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Review of *Crucible: The Year that Forged Our World*

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Fenby, Jonathan. *Crucible: The Year that Forged Our World*. London: Simon and Schuster UK Ltd., 2019. Reprint Edition. ISBN: 9781471155031.

In *Crucible*, Jonathan Fenby convincingly argues that the months between June 1947 to June 1948 were a decisive period in the escalation of international tensions and the making of modern conflicts. Fenby does not present a singular centralized narrative and prefers to chronologically present plotlines from separate conflicts such as the Soviet-American conflict over the future of Europe, the dissolution of the British Empire, and the establishment of national identities in Israel, post-colonial Africa, Southeast Asia, and China. When Fenby's narrative begins in 1947, the future of the postwar international order was in question: whether Europe's former imperial dominance would survive, whether Soviet-American tensions would escalate and produce rival international orders, and whether the self-determination of local populations in a world of power blocs and superpowers was the norm in international affairs.

Crucible is structured chronologically and regularly detours into different regions of the world to showcase the dynamism of 1947-1948. Part One covers the period between the end of the Second World War to June 1947 and outlines the characteristics of the "protagonists" in Fenby's narrative, forming intricate portraits of Truman and Stalin's worldviews to characterize the superpowers. Part Two set in June 1947 highlights global deadlocks, with a growing dollar gap in Europe, interethnic violence in India, and questions over Palestine in the United Nations. Part Three to Seven, between July-November, is centered around the fading power of European empires with the British withdrawal from India and French weakness in Algeria and Indochina, further complicated by growing political turmoil in France and Italy due to strikes. This is matched by strengthening Soviet

influence over Czechoslovakia. The conclusion of Part Seven acts as the midpoint of the narrative where economic recovery, conditional on superpower alignment is first tested, in Germany and Japan, increasing American support for the Marshall Plan to rejuvenate and make Western Europe economically independent. Part Eight to Part Ten details accelerating deterioration in Europe domestically and abroad between December 1947 to February 1948, with France paralyzed by strikes, Britain implementing austerity measures, and the Soviet coup in Czechoslovakia as the zero hour for an American response. Part Ten also discusses the role of Britain in the ongoing dispute between Israel, Palestine, Syria, and Transjordan and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia to foreshadow the Arab-Israeli War and the Berlin Blockade. Parts Eleven and Twelve focus on the emergence of the United States as a superpower with the Marshall Plan's passage through Congress in March and the Italian elections in April as evidence of the United States' new global role. Part Thirteen focuses on May of 1948 with the Arab-Israeli War and Soviet expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Communist Bloc; the former representing the climax of previously established tensions between Jewish and Arab national identities, and the latter representing the centralizing power within the Communist world. Part Fourteen concludes the narrative in June 1948 with the first UN brokered peace between Israel and Palestine, Stalin beginning the Berlin Blockade, and eruptions of violence over Kashmir. Part Fifteen is the shortest chapter and discusses the "logical conclusions" of the previous two chapters. Center stage in *Crucible* is the formation of the Western and Communist blocs, but also considers the implications that regional conflicts based on localized interests such as Israel, India, and even China were finding themselves increasingly defined by the conflicts from which they were forged.

Despite these seemingly disjointed threads, of which there were many, *Crucible* uses its dramatic structure and designation of "cast members" in each event to highlight an increasingly important dynamic, that being the role of superpowers and their all too human

leaders in a changing global order. If a central narrative exists in *Crucible*, it is the coming of the Cold War and the emergence of the United States and the Soviet Union as superpowers. However, Fenby's depiction of the rise of superpowers is potent not just through his use of American-Soviet competition over Europe as the oft-cited case study; but through instances where superpower relations had little influence compared to local nationalism in the Middle East and India. Fenby's chronological narrative and use of separate threads showcases the extent of superpower competition through its limitations; demonstrating that global affairs were not unilaterally dictated by Moscow and Washington, but also through conflicts of national identity that international arbitrators such as the United States, Soviet Union, and the United Nations were ill-equipped to handle. *Crucible* can be read as a dissection of what has been seen as the coming of a bipolar order out of uncertain and chaotic origins. Fenby acknowledges that in a chaotic period an equally chaotic picture emerges where no actor pursues identical goals to another actor.

