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Review: 1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe -- by James Mark, Bogdan C Iacob, Tobias Rupprecht, and Ljubica Spaskovska (eds.)

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James Mark, Bogdan C Iacob, Tobias Rupprecht, and Ljubica Spaskovska. *1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe*. New Approaches to European History. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. vii, 372.

Reviewed by

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Once hailed as the high-point of Western-inspired free-market liberal democracy, the so-called 'End of History', 1989, seems all the more hollow with the passing of time.[1] The images of popular rejoicing at the fall of the Berlin Wall have been replaced with populist disillusion. Fukuyama's liberal democratic *Weltgeist* is encountering significant headwinds three decades later. Communism remains the self-professed ideology of the world's emerging superpower China. Theocracies and dictatorships are growing in number. Promises of economic prosperity under capitalism were not realised for many on the periphery or semi-periphery. Nor did the end of the Cold War translate into peace. What had been understood as a liberal moment was followed by distinctly illiberal outcomes, inside and outside of Eastern Europe. This was not how the 'dominant liberal script' was supposed to play out.[2]

These new political realities have informed a recent contribution to Cambridge University Press's *New Approaches to European History* series timed to coincide with the thirtieth anniversary of the 1989 revolutions. Co-written by four current and former University of Exeter academics, *1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe* demonstrates what collaborative writing and research can achieve.[3] Regional specialisations from James Mark (Central Europe), Bogdan C Iacob (Eastern Europe), Tobias Rupprecht (Soviet Union and Latin America), and Ljubica Spaskovska (Yugoslavia), allow for a truly transnational and comparative analysis of a region never explicitly defined, but taken to mean former socialist states. That includes Russia and the Balkans, but excludes Finland and potential candidates in the Caucasus region. The six chapters entitled Globalisation, Democratisation, Europeanisation, Self-Determination, Reverberations, and A World Without '1989', reflect the 'global turn' in history, itself the product of post-colonial and decolonial approaches.

The introduction begins with a reappraisal of the familiar vision of 1989 propagated by the likes of French historian François Furet and German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. They saw the end of the Eastern bloc as the 'passing of an illusion' and a 'catching-up revolution', in which the semi-peripheral and isolated eastern half of the continent returned to Western Europe.[4] What emerges in their place is a rich, nuanced, and compelling re-casting of the collapse of state socialism as the culmination of a long-running debate over Eastern Europe's centuries-old 'in-betweenness'.[5] 'Transitional elites', a term frequently used by populists of the present, are the key actors in this story, makers of their own future and active participants in shaping the world.[6]

While the events of that year appeared to confirm a particular Western form of globalisation, the book brings to life forgotten alternative or socialist globalisations, a nod to a methodology informed by the 'global'. A focus on East-South connections is part of a growing trend and highlights a promising field of enquiry.[7] Such links, forged out of anti-imperialist solidarity with newly de-colonised states, came under pressure from crises in the global economy from the 1970s onwards. Eastern European elites, interacting with global ideas on governance during the Cold War and struggling to manage a foreign debt

crisis, gradually dropped socialist internationalism in favour of a Western mode of development: small-state, market economy, and democratic.

The democratic path was taken up late in the day, as the book reminds us. Removing the Communist party from power was not seen as politically feasible at the time. An authoritarian capitalist path lay in the realm of the possible. Consequently, modernising dictatorships in Latin America and East Asia were more relevant comparisons for Eastern European one-party states on the periphery of the global economy than Thatcherism or Reaganomics. Hungary's 'Korea Boys' looked to Seoul's military rule.[8] 'Formula Pinochet', named after the Chilean dictator, was admired in Poland and Russia both before and after the transition.[9] Case studies like these add nuance to the claim that there is a natural bond between democratisation and marketisation and feed into ongoing research into the global history of neoliberalism from the likes of Dieter Plehwe and Quinn Slobodian.[10] Only when dictatorship was perceived as an obstacle did democratisation come to the fore. Even after 1989, however, Western advisors, long accused of imposing neoliberal reforms, were used as political 'cover' by enthusiastic neoliberal reformers who remained apathetic towards democracy.[11]

Chapters Three and Six elaborate on how Eastern Europe's negotiated transition was instrumentalised by the West to usher in the 'winds of change' on a global scale.[12] In the 1990s, dictators were toppled, particularly in Africa. Western-dominated institutions like the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank pointed to Eastern Europe when constructing 'conditionality'.[13] The radical left felt the effects too. The collapse of Soviet-style communism was the impetus for an 'accommodation' with the capitalist world order.[14] The 'transition paradigm', rightly criticised in these pages as elite, out of date, and un-democratic, meant the path of violent revolution was dropped in favour of roundtable transformations.[15] Elsewhere, the authors trace a line from the collapse of state socialism to liberal interventionism in the Middle East or, more credibly given their shared history, the Colour Revolutions of the 2000s in the former Soviet sphere.

