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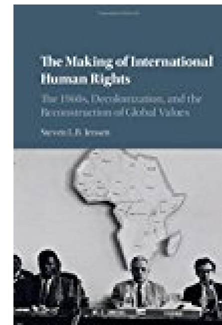
Steven L. B. Jensen. *The Making of International Human Rights: The 1960s, Decolonization, and the Reconstruction of Global Values.* Human Rights in History Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Illustrations. 334 pp. $99.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-11216-2.



Reviewed by Samantha Christiansen (Marywood University)
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The history of human rights, as told for decades, begins in the 1940s. There is perhaps an occasional nod to previous human rights-*ish* ideas, such as the rights demanded in the Magna Carta or the rhetoric of the French Revolution, but the traditional narrative places the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the immediate antecedents of that document, as the major point of departure. Indeed, even going straight to the source, the United Nations' official "History of the Document" for the declaration contends, "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 10 December 1948, was the result of the experience of the Second World War. With the end of that war, and the creation of the United Nations, the international community vowed never again to allow atrocities like those of that conflict happen again."[1] Following this line of thought, the story centers heavily on the political figures of the West, and human rights can be situated in a familiar Eurocentric, or perhaps more accurately Western-centric, tale. Following the "diplomatic feat" of the declaration, the narrative regularly jumps to the 1970s and the explosion of human rights organizations that gained public traction (best exemplified by Amnesty International's 1977 Nobel Peace Prize) and major diplomatic accomplishments, such as the Helsinki Accords of 1975, again placing human rights in the hands of largely Western actors.

Importantly, none of this narrative is inherently wrong; it is, however, incomplete. The gaps in the traditional approach and the resultant major implications for both diplomatic and human rights history are brought into stark light in Steven L. B. Jensen's work, *The Making of International Human Rights: The 1960s, Decolonization, and the Reconstruction of Global Values.* Jensen's work not only sheds light on a previously neglected decade, the 1960s, in human rights developments, but also brings to the front key diplomatic interventions made by figures in the Global South that "made not just an important but a transformative contribution that would influence the shaping of European détente through the Helsinki Final Act" (pp. 277-278). Jensen's ground-breaking work will undoubtedly reshape the trajectory and scope of human rights scholarship, and mark an important shift in understandings of the broader diplomatic history of the twentieth century.

The major body of Jensen's argument lies in tracing the interventions of Global South diplomats at the United Nations who pushed forward the idea of human rights and who effectively deployed the notion to move agendas that were not driven by Europe, the United States, or the Soviet Union, particularly issues of race and religion. With great effect, Jensen demonstrates the critical agency of the Global South in negotiating ideas of "universality" that would shape international politics for decades beyond the 1960s. As the notion of some kind of human rights project emerged in the 1940s, colonialism provided a complicated bedrock onto which notions of universal human rights were being established. Jensen explains, "In the hierarchical world of empire, human rights had only a limited opportunity to shape global politics. The notion of universality was anathema to this world system. After decolonization, human rights were negotiated in a more horizontal system of states, at least in formal terms" (p. 3). Critically, Jensen places constitutive power in postwar decolonization to the success of human rights as an international promise—without that

global power shift, the notion would have been effectively dead in the water as a result of its innate hypocrisy.

Jensen argues early in the work that in the first two years of the 1960s, debates over the official position of the United Nations on colonialism were a driving force for not only human rights discourse but also the international body overall. While European and US diplomats had attempted, with poor effect, to employ notions of human rights to protest the Berlin Wall's 1961 construction, Global South diplomats, such as Guinean President Sekou Toure, used the notion to set a new agenda for the United Nations General Assembly. Jensen explains, "For many member states, it [the debate over colonialism and its end] was comparable to debating a new UN Charter outlining the future purpose of the organization. These UN debates signified a new trajectory for human rights norms in international relations" (p. 51). While European diplomats were scrambling to defend an antiquated position, Global South diplomats pushed the conversation forward. In highlighting the role of figures from Ghana, Nigeria, Liberia, and the Philippines, and their effective use of human rights and a foundation for ending colonialism, Jensen depicts a moment where Global South diplomats were in control of the narrative.

