a great deal of literature focuses on the build-up of armaments and the potential for nuclear electricity generation, Hamblin points to other uses of nuclear technology for medical and agricultural development in the developing world. By highlighting racial dynamics and post-colonialism, Hamblin asserts that the promises of technological development were nothing more than appeasement to a global community that did not approve of the morally dubious arms race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, which hoarded this technology. In an attempt to stay ahead of the diplomatic curve, the U.S. engaged in deft promises, propaganda, and prohibition campaigns to maintain its primacy over atomic weapons. Through this partnership with the wretched atom, the U.S. perpetuated and sustained the colonial dynamics of the past five centuries.

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