

Defrosting the Cold War in the Mediterranean: European Institute Workshop, November 14-15, 2008

Talk about the Cold War reached the shoreline of Manhattan at an international conference at Columbia University November 14-15, 2008. The European Institute, with a generous grant from the Harriman Institute, invited a group of international scholars to revisit the recent past of this ancient crossroad of civilization in order to understand the legacy of Soviet and U.S. rivalry in the area.

"Cold War," "Mediterranean" - two evocative, thought provoking terms, not usually linked, said European Institute director Victoria de Grazia. "To bring these terms together is a spur to rethink what the Cold War was - not abstractly or through the vision of Superpower rivalries, but in terms of the Mediterranean as a crossroad of societies, cultures, and nations, but especially as an area whose shores ended up divided among Western Europe, the Soviet Bloc and the Middle East. Today, the shores of the Mediterranean are being re-connected in new ways," she added. An understanding of the fractured Mediterranean of the Cold War period helps us understand present trends. Was the Superpower rivalry just another phase in the three-century old efforts of the Great Powers in the area to exert their hegemony over the region, or did it introduce a very different dynamic? The fact that the European powers were forced back, and the U.S., a non-European power, came to occupy such a dominant role, only adds to the complexity and salience of this question.

Over the course of two days, more than a score of speakers examined an array of topics that have left an imprint on the Mediterranean. The subjects included the legacy of European colonialism and the competing interests of the Superpowers, as well as how small powers negotiated their interests in a bi-polar world. Speakers addressed whether the U.S. was indeed interested in democratic experiments, given its other strategic concerns. They also shed new light on the meaning of national security, the Palestinian –Israeli conflict, the difficulties of being non-aligned, the legacy of the Greek Civil War and the 1970s proxy wars in the Middle East, as well as debates on the usefulness of speaking of any overriding cultural identity in the Mediterranean region.

Vladislav Zubok opened the proceedings with a provocation, contending in his account of the USSR's Mediterranean Strategy that there was "A lack of a Soviet Mediterranean strategy altogether." Access to Soviet sources is incomplete, Zubok argued. Even so, it is clear at the end of World War II, Stalin and the foreign policy elite did not regard the Mediterranean as their strategic priority.

Effie Pedaliu discussed how the Mediterranean became an area of American dominance through the Truman and Eisenhower Doctrines. She argued that the incorporation of the entire Mediterranean basin into American Cold War political strategy was gradual until the Suez crisis and decolonization. According to Pedaliu's argument, the Eisenhower doctrine stemmed from the US failure to consolidate all Arab states to a defensive pro-Western pact.

The topic of the Superpower Agendas and the Mental Maps advanced into the theme of Connecting the Fronts. Silvio Pons from the Italian Academy and University of Rome at Tor Vergata presented his research on Italian foreign policy and the USSR in the framework of Italy as a Western front. "The workshop and the intellectual exchange are extremely

important to me, and Columbia University offers the best in both," Silvio Pons said, and continued, "What is different about New York City in comparison to great European cities is after you leave New York, you feel you are missing something."

The conference solicited new research. Economic historian Adam Tooze of Cambridge University, soon to move to Yale, in answer to the question of how the economy as a whole fared, presented a macroeconomic reading of the OECD and other data for the post-war period. He concluded that, "The Cold War was especially disruptive in the vast, diverse region encircling the Mediterranean Sea - And the truly striking experience of the Mediterranean in the Cold War era was the disparity between the Northern and Southern coastlines. An invisible division was drawn by the early 1970s, and the region was a frontline, not only in the Cold War, but between the 'developed' and the 'underdeveloped' world." Nowhere was this disparity more visible than in widely divergent policies toward the peasantry and agricultural reform.

The distortion of relations between the Northern and Southern shores and the East and West of the Mediterranean created cascading impacts throughout the whole region.

According to Jeffrey Byrne, the Algerian leadership aimed to develop an "autonomous revolution" and saw their newly independent country as the vanguard for the rest of Africa, if not the entire Third World. Byrne, a doctoral student at the London School of Economics, highlighted the complex identity of a country that, while at the center of study and debate through the 1960s, is so little discussed now: "Algeria is interesting because it is an African country; it is a Middle Eastern country and sort of a Third World, guerrilla, and radical country," Byrne said.

