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Federico Romero. ***Storia Della Guerra Fredda: L'Ultimo Conflitto Per L'Europa*****.** Turin: Einaudi, 2009. ISBN: 978-88-06-18829-0 (€30.00).

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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Mark Gilbert**, Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies, Bologna, Italy

Italian scholars continue to produce a large body of innovative work on the Cold War that is little read and too rarely cited outside the country. This book is a good example of what non-readers of Italian are missing. Federico Romero, who was formerly a professor at the University of Florence and is now chair of modern European history at the European University Institute, has written a subtle and densely intellectual general history of the Cold War. Its intended audience is presumably university students and school teachers, but it is nevertheless a work that specialists in the field can read with profit.

Romero's approach is superficially chronological. He takes us from the onset of the Cold War between 1944-1949 to the unification of Germany and the end of Soviet communism 1989-1991. The opening chapter is followed by a series of essay-like chapters on "Militarized Bipolarism, 1950-1956," "A Global Struggle, 1957-1963," "Bipolar Upheaval, 1964-1971," "The Culmination and Defeat of Détente, 1972-1980," and "The Circle Closes, 1981-1990." This periodization is surprisingly unadventurous in its reliance upon core events in American political history to act as hinges from one chapter to another, but the book has a strong narrative drive and – in many ways, this is the book's most distinctive feature – the factual story is laden with interpretative commentary.

One interpretative theme inserted into the narrative is implicit in the book's subtitle. Romero's Cold War is neither a triumphant victory for universal western values and for the United States, nor a conflict whose main locus was the Third World, but rather an ideological and geopolitical struggle to define the future of Europe. He is very insistent on this point: "it is…right to argue…that the dynamics of the process of globalisation were decisive in bringing the Cold War and the Soviet experiment to an end. It is there [in the Third World] – more than through containment and strategic deterrence – that western culture and organisation, led by the United States, wore down and eventually defeated a weaker adversary that was burdened with excessive expectations and that was, above all, unresponsive (*statico*)" (p. 10).

Nevertheless, Romero underlines that the region of the world that proved to be "continuously and decisively central" was Europe. The divided continent was the *baricentro* of the conflict, the only area that was an "absolutely core concern" (*assolutamente imprescindibile*) to both blocs and where neither bloc was prepared to accept defeat (p. 10). The Cold War could only end, in fact, when the conditions that had generated it ceased to predominate in Europe.

How did the Cold War start? Romero sees American choices (occasionally made as a result of prodding from London) as being decisive. Romero acknowledges that Stalin would never have been satisfied without a "substantial Soviet continental hegemony" over Europe. He is sure that the post-war climate was bound to be characterized by "a hefty dose of international antagonism" whatever happened. There would have been *a* Cold War (or possibly a hot one). Nevertheless, the Cold War we got, he thinks, was mostly caused by U.S. actions and the conceptual framework that inspired those actions. Stalin "did not foresee, and did not want, the Cold War that he got." The Truman doctrine, containment and, above all, the decision to bring West Germany into a western bloc "nourished (*alimentata*) by the Marshall Plan" were the actions that made superpower relations freeze over (all quotations from p. 69).

The Americans took the decisions that launched the Cold War because they wanted to save the world for democracy. That is to say, U.S. policy was driven by "the ambition to construct a post-war world order of interdependence between capitalist market economies and democratic regimes inspired by the universalism of liberal values," (p. 70) which means the same thing – sort of. The ambiguity lies in Romero's assessment of the motives that prompted the U.S. to offer its aid. For Romero, Uncle Sam was less an altruist reaching out a helping hand than a potent, self-confident rich man who was willing to offer Europe a "way out of its past, with the prospect of embracing (my very free translation of *approdo*) a modernity whose credibility – and attractiveness – was enhanced by the opulent American society on show to anybody who went to the cinema." (p. 57) The Americans, in short, invited the bedraggled, shell-shocked Europeans into their home and pointed out the luxury of the furniture and labour-saving appliances: the explicit message, underlined in a thousand ways, was, "You, too, can be like us."

Romero substantially agrees with the Norwegian historian Geir Lundestad that the Europeans did not have to be asked twice to rent space in the American condominium. Indeed, they banged energetically at the doors and asked to be let in. It was European supplication that made the post-war extension of American military and political leadership such a "singular" empire. In effect, "once great powers – the two principal colonial empires and two main recently defeated industrial powers – welcomed or outright solicited the extension of American hegemony over them" (pp. 70-71). As Romero drily points out, Western Europe got a very good deal: it was, indeed, the "main beneficiary" of the Cold War. The Cold War and American hegemony were the "necessary pacifying conditions that enabled Europe to turn its back on the civil, ideological and international conflicts that had dragged it down in the previous three decades" (p. 72).