The questionable aftermath of these world-making projects and the financial crisis of 2008 provoked an identity crisis among regional elites. This sentiment was fed by a bitterness at not being accepted as 'full Europeans' by the West, particularly in immigration debates.[16] Early supporters of the liberal script, like Viktor Orbán, started to turn against the liberal aspects of Western globalisation.[17] Nationalists in Poland and Czechoslovakia, who saw the end of state socialism as another 'end of empire' story in the struggle for self-determination from 'Soviet colonisation', had a particular vision of a common civilisation space: Christian or Fortress Europe.[18] In the same stroke, if not somewhat paradoxically, elites pivoted away from the 'return to Europe' and rekindled old ties with Russia or the South. The rise of China and its blend of authoritarianism and capitalism was used to teach a different lesson: 'the European model had failed'.[19] The dynamism of the Baltic States, poster children of liberal reformers, was conveniently forgotten in this narrative. Estonian elites, enamoured by a 'Hungarian model', enthusiastically opened up to the global

economy after 1989 and reaped the rewards: European Union accession and NATO membership.[20]

While Eastern Europe remains allied to the West for the time being, it is searching for alternatives. This process is again led by elites, some of whom openly embraced the liberal script. They feel shunned by the superior attitude of Western counterparts, captured in the enduring words and 'illusions' of Habermas and Furet, and are looking anew at forgotten links and traditions. That description of the intellectual history of Eastern Europe would correspond with the book's narrative that this 'swing region' has been shaped by its global interconnectedness and in-betweenness.[21] The same cannot be said for geopolitical in-betweenness, trapped between Russia and Western Europe, a position which is in the long-run unsustainable, then as now.

While the historical contingency of a blow-by-blow account of the events of 1989 is lost in the narrative of a 'long revolution' guided by elites, the main argument of the book is convincing and returns agency to a region too often portrayed as passive.[22] Its title and cover, which features graffiti of a Trabant breaking through the Berlin Wall, are misleading in so far as their purpose is to relativise the 1989 moment. To what extent this was the choice of the publisher or the authors is unclear. Reinforcing of the argument and crossover between themes occasionally strays into repetitiveness. The final chapter looks to the future, but the text still lacks an overall concluding statement. Still, the sections are well-structured with copious footnotes. Researchers should pay attention to the archives and primary sources listed in the bibliography. The book ends on an ambiguous note: the liberal interpretation of 1989 is under threat, but is still a 'mobilising symbol' not yet forgotten by the peoples of Eastern Europe.[23]

Notes

1 Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?", *The National Interest* 16 (1989).

2 James Mark, Bogdan C Iacob, Tobias Rupprecht, and Ljubica Spaskovska, *1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe*, New Approaches to European History (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 3.

3 The book was also the product of a research project with ties to the University of Exeter: "1989 After 1989: Rethinking the Fall of State Socialism in Global Perspective", https://1989after1989.exeter.ac.uk/.

4 François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Jürgen Habermas, *Die Nachholende Revolution*, Edition Suhrkamp 1633 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990).

5 Mark et al., *1989*, 8.

6 Mark et al., *1989*, 12.

7 One of the authors has helped set the terms of the new debate: James Mark, Artemy M. Kalinovsky

and Steffi Marung, eds., *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020).

[8] Mark et al., *1989*, 71.

[9] Mark et al., *1989*, 119; for a more detailed history, see Tobias Rupprecht, "Formula Pinochet: Chilean Lessons for Russian Liberal Reformers During the Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000", *Journal of Contemporary History* 51, no. 1 (2016), https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009415585891.

[10] Dieter Plehwe and Quinn Slobodian, eds., *Market Civilizations: Neoliberals East and South, Near Future Series* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

[11] Mark et al., *1989*, 15.

[12] Mark et al., *1989*, 6.

[13] Mark et al., *1989*, 226.

[14] Mark et al., *1989*, 231.

[15] Mark et al., *1989*, 91.

[16] Mark et al., *1989*, 282.

[17] Mark et al., *1989*, 265.

[18] Mark et al., *1989*, 19–141.

[19] Mark et al., *1989*, 22.

[20] Mark et al., *1989*, 81–193.

[21] Mark et al., *1989*, 8.

[22] Mark et al., *1989*, 11.

[23] Mark et al., *1989*, 267.