"I was lucky to get an inside look at the Algerian archives – about what they [the revolutionary leaders] were thinking, what they were saying, and how they were looking at the world," Byrne said. Getting access seemed impossible; over a year and a half he saw many people come and go. "People told me I was crazy, and they got fed up and left. He chuckled, "I was psychotically patient with them." Byrne's other great advantage was, "I am Irish, and they like the Irish thing - we shared an anti-colonial history, but ultimately they wanted to tell their story."

The U.S. had previously recognized the importance of maritime supremacy, and saw a unique opportunity in maximizing the superhighway system of the Mediterranean Sea. Americans began to view the Mediterranean as being one of strategic importance to United States' national security and interests. However, eventually the Mediterranean became invisible in the grand scope of world affairs as the Middle East became the centerpiece.

Director de Grazia asked herself, where are the exciting questions to understand the regions recent past? "They are not only found in the usual places," she said, meaning European nations' relations with their former colonies. "That is an important agenda, one that lies behind the new effort on the part of Europeans to create a Mediterranean Union both culturally and politically." The exciting work on the Cold War period comes from colleagues like Tim Mitchell, Robert Vitalis, and Rashid Khalidi, whose work on the Middle East at first seems tangential to the history of the Mediterranean. But that is because during the Cold War, political issues and the division of labor in scholarship tended to hive off the study of

the Eastern and Northern shores of the Mediterranean, renamed the Middle East, from the rest of the area.

There is thus much to learn about the broader significance of oil for trans-Mediterranean and European developments, as well as U.S. intervention in the Middle East. Tim Mitchell's work on the 1973 oil crisis was part of a larger project on the politics of oil, and its specific focus was neither the Mediterranean nor the Cold War – the case also with Robert Vitalis's presentation about the U.S.'s grip on Saudi Arabia. However, their reconceptualization of the oil question, so distant from conventional narratives about "scarcity," "cheapness" and resource "security," provokes consideration of important new angles. For example, what did oil mean to the success of the Marshall Plan and to coal-based Europe's consumption? Elisabetta Bini, a history doctoral candidate at New York University, made the point that Europeans tried to tap into the oil riches with their own neocolonial strategies, the most telling case being the Italian oil company, ENI, and its charismatic leader, Enrico Mattei.

By the conference's close, it was clear that there was no consensus either on "The Cold War" or the "Mediterranean." But in combination, they had opened up fresh perspectives on the era up to 1989. Experts on the U.S. knew more about the Soviet strategies and development models; experts on Egypt and Algeria more about Italy and the Balkans and the connections between them through the non-aligned moment; historians learned from anthropologists how Cold War ethnography invented categories like "amoral families" to stigmatize peasant cultures, which failed to conform to modernization theories. The dozen undergraduate members of a semester-long seminar on the Cold War in the Mediterranean, attending their first academic conference and presenting their own research at a mini conference on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, told of their excitement at meeting authors of books and articles they had read, seeing "knowledge being formed," and hearing professors take intellectual jabs at one another.

This conference was about bringing the intellectually most savory ingredients to the mix. "It worked to shake us up - stretching to connect, compare, re-conceptualize, we glimpse a history that can't be neatly packaged in a narrative," de Grazia said. "The question of the Mediterranean will stay in our head, and so, too, will the Cold War for those who don't use that language," she added. The colleagues who are working on the Middle East now recognize that the Middle East is also the Mediterranean, and that the Suez Crisis is intimately connected to the founding of the European Community. Scholars who focus on Western Europe see how important the oil question, usually defined in terms of the Middle East, was to the Marshall Plan and to Europe's mass consumer "Americanization." All could see that militarization, proxy wars, dirty tricks and psychological warfare played out on all shores, and that the Cold War in its violence was anything but Cold.

The Cold War in the Mediterranean program continues in the spring: on February 13, there will be an all-day workshop on Third Ways in the Mediterranean: the Non-Aligned Movement. For information about the ongoing program, please contact the European Institute