As this assessment of Romero's portrayal of the origins of the Cold War suggests, Romero believes that the main stages of the Cold War were shaped by the states of minds prevailing among the statesmen who were fighting the conflict and created by propaganda among public

opinion. *Mentalité* mattered. I say *mentalité* rather than ideology since Romero strives to portray the ideology of the protagonists of the Cold War, perhaps especially the Americans, as being motivated less by intellectual reflection than by dogma, Manichean prophecy and a propensity to over-interpret events. NSC-68, which in Romero's view represented "a shift of perspective," (*una svolta prospettica*) is a crucial document in his story for this reason. After NSC-68, the U.S. government believed it had to conduct its policy on the assumption of the "worst case scenario," namely that Moscow and its agents were intending the subversion or violent destruction of the entire non-communist world. Seeing the world through these thick conceptual lenses, U.S. policy-makers were blinded to the "divisions and weaknesses of the adversary" and saw only "a linear, abstract accumulation of power" on the part of the Soviet Union. The Cold War, in short, ceased to be about hegemony in Europe and became seen in Washington as a crusade between the "free world" and the "slave society" of the Soviet bloc. "NSC-68," Romero writes, "implied…an expansion and a multiplication of American security interests, but blurred the distinction (*una perdita di distinzione*) between core interests and minor ones, and hence led to a progressive imbalance between the commitments regarded as vital and the resources available to carry them out, which obviously could not be infinite" (quotations from p. 82).

From the early 1950s onwards, in short, the U.S. saw its task as that of saving the world from communism wherever it might be found. The whole world was at stake and a defeat *anywhere* was regarded as a defeat *everywhere*. U.S. intervention in Korea (about which Romero writes deftly and succinctly), Guatemala and Iran derived from this "all or nothing" mentality: the Korean War, indeed, transformed NSC-68's "gloomy prophecies," in the eyes of many in Washington, into "axiomatic certainties" (p. 83). The construction of the massive "national security state," McCarthyism and the cultural Cold War were the corollaries of what Romero plainly regards as an inflated sense of mission, as were the Bay of Pigs, intervention in Vietnam's civil war and the growing deep ambivalence in Western Europe itself over the values and wisdom of its protectors (p. 99).

One shortcoming of the book is that Romero, who is a specialist on U.S. diplomatic and political history, does not provide the reader with a sustained analysis of the ideological climate in Moscow, let alone China. This is not to say that Romero weighs the sides with different measures: there are certainly no apologetics here for the grim miseries of Brezhnevism or the lunacies of the Cultural Revolution. But his specialist bias unquestionably shows. After all, the leaders of the communist bloc were at least as prone as the U.S. to portray the conflict as an ideological crusade, except that in their case it was a crusade against "imperialism" and for "world revolution." One short paragraph aside, Romero does not really discuss systematically the extent to which ideology drove communist foreign policies (but he does provide a skilful summary of the debate in the U.S. over modernization theory and its Cold War role). Yet revolutionary and anti-imperialist ideology, as Romero does note, was undeniably one reason for Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's decision to support and exploit Fidel Castro's revolution in Cuba (p. 153), as was Mao Zedong's notoriously blithe attitude towards nuclear war. A greater emphasis on the world view(s), the rhetoric and the propaganda of the communist states would have enriched the narrative – and not just when recounting the Cold War's early years.

A second shortcoming – or, at any rate, debatable narrative choice – is that Romero does not really address how the Cold War affected the political development of individual countries, both in Europe and elsewhere. He does not really discuss the effect of the Cold War even on the domestic politics of his own country, profound though they were. Romero says in the Introduction that his book is "not a history with Italy at its centre, even implicitly." "Italy," he says, "was part of the Cold War, but it wasn't a protagonist" (p. 13). This is true, but it is certainly also true that the Cold War divide characterized and deformed post-war Italian politics. The U.S. followed political developments in Italy carefully and had no scruples about making its political preferences known to the powerbrokers in Rome; the Italian Communist Party (PCI) was embroiled in a tormented relationship with the USSR that spilled over into domestic politics. The Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia were both epochal events for the PCI. The U.S. role in Greece was if anything even more overt than in Italy, while the United States' relations with Fascist Spain and Portugal belied its rhetoric about the defence of democracy and caused periodic unease among its more sensitive NATO partners. Yet the chief political actors of the Mediterranean states, and the key political developments, are scarcely mentioned in Romero's text. Giulio Andreotti, Marcelo Caetano, Francesco Cossiga, Amintore Fanfani, Kostantinos Karamanlis, Alexandros Papagos: none of these political figures is so much as mentioned in the text. Spanish dictator Francisco Franco appears only once, like the Portuguese Socialist leader Mario Soares and the French Communist Maurice Thorez; Italian Communist leader Palmiro Togliatti appears twice, but only in the briefest of asides. This book may be the only one ever written by an Italian author on Cold War history that does *not* contain a learned disquisition on the finer points of polycentrism.

