

[H-Diplo Article Review 757 on “Bandung as the Call for a Better Development Project: US, British, French and Gold Coast Perceptions of the Afro-Asian Conference \(1955\).”](#)

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Review by **Stella Krepp**, University of Bern

The Afro-Asian conference of Bandung 1955 features prominently in the history of the Global South, often evoking a “Bandung spirit.”¹ Yet, as Robert Vitalis has rightly pointed out, this mythology bears little resemblance with the “real conference, about which not very much is known, about which people care even less, and which has faded away like a bad dream.”² Part of the reason for this is that the historiography of the Non-Aligned Movement up until now has “too much focused on rhetoric and discourse analysis” thus “creating a ‘mythology of the April 1955 Bandung Conference,’ as James Jeffrey Byrne has lamented.³ And these myths have proven surprisingly pervasive even in well-respected scholarship.⁴ In sum, despite the Conference being a supposedly formative moment in the birth of the Third World, we know comparatively little about it.

Frank Gerits’s article offers a counter narrative to the pervasive image of Bandung as the spiritual birthplace of non-alignment. His main argument is that rather than the Cold War or racial solidarity, development and modernisation lay at the heart of Bandung. Based on documents from U.S., British, French, and Ghanaian archives, this is a multi-centric perspective on the conference with a specific focus on the power of ideas and how they shaped political assessments. With it, Gerits’s article contributes to a new wave of scholarship on non-alignment and Global South politics that is much more empirically driven and has benefitted from the timely opening up of archives throughout the Global South.⁵ He thus belongs to a new generation of international historians conducting multi-

archival research in multiple countries and languages.

On the one hand, the United States and Great Britain viewed the conference mainly as a public-relations challenge. Behind the scenes, British and US officials coordinated their actions to informally approach delegates to encourage them to voice pro-Western views, wary that a heavy-handed attempt at interference might backfire and make them vulnerable to charges of imperialism.

France, on the other hand, adopted a much more critical view. Faced with the disintegration of the French colonial empire and embroiled in military confrontations in Indochina and Algeria, it was much more concerned by the idea of an Afro-Asian community. French officials were particularly angered that the Algerian *Front de Libération Nationale* was granted diplomatic recognition to attend the Bandung conference.

Gold Coast officials, with Kwame Nkrumah as the lead, cunningly exploited these insecurities to convince British officials to send a Gold Coast representative to the Bandung conference. In an unofficial capacity, and unbeknownst to British officials, the Gold Coast representative was charged with establishing links with Third World leaders.

One of the most fascinating accounts is when Gerits narrates the cleavages between African and Asian leaders and their underlying racial and cultural assumptions. In a section titled the “The Brown Man’s Burden,” inspired by an article with the same name that was reprinted in the conference proceedings, he elaborates on the often difficult relationship between Nkrumah and Asian leaders (261).¹⁴ A clear—some might say problematic—reference to Rudyard Kipling’s poem “The White Man’s Burden,” it posited that the moral responsibility of the Asian nations to support African nations in their development efforts lay with their expertise and financial aid. Interestingly, as Gerits argues, Bandung reinforced Nkrumah’s contention that the path to development was to be achieved within Africa, since he was wary of substituting European colonialism with “Asian paternalism” (262).

Ultimately, as Gerits argues, Western assessments failed to grasp the objectives of the conference and rather interpreted it as a call for more and better development. As a result, all three states stepped up their efforts to expand cultural and educational assistance.

This is a fascinating account and the detail and breadth of the sources is impressive. At times, however, one can get lost in the sheer abundance of information and sources and a better development of the narrative and more stringent argumentation might have helped.

I would also have liked to see further analysis of some avenues. Overall, there is a certain ambivalence about the Cold War. Gerits argues that it is not a central theme (255) and yet, on the second page of the article, he frames the conference as a “global Cold War event” (256). This is far from unique, as it epitomises our struggle as international historians of the post-war era; try as we might, we seem to be unable to escape the Cold War. Gerits instead offers development as a guiding principle to understand Bandung, and of course he has a point. However, the whole terminology of development is imbued with a Cold-War rationale. In many ways, development was a brainchild of the Cold War, and it certainly had an influence on how development politics, or in Gerits’s terms, different forms of “assistance” (257) played out. The Cold War created political possibilities and enabled political options and Gerits’s narrative on Kwame Nkrumah underscores this point. The

colonial powers and the U.S. were willing to lend development assistance because they had a vital interest in securing the support of Third World countries and not out of the goodness of their hearts.

Ultimately, development was a way to differentiate between the First and Third World, posing a clear hierarchy between the two categories with normative political, economic, but also moral connotations. Maybe the solution is not to substitute one for the other, but to disentangle the diverse narratives that drove non-alignment and Third World politics and to show where they intersected along the lines of Odd Arne Westad's work.⁴

Despite these minor niggles, this is an illuminating and rich account that helps us to understand and situate the emergence of the Third World.

Dr. Stella Krepp is an assistant professor of Iberian and Latin American history at Bern University, Switzerland. In 2013, she received her Ph.D. in history at the University of Cambridge. The revised thesis titled *The Decline of the Western Hemisphere: A History of Inter-American Relations from 1941 to 1990* is currently under review at Cambridge University Press. In 2016, she won the D.C. Watt Prize of the Transatlantic Studies Association for the paper "A View from the South: the Falklands/Malvinas and Latin America". Together with Thomas Field and Vanni Pettinà, she is co-editing the volume *Latin America and the Third World: An International History*, currently under review with The University of North Carolina Press. Her current project "The Real Road to Development': The Americas between Reform, Independence, and Revolution, 1954-64" examines these emerging ideas of progress, modernity, and development in Brazil, Cuba, and the British Caribbean.

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Notes

[1] Vijay Prasha, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2007).

[2] Robert Vitalis, "The Midnight Ride of Kwame Nkrumah and Other Fables of Bandung (Bandung)," *Humanity* 4:2 (Summer 2013): 261-288, 261.

[3] Jeffrey James Byrne, "Beyond Continents, Colours, and the Cold War: Yugoslavia, Algeria and the Struggle for Non-Alignment," *The International History Review* 37:5 (2015): 912-932, 913.

[4] Vitalis, "The Midnight Ride of Kwame Nkrumah and Other Fables of Bandung (Bandung)," 261-

288.

[5] Nataša Miškovic, Harald Fischer-Tiné, and Nada Boškowska, eds., *The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War: Delhi-Bandung-Belgrade* (London: Routledge, 2014). Robert B. Rakove, *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2014). Sandra Bott, Jussi M. Hanhimäki, Janick Marina Schaufelbuehl, and Marco Wyss, eds., *Neutrality and Neutralism in the Global Cold War: Between or Within the Blocs?* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[6] As quoted in footnote 32 in the article: UKNA, FO 371/116981, News Bulletin, "Afro-Asian Conference News, Published by the Information Department of the Embassy of Indonesia in London, 19 April 1955.

[7] Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).