This origin in chaos is an important aspect of Fenby's style when presenting a cacophony of reactive and spontaneous events. By breaking up the narratives, Fenby's approach makes the reader sympathetic to the experience of a world leader of the time. Fenby makes excellent use of primary sources from the United States, Britain, Israel, and France to detail the decision-making processes that would have been available to world leaders in real time. While Fenby does not overtly align with a historiographical school on the coming of the Cold War, *Crucible* is an excellent articulation of the post-revisionist school. Where the orthodox and revisionist schools assume a degree of intentionalism in global affairs where states, particularly the superpowers of the United States and Soviet Union pursued grand strategies with deliberate aims and means. Fenby provides an alternative argument which aligns with the post-revisionist perspective that leaders operated on a false sense of information where each move was reactive to an anarchic world order. The Marshall Plan for

instance, may have been designed as early as June 1947, but Fenby only presents it as a reactive measure to the deadlock in Europe in late 1947, Truman's re-election bid in January 1948, and the shock of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in February 1948. With the same principle, no event in *Crucible* happens in isolation or with complete agency, with Stalin's actions in Czechoslovakia and East Germany motivated by fears of Marshall Plan aid destabilizing the Eastern Bloc, the Soviet-Yugoslav split motivated by differences over approaches to the Greek Civil War, Israeli-Arab and Indian-Pakistani tensions motivated by interethnic suspicions, and European policies in their former colonies motivated by postwar debt. What *Crucible* succeeds most at doing is presenting complexity and uncertainty as a layer of nuance that is often overlooked in historiographies that present the road to conflict as a straightforward and simple inevitability.

Thematically, the questions of superpower relations and local nationalisms resonate with the intended readership of *Crucible*, the general public. Fenby's narrative is written with one eye on the present; making *Crucible* serve the double purpose of telling the narrative of June 1947 to June 1948, but also explain the origins of actors, paradigms, and institutions that exist in the modern day. These include the American 'rules-based' international order, divisions in the Middle East, Kashmir, Vietnam, and Korea, the rise of the People's Republic of China, and questions of nation-state formation in the post-colonial third world. These structures of international affairs act as immutable objects that seem eternal, but Fenby breaks down their origins into its constituent factors, geopolitical interests, and human considerations. *Crucible* succeeds because it presents structures as products of chance rather than grand design. One chapter to elucidate this was in Part One Chapter Three in a subsection called "Joe and Harry" as a means to humanize world leaders through their flaws and their human defects, from Ernest Bevin's weight, Stalin's physical deformities, George Kennan's ulcers, and Truman's short-sightedness. *Crucible* ensures that world leaders are

taken off their pedestal so their role in determining the course of world affairs is made explicitly human.

However, whether Fenby's approach is altogether effective in approaching this period is questionable. The humanization of world leaders and the chronological structure of *Crucible* gives the post-revisionist approach its due credence by delegitimizing arguments about inevitable Soviet expansionism or American market imperialism. One defect in *Crucible*'s approach is that the human aspect is emphasized to the point where individual relations and egos become the dominant, if not sole, driving force behind world affairs. This is effective when examining certain aspects of global affairs, such as Mountbatten's partition of India and Stalin's paranoia over the Eastern Bloc. The humanization of world leaders and chronological approach to examine the monthly factors in concise excerpts are effective means to highlight the dynamism of this period, the way it would have been experienced. This strips away the long-term assumptions and factors that influenced decision making, creating a scenario where each world leader seems to be entirely reactive to their individual circumstances and interests. Nevertheless, *Crucible*'s function is not to explain the theory of containment, the dollar gap, or Zionism, but to produce a history of June 1947 to June 1948. Taken through that metric, *Crucible* is an intricate tour de force that provides a refreshingly human account of a period that, as Fenby correctly identifies, acts as an inflexion point in international affairs and national histories.

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About the author

Timothy Li is currently a third-year undergraduate studying history at Durham University. He has written another article for the *Durham Eastern European Review* on the dynamics of détente between the United States and the Soviet Union. His research interest is the interplay between superpowers in the Cold War.