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Book Review: Europe Since 1989: A History by Philipp Ther

Samuel B. Hoff

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Ther, Philipp. *Europe Since 1989: A History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. xi + 425 pages. Hardcover, \$35.00.

This study, published in English two years after the original and translated by Charlotte Hughes-Kreutzmuller, emanated from a 2008 conference at the European University Institute in Florence. The author, a professor at the University of Vienna, previously released studies on the northern and central regions of Europe. Adopting a social history perspective, the research uncovers the impact of two waves of neoliberal reforms on Europe as a whole, finding that “the economic performance of post-communist countries, including Germany after its 1990 unification, depended on their social capital” (Preface, x).

Following the Introduction, Ther probes events of the early and mid-1980s which preceded the 1989 wave of change. In Western Europe, states rejected welfarism and instituted capitalist-leaning reforms. In Eastern Europe, labor unrest and the foreign debt crisis worsened and the Soviet Union suffered a severe drop in oil prices. Meanwhile, communist nations in other parts of the world were making radical revisions as well. For example, Vietnam abolished state price regulation in agriculture in 1986.

For certain, the events of 1989-1991 were transformative for Europe. From the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 to German unification in 1990 to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, there were a number of direct factors which led to these enormous changes. Among them was mass mobilization of citizens, the unintended effects of Mikhail Gorbachev’s reform policies in the Soviet Union, nationalist feelings, and the failure of socialism. Ther uncovers the important role that the media played in Eastern bloc changes, observing that “[m]any journalists, newspapers, and radiobroadcasters remained loyal to their regimes for several years, but swiftly changed sides in 1989” (p. 61).

If the first wave of reforms left a similar trail of liberalization and privatization, the changes which beset Europe following the recession of the early 1990s led to increased social and regional divergence, according to Ther. He notes that only Slovakia and the Czech Republic are examples of post-communist countries without stark urban-rural or east-west divides. Ther examines the impact of changes on several European cities over the 1995-2008 period, finding that the rich-poor divide became more pronounced.

Ther then turns his attention to explaining how the Great Recession of 2008-09 affected Eastern and Southern Europe. While post-communist nations in the former area were seeking to prevent further decline of their currencies, countries in the latter region faced mass migration from the Middle East. In reviewing how the post-1989 period impacted both regions, he compares Germany with several Southern European Union (EU) nations. He finds not only divergent economic performance, but clearly inconsistent political patterns between them.

In the concluding chapter, Ther reviews events as they actually turned out and speculates how things could have transpired under different conditions. Solidarity, freedom, and women's rights were among the characteristics of the "Velvet Revolution," though its relatively peaceful implementation was the most significant feature. Ther identifies contemporary disputes among European nations, including how to treat Russia after its repeated incursions against Ukraine, whether to expand EU membership, and how to handle increased migration. He asserts that "the past three decades has furnished ample evidence of the vulnerability and volatility of the order created in 1989" (p, 337).

Over the last decade, a number of studies have concentrated on the outcome of 1989's events on Europe generally and selected areas and nations in particular. For example, Tony Judt's 2006 study, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, is considered the grand history of

postwar Europe. Even Ther gave a nod to Judt in his book. In *Europe Since 1980* (2010), Ivan Berend dissects cultural, political, economic, and social changes which occurred in Europe after the Cold War. Whereas Padraic Kenney 2013 research, *The Burdens of Freedom: Eastern Europe Since 1989*, probes how fifteen Eastern European countries transitioned from communism to freedom, S. Ramet's 2014 edited work, *Religion and Politics in Post-Socialist Central and Southeastern Europe: Challenges Since 1989*, contains articles portraying how post-1989 changes affected religion and politics in Central and Southeastern Europe. Finally, in *No Place for Russia: European Security Institutions Since 1989* (2018), William Hill offers an indictment of how post-1989 European security institutions failed to anticipate or prevent Russian aggression.

Ther's study is valuable as historiography but also as a linguistic lecture to the West: he repeatedly tells the reader to beware labeling what transpired in 1989 as a single revolution. Moreover, he contends that the post-1989 period was influenced more by an East-to-West trend than the opposite. While the transition between chapters could have been improved, there were no apparent translation oddities and data was presented effectively. The book benefited from Ther's own specialization, from his many colleagues around the world who reviewed portions of the manuscript, and from the wealth of sources which he tapped.

Since publication of this book, the challenges facing Europe have multiplied, including political changes in Germany and France, Italy's worsening fiscal situation, the uncertain impact of Brexit, and the continuing migration crisis. Still, few would argue that freedom's spread in Europe was either preventable or has been uniformly negative.

Samuel B. Hoff, Ph.D.
George Washington Distinguished Professor of History and Political Science
Delaware State University, Dover, Delaware