That same level of agency and effective diplomacy in the hands of Global South diplomats is apparent in further debates in the General Assembly over the course of the 1960s. Debates over two critical issues—race and religion—shaped major shifts in policy and the power dynamic in the diplomatic struggle over human rights. In fact, Jensen argues that race and religion "were political Achilles' heels for the two superpowers" (p. 138). Jensen traces each of these with meticulous care and demonstrates the depth of negotiation, political complexity, and vulnerabilities involved in the global negotiations. With regard to racial equality, he argues, "The global struggle for racial equality challenged the legitimacy of the United states leadership on the world stage because of the system of racial segregation in the South. This dynamic had an impact on domestic political reform in the United States in the 1960s" (p. 138). The International Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965), the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) brought issues of race and discrimination to new diplomatic levels. The passage of these conventions and the diplomatic process preceding them "elevated the concept of human rights from one that had been on the fringes of international affairs to one that could not be ignored. It was a process that the superpowers—so dominant in the military and economic spheres—could not control" (p. 137). Yet while racial discrimination had proven to be a fruitful ground for breakthroughs in human rights during the 1960s, the issue of religion was equally important, and it was the other superpower, the Soviet Union, that was most vulnerable on that issue.

Jensen traces the debates over the failed Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Religious Intolerance as a lens through which to view the deterioration of world diplomacy over the latter half of the 1960s. The debate, much like the ones surrounding racial discrimination, was framed and formulated largely by Global South actors, including Liberia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Venezuela. A key player was also Saudi Arabia, whose leaders pointed criticism toward the Soviet Union's intolerant position on the region. Yet, unlike the United States, which enacted domestic policy changes regarding race that were spurred on by criticisms both at home and in the global community, the Soviet response to concurrent domestic and international critiques on religious freedom was to harden their position on the issue, and between 1959 and 1964, there was a concerted crackdown on religious activity within the Soviet Union. Between 1964 and 1967, the breakdown of the diplomatic process is clear in the debates over religious freedom. A critical, and unexpected variable, also came in the form of the Six Day War, in June 1967. Jensen explains, "In the aftermath of the Six Day War, Jerusalem symbolized war, religious conflict, Zionism, displacement and battles over sovereignty. These symbolic meanings were exploited by the communist states as an attack on the Convention [on Elimination of All Forms of Religious Intolerance] itself" (p. 165). As the debate continued, it became mixed into debates over colonialism, the Crusades, and slavery, and had lost all integrity. By November 1967 the entire conversation had collapsed and within months it was removed from the agenda completely. Yet while the efforts failed, Jensen effectively uses the issue of religious freedom as a way to trace the increasingly tense diplomatic environment at the United Nations moving into the late 1960s. The failure to come to agreement over the protections of religious freedom marked an important limitation in the seemingly limitless hopes of the early 1960s human rights debates.

Following his examination of the diplomatic efforts regarding freedoms of race and religion as tenets of human rights, Jensen takes us through 1968 and the International Conference on Human Rights, held in Tehran. Efforts to bring the Geneva Conventions to a more modern and effective form turned toward the language of human

rights for guidance. While 1968 was a "bitter year for human rights" as a result of widespread abuses and in the shadow of the failed negotiations on religious freedom, it was also a year of success. As Jensen points out, with the ratification of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in December 1968, "human rights had formally become international law" (p. 208). Jensen follows his consideration of the 1960s with two chapters that offer a reexamination of the role of human rights, and the Global South, in the Helsinki Final Act and a chapter on the changing role of the United Nations as the fight for human rights shifted to nongovernmental organizations in the 1970s. The final chapter, "The Presence of the Disappeared, 1968-1993," is an excellent bit of scholarship, and while it certainly provides some narrative continuity with the previous focus on the 1960s, it feels the least clearly connected to the others. That said, it does provide some insight into the ultimate trajectory of the debates he traces so closely in the 1960s.

While Jensen's work is not the first to take issue with the Eurocentric nature of the human rights narrative, it is the most comprehensive counter-narrative produced to date. Making use of archive collections in ten nations, alongside a comprehensive body of previous work on the diplomatic and discursive history of human rights, Jensen convincingly argues that the Global South is an active and formative player in the diplomatic negotiations regarding human rights. In addition, his illustration of how human rights became a discursive tool that Global South diplomats were more effective at deploying than the superpowers provides an important counterbalance to notions of a Cold War that provided no space beyond the US-Soviet binary. H-Diplo readers will particularly appreciate his skill at recreating complex diplomatic moments, and translating legal documents, meeting notes, and policy reforms into readable and frankly, riveting, chapters. Not only does Jensen's work unsettle the entire narrative of human rights history, but he also in fact requires modern historians to step back and reevaluate virtually every diplomatic development in the postwar era. This work is a critical and long-needed intervention in human rights history, diplomatic history, and indeed, modern world history.

Note

[1]. United Nations, "History of the Document," `http://www.un.org/en/sections/universal-declaration/history-document/index.html` (accessed July 7, 2016).

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