

Mountains, Revolutionary Geography, and Self-Reliance in the Afro-Asian World
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Panel 15: *In the Shadows of the Cold War: Marginal Actors in Global Politics*

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Abstract:

This paper is based on my current book project, *High Up in the Cold War Sky: Mountains in the Communist World*, that argues that mountains played a crucial role in the construction of communism during the Cold War era and aided in the resilience of non-European socialism during the post-Cold War era. From providing cover for guerilla movements in their early anti-colonial struggles to later serving as sources of legitimacy, mountains were important sites of armed struggle and commemoration for many radical regimes. Mountains were not only physical spaces but also important mediums of ideological rejuvenation, mass mobilization, and nostalgia. From Mao Zedong's Long March to Fidel Castro's guerilla warfare in the Sierra Maestra, mountains served as revolutionary spaces for a number of governments during the Cold War era. Using mountains as my primary focus, I examine the ways in which guerillas forged their revolutions from the natural landscape and once in power, these guerilla leaderships used these same terrains as sources of state legitimacy. Primarily based on multinational archival sources and periodicals from the former Eastern Bloc, I will look at how mountains became a military and ideological tool for communist regimes around the world.

As China, North Korea, Cuba, and Vietnam continue to be committed to differing versions of Marxism-Leninism, scholars often search for reasons as to how these party-states retained power during the post-Cold War era despite economic uncertainties. I argue that mountains were one of the reasons why these autocracies were able to hold onto power after the collapse of global communism in the early 1990s. Party-states appropriated these landscapes to commemorate their revolutionary origins and bolster popular support for the ruling leadership. Similar to the way in which Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis helps explain the trajectory of America's national development and westward expansion, mountains became an oasis where disaffected youth could reinvent themselves as revolutionaries and collectively build a new national consciousness. Mountains later became metaphorical ways for these guerilla fighters-turned-national leaders to express their utopian aspirations and reflect on the revolutionary struggles of their ideological forefathers. Mountains represented the hardships and sacrifices of their compatriots who often gave their lives for the sake of the revolution in this topography. By going to the mountains on political pilgrimages or being depicted in this rugged terrain in official state-run media, national leaderships and common people paid homage to the revolutionary lineages of their respective party-state that was once forged in this very same forbidding landscape.

This paper does not intend to be a scientific analysis of mountains nor does it quantitatively evaluate the biodiversity and environmental degradation of such regions. I also do not employ a specific measure as to what constitutes a mountain. In this paper, I look at a variety of mountains, both big and small, and I use synonyms for mountainous terrain, such as "highlands,"

“uplands,” “massif,” and “sierra.” This paper primarily focuses on the ways in which communist regimes appropriated mountains into their national imaginations and symbolic landscapes. In the Communist Bloc, mountains primarily served as political metaphors and nationalistic symbols. It was in this sociopolitical milieu where mountains represented socialist construction and national strength. Due to their sheer size and physical imposingness, mountains symbolized the grand visions and utopian heights that socialist regimes sought to attain on their way to building full communism. From once hosting guerillas fighting for national liberation to being coopted into socialist landscapes, mountains in the Communist World were both vital for the historical memory of a party-state’s revolutionary origins and the future-oriented consciousness of socialist modernity. Mountains represented both the armed struggles of the past and the future glory of a socialist paradise.