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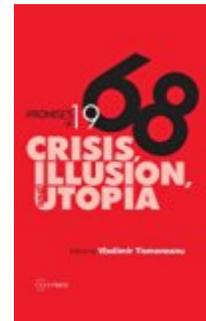


Vladimir Tismaneanu, ed. *Promises of 1968: Crisis, Illusion, and Utopia*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011. 460 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-615505304-7.

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Promises of 1968

This book collects the proceedings of a two-day conference cosponsored by the Cold War International History Project, the University of Maryland, the Romanian Cultural Institute, the Romanian Embassy in Washington DC, and Georgetown University, which took place at the Woodrow Wilson Center in November 2008. According to the event's website, the conference was to "include discussions of the crisis of 'really existing socialism' and the failure of 'socialism with a human face,' and post-Marxist utopia and the rediscovery of radicalism." [1] In its published form, the book complements other studies, such as Jeremi Suri's *The Global Revolutions of 1968* (2007) and Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth's *1968 in Europe: A History of Protest and Activism, 1956-1977* (2008), in its stated goal to reassess the significance and consequences of the events associated with the year 1968 "beyond the East-West divide" without the claim, however, "to have found a resolution to the dilemmas raised by the topic discussed" (p. 1). The editor, Vladimir Tismaneanu, emphasizes a search for similarities and differences of a global phenomenon that challenged the two established versions of late industrial modernity: liberal democratic capitalism in the West and Leninism in the East. He finds the most significant difference to be one of rationale in the protesters' "attitude toward utopia with crucial consequences upon the re-conceptualization of the political" (p. 2). Thus, in the West, Tismaneanu claims, the protests were about politically emancipating spaces that had previously been closed to public scrutiny (the university system, the family, sexuality), while in the East, protesters contested Leninism's "ideologically driven monopolistic

grip on society" (p. 2). A fundamental difference, which at times complicated the communication between the protesters in the East and those in the West, was the Western protesters' reliance on Marx to criticize the inadequacy of their parliamentary democratic systems, while Eastern protesters called for the establishment of more democratic systems to replace the authoritarian rule of parties that claimed to adhere to Marxist principles.

The main issues discussed by the contributors to the volume are: the sixties as a generational conflict and cultural revolution; the redefinition of the political; the role of utopia and the de-radicalization of intellectuals; the challenges to both Soviet and American imperialism; the crisis of "real existing socialism" and the failure of "socialism with a human face"; the gradual departure from the Yalta system; the emergence of a culture of human rights (Helsinki 1975) and "the project of a global civil society"; and the relationship between 1968 and 1989. The book is divided into three parts. The first, "Picking up the Pieces: 1968 between Memory and Theory," contains theoretical essays and moving personal recollections, some of which at times overemphasize the 68ers' good intentions—for example, Irena Grudzinska Gross's account of March 1968 in Poland.

The second part, "Lessons and Legacies of 1968," problematizes, as the title entails, what followed after the turbulent events of the year 1968 and how different countries have managed this particular historical inheritance. Particularly insightful are Bradley Abrams's ob-

servations about the realization in the aftermath of the Prague Spring of some Marxist intellectuals that “a new *non-Marxist* conceptual foundation for progressive political thought had to be created” (p. 184), namely, one that afforded a critique of bourgeois society and real existing socialism, respectively, and served in both cases as a connection to society at large, which culminated in the rise of civil society. Cristian Vasile’s contribution, “1968 Romania: Intellectuals and the Failure of Reform,” is disappointing. It claims to “examine the relationship between Romanian intellectuals and Ceaușescu’s regime, with a particular emphasis on the late 1960s” (p. 241). Instead, it focuses on 1965—the year when Nicolae Ceaușescu became general secretary of the country’s Communist party (the Romanian Workers’ Party)—and on the activities of some intellectuals (Tudor Bugnariu, Paul Cornea, Nicolae Breban) prior to 1965 and afterward, without however considering their attitudes in 1968 either before or after Ceaușescu’s condemnation of the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia. Furthermore, Vasile’s research relies too heavily on Tismaneanu’s previously published work, which given that the latter is this volume’s editor makes this piece questionable.

The third part, “1968 in Pieces: Case Studies of Transformation,” includes case studies on Romania, Czechoslovakia, and West Germany. Here Jeffrey Herf’s analysis stands out as he views 1968 as an ominous year for both the East and the West since it led to repression, on the one hand, and radicalism and terrorism, on the other. The claim that in their operating principles the Rote Armee Faktion or the Brigade Rosse adhered to Communist tenets is not new but it belongs in a volume that wants to encompass 1968 and its aftermath in all its complexity. The volume’s concluding remarks belong to

Charles S. Maier. He argues that “the most challenging historical issue is whether the historian or social scientist can impute some underlying causes of turbulence to all the contested locations in 1968” (p. 417). He identifies two such causes: “a deep-seated discontent with residual authoritarian regimes,” or in other words a rejection of the Yalta agreement; and the dissatisfaction of a young generation who felt “caught up in the mass process of a complex and bureaucratized anti-heroic society” (pp. 419, 431). While this view does not do justice to the heterogeneity of reasons behind the protests in places as different as France, Germany, Romania, or Mexico in spite of the global character of 1968, I agree with Maier that in order to understand the events of 1968 one must understand the evolution of the world during the first two decades of the Cold War.

The conference essays vary considerably in structure and length. Mark Kramer’s analysis, “The Kremlin, the Prague Spring, and the Brezhnev Doctrine,” of eighty-six pages is in sharp contrast to Cătălin Avramescu’s six-page “‘Don’t Push Us, Comrade!’—De Gaulle in Bucharest.” Overall, *Promises of 1968*, a useful tool for graduate students and scholars of history and European studies, explores the intellectual developments that led to 1968 and the transformations in the political and social environment of both Eastern and Western Europe—and with implications beyond Europe’s borders—that followed the events of that year.

Note

[1]. Wilson Center, “Promises of 1968: Crisis, Illusion, Utopia,” 2008, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/promises-1968-crisis-illusion-and-utopia> (accessed April 15, 2013).

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