
Reviewed by Stephen Macekura, Indiana University

Over the last two decades, the history of international development has become a major topic of interest among international and global historians. These scholars have written extensively on the Cold War era, when the superpowers heartily embraced international development and foreign aid as important foreign policy tools to use in the hopes of winning hearts and minds and bolstering strategic ties to the so-called developing countries or Third World. Corinna Unger has contributed greatly to this wave of scholarship. She published a series of influential articles and manuscripts in English and German and edited and co-edited multiple volumes and journal special issues on topics such as the history of U.S. philanthropy overseas, rural development (with a focus on South Asia), European development aid, and Cold War development politics. To this long list she now adds another impressive feat: an excellent single-volume synthetic history of international development. Her book nicely encapsulates many of the major themes and findings from the recent scholarship on international development history.

*International Development: A Postwar History* focuses on international development politics, ideas, and policy. While noting the range of meanings affixed to development across time and space, Unger demonstrates that development became a major global pursuit during the mid-twentieth century amid the interconnected processes of postwar reconstruction, decolonization, and the surge of Cold War tensions. Leaders across the world viewed development “as a promise of a better future, a tool of liberation, and a vision of a feasible alternative to the past and present” (p. 9). Much of her book focuses on the “discursive and ideational levels of development thinking,” but she is also attuned to the importance of the “practical and material aspects of development” (p. 11). Unger argues that for Communists, liberal capitalists, and postcolonial revolutionaries alike, development offered hope “that poverty could be overcome with constructive means, that individual nations or societies could be designed in better, improved ways, and that regional inequalities could be leveled” (p. 8). Defying any single line of argumentation, her book introduces readers to the deep origins of postwar development thought and practice, the key institutions and actors in development policy, and the range of development forms (community development, rural development, modernization theory, sustainability) that captivated thinkers and leaders worldwide.

Unger has expertly woven the latest published scholarship in English, German, and Italian into a richly detailed summary of how and why countries adopted international development as a tool of policy, the international politics of development aid, and the important consequences of development intervention. The strongest parts of the book show how countries with vastly different ideologies nonetheless embraced similar modes of foreign aid and developmental planning to achieve similar political ends. An effective exploration of U.S., West European, and Soviet foreign aid policies.
during the early Cold War reveals how aid was always connected “to larger political, economic, ideological, and strategic positions” (pp. 97–98). In this discussion and similar comparisons throughout the book, Unger successfully balances reasoned generalization with illustrative case studies of particular development policies, projects, and thinkers. Moreover, Unger is especially adept and convincing in drawing out the long intellectual, political, and personal connections between colonial developmentism in the early twentieth century and the interwar competition between fascist, Communist, and liberal development efforts and the Cold War era. The title of the book in this sense is a misnomer, and for good reason. Unger’s title suggests it is a “postwar” history, but she shows persuasively that 1945 is an often overstated and misused dividing point in the history of international development because so much of postwar development flowered from prewar roots.

As a work of synthetic history that relies on available published sources, the book is necessarily thin on the contemporary era (for which there is little historical scholarship). Unfortunately, this means the post-1991 period receives only brief attention in a short (eight-page) chapter that provides a very general narrative of international politics and intellectual shifts. As a result, major aspects of recent development history—from China’s large-scale development initiatives at home and abroad and the U.S. government’s extensive developmental efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan—receive little attention or historical context. In addition, although Unger promises greater emphasis on the material aspects of development in the introduction (p. 11), her book largely does so only in particular instances (such as the green revolution on pp. 114–115 and birth control policies on pp. 122–123) without equivalent reflection on their cumulative effects. The larger biophysical and ecological transformations wrought by development—on landscapes, on settlement patterns, on the earth’s climate—still demand greater historical focus.

These small quibbles aside, Unger’s book is the best single-volume history of international development published to date. It would make a valuable addition to graduate courses on international and global history, and its clear and direct style would make it useful for select advanced undergraduate courses as well. Professional historians will also find the book an excellent resource for writing lectures on topics ranging from international perspectives on the Tennessee Valley Authority to the origins of development economics. The book should be the starting point for any researcher interested in the topic.

East Punk Memories, directed by Loucile Chaufour. Icarus Films, 2015. 51 min. $390.00.

Reviewed by Anna Szemere, Independent Scholar

L. P. Hartley’s novel The Go-Between opens memorably: “The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there.” Few representations of social and personal memory