

Hamilton, Shane: *Supermarket USA. Food and Power in the Cold War Farms Race*. New Haven: Yale University Press 2018. ISBN: 9780300232691; X, 277 S.

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Shane Hamilton takes his book title, *Supermarket USA* – and its evocative cover image – from an American display at the 1957 Zagreb International Trade Fair. The industry-government initiative had more than one purpose. First, it was to be a vivid illustration of the bounty of food produced in the American free enterprise system. But, more than a propaganda exercise, it was intended to jumpstart a global presence for American industrial agriculture and its retail outlets. And, finally, beyond propaganda and economic initiatives, *Supermarket USA* was designed to effect real political change by inspiring political dissatisfaction behind the iron curtain, leading Yugoslav citizens to throw off their communist masters. Hamilton's agenda for his book is similarly multi-purpose and ambitious, providing a nuanced consideration of the phenomenon he dubs „the Cold War Farms Race“.

Hamilton places the 1957 *Supermarket USA* at the center of his discussion, because it conveys the central premises of his book. His Cold War analysis is not intended merely to add to the literature on the subject, but to deconstruct the dominant interpretation, emphasizing that the conflict is best understood as an economic competition broadly waged in various realms. From within this broad interpretative framework, Hamilton examines the supermarket in new and creative ways. Almost always viewed as a manifestation of consumer abundance in the mid twentieth century, Hamilton instead tells readers that he wants to „break down the artificial division between production and consumption“ to instead explain that the supermarket isn't only a retail space „but... the endpoint of a supply chain of industrialized agriculture“ (p. 2). Together, these two premises logically lead to a third which underlies Hamilton's argument: if the Cold War is primarily an economic competition and supermarkets are integral to both

American agriculture and industry, then one would expect that the U.S. government was deeply involved in both areas, or in waging the „Cold War Farms Race“.

The six chapters of *Supermarket USA* are chronologically arranged, and each discusses a distinct manifestation of the Cold War Farms Race. Chapter one details how the domestic spread of supermarkets in the two decades before the Cold War started was born of concentrated buying power and the relentless pursuit of efficiency in supply chains, creating a new entity relying on the intertwining of „state power and market power“ (p. 19). The meticulously organized system brought reliable abundance at cheap prices to most Americans. While this marvel of the domestic economy was being strengthened, foreign policymakers in Washington were busy articulating what the liberal world order stood for – and why it was superior to the postwar communist system in eastern Europe and elsewhere. Chapter two discusses the evolving policies of the Truman and Eisenhower administrations. First, they viewed agricultural abundance and productivity as a demonstration of western largesse and success, and second as a means of strengthening American corporations overseas; in both approaches, supermarkets and industrial agriculture were weapons to be deployed in the Cold War.

Chapters three and four discuss how private corporations and the US government cooperated in the export of American supermarkets to Latin America and to Europe to achieve political, economic, and propaganda goals. One model for this system was created by Nelson Rockefeller with his International Basic Economic Corporation (IBEC) which ran a chain of supermarkets in Venezuela from the 1940s to the 1960s. Hamilton details the seamless transformation of supermarkets first intended as idealistic initiatives to improve the lives of Venezuelans, and then intended to be an arm of corporate businesses to make money for shareholders. More directly on the front lines of the Cold War, American demonstrations of abundance beginning in Yugoslavia in 1957 encapsulated efforts to use food as a weapon on the Cold War. Put in this context, Hamilton's discussion of Khrushchev's fall from power when

he failed to meet Soviet expectations – that he had helped manufacture – for cheap and abundant food illustrates the far-reaching impact of the „Cold War Farms Race“.

In chapter five, Hamilton turns away from his explicit focus on the Cold War to examine the changes in agribusiness which increasingly in the 1950s and 60s was less the work of family farmers and more vertically integrated corporate systems to profitably provide products for their consumers. Supermarkets, in this new twist on the production and distribution of food, were institutions which supposedly demonstrated „consumer sovereignty“ in their very definition as customers could „choose“ from plentiful foods of various sorts. Critics in the 1960s and consumer boycotts in the 1970s charged that such freedom was illusory, since massive corporate buying power and carefully controlled supply chains manipulated prices and available foods.

In his last chapter, Hamilton returns to the global impact of the industrial agricultural system which had grown far beyond supermarkets. The chapter continues the thoughtful juxtaposition of government and corporate agricultural policies that runs throughout the book. While presidents from Kennedy to Nixon experimented with different ways to exercise the US's „food power“ – through policies such as „food for peace“ or grain deals with the Soviet Union – Reagan gave up the idea of using agriculture as a foreign policy tool, and embraced the idea that agriculture was just one aspect of global trade to profit American corporations. In sum, Reagan ceded the field of global agriculture to the expansive enterprises which would come to dwarf previous efforts, making such initiatives as a small chain of supermarkets in Venezuela discussed in earlier chapters seem quaint. There is, then, a direct line from this shift to the present-day agricultural and retail behemoths of ADM and Walmart which grew out of twentieth century supermarkets, but no longer resembled them.

In the nearly three decades since the end of the Cold War, historians have been debating the causes, impact, and legacy of the rivalry which dominated twentieth century foreign policy and touched many areas of American life. Shane Hamilton's *Supermarket USA* is

an important contribution to this discussion because he shifts the framework to economic competition, focuses on the ordinary and necessary goal of procuring food, and neatly illustrates how the power of the Cold War lay not in the event itself but in the systems it left behind. As Hamilton concludes, while „the economic Cold War did not determine the shape of the post-Cold War economic world“ (p. 209), it is hard to imagine the Walmart of 2018 without the systems laid down half a century before.

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