

[Klimo on Mark and Iacob and Rupprecht and Spaskovska, '1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe'](#)

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James Mark, Bogdan C. Iacob, Tobias Rupprecht, Ljubica Spaskovska. *1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe*. New Approaches to European History Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 380 pp. \$84.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-108-42700-5; \$26.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-108-44714-0.

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People usually struggle to make sense of the historical period they live in. This is also true today, especially in what has been called “the West,” which includes wealthy democratic societies of Europe and the United States, countries (or their elites) that have been identifying themselves in contrast to the communist “Second World” and the poor, underdeveloped “rest,” called the “Third World” by those who believe they represent the “First World” (a designation mostly avoided because it sounds a bit pretentious). With the collapse of the political system of the “Second World” around 1989 and the early 1990s, the “First World” seemed to be the “winner” of the Cold War, although, if we look closely at what was written in the West at the time, many were rather concerned about what would follow, and the wars that accompanied the breaking apart of Yugoslavia seemed to prove that the situation was indeed dangerous. Later, for a moment, “Europeanization” of Eastern Europe seemed to bring the liberal dream of an “end of history” into reality when most countries in Europe had embraced capitalism and democracy, epitomized by the European Union. After the 2008 economic crisis, however, this “myth of 1989” came under increasing attack, not only in Hungary and Poland but also in the Western “core” of the EU.

The new *1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe* focuses on the “myth of 1989” and attempts to counter a simplified, Eurocentric narrative of the Eastern part of the continent since 1989 in a number of ways (p. 1). Using a global approach, this extraordinary book, which was written by four authors, who all teach history at the University of Exeter as specialists of different regions (James Mark/Central Europe, Bogdan C. Iacob/Eastern Europe, Tobias Rupprecht/Latin America, and Ljubica Spaskovska/former Yugoslavia), critiques and revises a number of popular aspects of this Eurocentric myth of 1989. They bring back agency to elites and peoples of Eastern Europe, who were not all “waiting” longingly to become a part of the “West” (although, as the authors admit, many were!). The authors, instead, highlight that many experts, often communist “reformers,” were actively engaged in changing the state-socialist economic system by opening it to the world market, thus bringing a new dynamic into the process of globalization that had slowed down during the 1950s because of heightened East-West confrontation. Later, communist reformers sometimes played a crucial role in international debates about capitalism, sometimes asking for more radical, or “neo-liberal,” forms of capitalism in contrast to their Western counterparts who were more oriented toward a social democratic model (page 64 cites the Hungarian economist János Kornai as an example). But this

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happened long before 1989. Eastern Europe was not an isolated gray zone of people desperate for Western consumer goods and freedom. The images of the opening of the Berlin Wall and East Germans standing in line to get bananas have covered up these long-term developments and the manifold relations between East Germany and the Southern Hemisphere.

Decolonization since the 1960s, which had brought political independence to a number of African states, had opened new perspectives for politicians and experts in *both* communist and capitalist Europe and initiated an increasing spectrum of “developing” strategies and attempts to integrate or reintegrate Africa and Asia into world trade. The book shows that we have to think about the relationship of two processes: the (self-)integration of Eastern Europe into the world market and the decolonization since the 1960s with a perspective on the involvement of Eastern European communist functionaries. In the early 1980s, however, Western ideas of “Eurafrica” and Eastern European attempts to create a socialist world market in contrast to global capitalism slowly lost their popularity (p. 164). The challenges of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and, most of all, new trends in global mobility brought forth a revival of older ideas of “Christian Europe” or “fortress Europe,” accompanied by racists ideas and acts of violence (pp. 164, 165). Again, this shift could be observed in *both* the East and West, which demonstrates the insightfulness of the global perspective on Eastern Europe.

Another popular but partly erroneous narrative the book addresses is the idea that all Eastern Europeans wanted a liberal democratic system to replace the communist dictatorship, which was seen as a quasi essential complementary to the market economy. Many economists and communist reformers were, especially before 1989, convinced that an authoritarian-capitalist model, like the examples of South Korea under Park Chung-Hee or Chile under Augusto Pinochet, were superior to a combination of capitalism and democracy. In Russia, because of the chaotic situation in the early 1990s, the belief in “Formula Pinochet” had many adherents also after 1989. Emphasizing that the question regarding which political model to follow was fierce and not determined in 1989 in many parts of Eastern Europe is not only important for the historical record but also in relation to the authoritarian and illiberal tendencies in the region that have been observed in the last decade.

In Africa, the myth of 1989 had strong influence on the political elites who quickly abandoned Marxism and their connections to the Soviet Union and often engaged in “democracy talk” without actually giving up their grip on power (p. 221). However, the myth also brought back ideas of a “superior” Western model that Africans had to follow, introducing stronger “conditionality” in agreements or loans from the European Community or the International Monetary Fund while African elites feared that investments would now mostly flow into Eastern Europe (p. 226). A similar push to support democracy and human rights could be observed in other parts of the world, especially in the Middle East or the Balkans, where the narrative of 1989 was used to justify Western interventionism, although, as the authors underline, “third-wave democratisation and marketisation, catalyzed by Eastern Europe’s 1989, was not simply a story of instrumentalisation of the West and then export to the rest” (p. 264). Instead, traditions created by the socialist or the nonaligned world, which were not perceived as part of the West, still resonated in these parts of the world after 1989. At least since 2010, when the “Arab Spring” turned into brutal civil wars, and populist right-wing politicians started to rise in many parts of the world, the myth of 1989 as the triumph of Western capitalism and democracy has become increasingly contested and probably even “marginalized” in Eastern Europe itself (p. 308). “For many Eastern European conservatives, 1939 superseded 1989 because it

symbolised both national martyrdom and the non-Western, non-liberal roots of their national and Christian European identity” (p. 310). Even the oppositional groups active today against populist governments in Hungary, the Czech Republic, or Poland are not fully behind the older Western liberal narrative but are more concerned with anti-corruption causes or government responsibility. But who knows, maybe the myth of 1989 will, eventually, return?

1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe is, in any case, an important contribution to our understanding of today’s world. The book offers a coherent narrative, and this sometimes results in repetitions, but the reflexivity of the authors who counter their own theses with counter-theses inspires further discussions. One does not have to agree with the authors’ critical, postcolonial critiques of the “neoliberal” West to see the value of the new insights their global perspectives bring to the field of Eastern European history.

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