Specialists on Latin America, Central-Eastern Europe, East Asia and Africa would probably raise this same objection. Despite some skilful short surveys of key events (Romero's discussion of the Vietnam war and – changing the geographical focus – of the 1980-1981 political crisis in Poland are both very well done), Romero is not ultimately writing a book about the events of the Cold War so much as an extended essay on the historical forces propelling the Cold War and twisting it into new shapes at every juncture. Events are grist to Romero's interpretative mill and though some major events, notably Vietnam, retain a certain lumpiness in the narrative, other events that seemed of great historical importance at the time are transformed into literary flour in a few lines. Here one returns to the centrality of *mentalité* for this book's story. The protagonists of Romero's narrative are not corpulent generals in sunglasses manoeuvring tanks in some sun-baked Latin American or Mediterranean square, or even the takers of great decisions occupying the seats of real power in the Kremlin and the Oval Office, but patterns of thought shifting in conjunction with economic developments.

In fact, Romero in effect contends that just as the diffusion of particular mental constructions propelled the Cold War into a global conflict after its beginning in Europe, so changing perceptions and values brought it to an end. The invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Red Army in 1968 discredited communism even with the radicals on the barricades of Paris and Berlin and confirmed that the Soviet state "no longer represented a challenge to the defects (*debolezze*) of capitalism. It was, on the contrary, a system holed up in defiance of capitalism's seductions" (p. 207).

But it was the ability of western capitalism to overcome the crisis of the 1970s and to globalize its appeal that truly sounded the death knell for Moscow. The chapter on "The Culmination and Defeat of Détente" has a brilliant section on the "birth pangs of a new global economy" in which Romero manages in just a few (dense) pages to synthesize a decade and a half of transformation in the global economy and simultaneously underline what the intellectual consequences of this transformation were. In the 1970s and early 1980s, he points out, the dollar ceased to be the anchor of a fixed exchange rate system and became the "principal currency of a regime in which there was an open competition to attract capital" (p. 259). The U.S. became the main receiver of capital investment from abroad, instead of the world's biggest exporter of capital, and the world's biggest importer of foreign goods. This dramatic shift in the United States' role in the world economy generated a neoliberal ideology whose key tenets were the centrality of competition and innovation as the key characteristics of a successful society. Of course, there was more to the West's success than this – the West's welfare states contributed to making the wrenching transition of the 1970s less painful than it otherwise would have been – but the West's ability to innovate, to find new sources of prosperity and to spread wealth was a challenge to which the USSR had no answer. Communism ceased to be the "spectre" haunting the world, since the Taiwanese, Koreans, Malaysians, Mexicans and Thai, not to mention the Portuguese, Greeks and Turks, had made their choice for broadly market economies, as the Chinese would by the late 1980s (p. 261). The respective fates of South and North Korea, the horrors of the Ethiopian famine, and the "re-education camps" constructed in post "liberation" Vietnam told the once non-aligned peoples of the world a plausible story about history's direction. Communism was a thing to flee from.

Romero, however, is not merely arguing the trivial point that the side that produced the most prosperity won. His point is a more sophisticated one. Quoting the film director Wim Wenders as saying "the Yankees have colonized our subconscious," Romero argues that the spread of global capitalism broke down the "antithesis" dear to the 1968 radicals (but inherent to the "progressive" intelligentsia in Western Europe since 1917) between capitalism and freedom (p. 264). As capitalist consumerism became all but ubiquitous from the late 1970s onwards, it did not oppress or homogenize the complex societies of the so-called emerging markets, but constructed a dynamic world society in which anybody could participate and in which there was a common cultural "language" provided by western consumer products (p. 265).

These developments were made all the more significant by the fact that citizens of the peoples' republics learned about them. They learned about them as a consequence of the Helsinki accords, whose "impact" Romero regards as "unequivocal" and "profound" (p. 246). Although nobody could have predicted in 1975 that the communist regimes of central Europe would crumble so soon, the West's success in linking human rights to any bargain over frontiers meant that from then on the communist regimes would be engaged in a losing battle to hide the extent to which their political practices diverged from the principles that they had theoretically espoused. Helsinki paved the way for a new era of human contacts, trade and improved transparency between western and central Europe in which the communist bloc's ideological legitimacy gradually ebbed away.

