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Russian, Eurasian, and East European Studies

From the ‘Second’ to the ‘Third’ Worlds: Rethinking Eastern Europe’s Cold War

On Thursday October 9, 2014, the Harriman Institute and the Central and Eastern European Club hosted James Mark, professor of history at the University of Exeter. Mark challenged what he described as the simplistic narratives imposed on many countries of the former Eastern Bloc and questioned the traditional Western view of the Cold War as a reaction to colonialism. “Peripheries,” he said, referring to the nations stuck between Western Europe and the USSR, “attempted to band together,” and in doing so, changed the courses taken by superpowers.

The term “decolonialization,” used to explain the spread of global socialism into the so-called “third world,” was invented by the West “to explain a changing world,” Mark said. A better term, he suggested, might be “socialist globalization.” The distinction is important, he stressed, because socialist expansion was defined not so much in opposition to the West as in expectation of global reach. Globalization, which has been largely viewed as a Western, capitalist force created to oppose communism, was in fact prevalent behind the iron curtain in its own right, and it is a phenomenon we rarely historicize.

For instance, after Iraq’s socialist elite overthrew the country’s monarchy, the Iraqis looked all over the world for architects to rebuild Baghdad. They finally settled on a Polish group from Krakow, in part because “Poles had a reputation as rebuilders of cities,” and in part because “they wanted to make a point about socialist solidarity.” Ironically, the bunkers and compounds that housed Saddam Hussein until his capture by Americans were designed by Polish architects.

Mark also discussed Eastern European attempts to gain influence in Latin America and Africa, especially after the Cuban revolution. “Cuba was important to the Soviet elite,” he said, both because of its proximity to the United States and because it proved that socialism could take

hold outside of Europe, in an environment utterly different from post-World War I Russia. However, Soviet attempts to win over Africans often backfired. While visiting the Eastern Bloc, Africans were shocked by the poverty they encountered. Also, the mere presence of dark-skinned people in Eastern Europe raised issues of racism and cultural conservatism that showed what Mark called “the ossification of socialism.” Regardless, the cultural exchange did leave an impression: some citizens of Eastern Bloc countries, particularly Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, began to connect the oppressive regimes of the visiting Africans to their own oppressive regimes. This paved the way for resistance and, ultimately, revolution.

Finally, Mark debunked the myth that Eastern Bloc leaders pulled away from the West. In fact, he argued, “the nations of Eastern Europe were looking for Western help modernizing” and maintained relationships with Western countries while publicly excoriating them. “A little anti-Americanism was good,” he said, but not too much. When Eastern European protests against Vietnam resulted in violence, including a crowd of 200,000 that attacked the U.S. consulate in Zagreb in 1966, the Eastern European leadership did not encourage them, because they were “too anti-American.” What Eastern Bloc states wanted, according to Mark, was “fealty to socialist ideals without disruption of relationships with the U.S. and U.S.-based economies.”

Ultimately, he said, socialist globalization was less successful than its Western counterpart. But we see echoes of it in Vladimir Putin’s politics. Putin, Mark concluded, has resumed the Soviet ambition of co-opting leaders of developing countries, plying them to join his cause.

*Reported by Matthew Van Meter
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