It was for all these reasons that Enrico Berlinguer, the PCI leader, spoke in 1981 of the communist world's "running out of momentum" (*capacità propulsiva*, p. 261) What did a Brezhnev or a Suslov have to say to the middle classes of the emerging markets? Or to the new democracies brought into existence in the "Third Wave" of democratization that began with Portugal's "carnation revolution?" That they had nothing to lose but their aspirations for Louis Vuitton handbags? The communist states were, in truth, forbidding, narrow-minded, sclerotic wallflowers at an increasingly inclusive global dance. Romero argues persuasively that American neoconservatives and "Reagan apologists," whatever their other failings, grasped this essential point. Right-wing Republicans were "certain" of communism's "intrinsic inferiority" in comparison with the West, especially the United States. They were therefore "singularly well-equipped" to "pick up" the signals of weakness being sent out from the decaying hulk of the Soviet bloc (p. 287). Romero's point is that whereas in the 1950s, the Cold War struggle was between two arch-enemies, each of which was convinced that it had right on its side, and each of which could plausibly hope to win the intellectual battle, in the 1980s, America's conservatives, while strident in their denunciations of communism and its abuses, were by now sure they were going to win. History was on their side – unless the conflict turned hot.

This is why peaceful competition in the field of nuclear disarmament became possible. Unlike the 1950s, when the use of nuclear weapons was a policy tool contemplated with sober realism, by the 1980s, the idea of nuclear warfare was repugnant not only to the protesters of the peace movements, but also to the figureheads of the opposing blocs, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail S. Gorbachev. The latter had to ease the burden of defence spending if he wanted to coax the Soviet wallflower onto the global dance floor; the former had nothing to gain from tensions remaining so high that nuclear conflict was a possibility. Supremely confident in his own side's strength, Reagan both launched a new era of détente and, after Gorbachev had unveiled *perestroika*, pushed the Soviet leader to take further steps: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" The policy worked: Romero says that during the second mandate, Reagan made "a crucial contribution to the deconstruction of the rivalry" between the two superpowers (p. 318). There was nothing predetermined about the path of Gorbachev's new thinking: the USSR might just as easily have adopted Chinese-style centrally-controlled capitalism, or wallowed in a siege mentality. Instead, Gorbachev's priority became establishing greater democracy within the Soviet Union, within its empire and between the nations of the world. It was a priority that was incompatible with the maintenance of the Soviet empire in central Europe.

It will be seen from the foregoing discussion that Romero has written a book that certainly presents the Cold War as a triumph for the West, but not as a "triumphal advance of universal values" (p. 333). In Romero's reading, the Cold War was a lengthy struggle for the minds of the world's peoples, in which the outcome was very often in jeopardy: there were moments, notably during Vietnam, when the peoples of the world might well have chosen the alternative world view. Any linear account of the Cold War as the necessary victory of eternal verities over Marxist dogma is a travesty. Yet it would be definitely wrong to class Romero with opponents of American triumphalism and with revisionists more or less 'post.' I actually think this book is closer to, say, John Lewis Gaddis's textbook account of the Cold War than the author himself might be entirely comfortable with, though it is conceptually richer. As I have

underlined in this review, Romero contends that the greater economic dynamism of the West empowered peoples around the world to aspire to prosperity – twice. After 1945, the Europeans pleaded to be let into America's luxurious condominium and then proceeded to squabble pettily over the small print of the house rules, while accepting the fundamental values and prospering from them. During and after the economic crisis of the 1970s, American capitalism re-invented itself and dragged most of the rest of the world into an unprecedented age of prosperity. The Communist bloc was prevented by the limitations of its ideology from sharing in both these U.S.-driven economic booms, but could only offer the piles of lignite produced by the command economy as an alternative.

In the minds of men and women all over the world, which is where Romero thinks the Cold War was fought most continuously, the concepts and language of the market economy became, in short, common currency. Capitalism proved to be "more efficient, more pervasive and more convincing than socialism" (p. 336). Contrary to the theorizing common on the political left in Italy and France even today, but in similar Gramscian phraseology, Romero concludes that capitalism was able to "draw into its maw (*aggregare nei suoi meccanismi*) élites and social categories from societies across the globe (*società le più diverse*), thus evolving a deeply rooted and continuously expanding hegemony" (p. 336). In a world in which "technological agility," "ability to innovate" and "cultural prowess" counted at least as much as military force, Romero's Cold War is in the final analysis a Darwinian struggle in which the fittest unexpectedly survived.

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