In 1977 an incident occurred in a tiny fisherman village located in the south-eastern corner of Italy, which resonated in both Washington and Moscow. That kind of linkages in history, combining the micro and macro levels of analysis simultaneously, is what inspires me the most as a historian and what makes me feel so much at home at EUR’s history department. An overarching, comprehensive view of history, one that intertwines the local and global together, helps me in the exploration of the global repercussions that a plethora of apparently marginal events recurrently had throughout the cold war.

When the incident happened, the crisis of the cold war détente – the attempt to establish a pacific coexistence between the two superpowers – was already in full swing. The newly elected American president Jimmy Carter was trying to implement an international policy based on the universal safeguard of human rights. In his inaugural address, Carter had stressed the importance of such a new approach for the conduct of American foreign policy, which had to be based on nothing less than a worldwide defense of human freedom. “Because we are free,” the US president said, reiterating a long-standing view of American exceptionalism, “we can never be indifferent to the fate of freedom elsewhere. Our moral sense dictates a clear-cut preference for those societies which share with us an abiding respect for individual human rights.” The main object of Carter’s criticism, was, of course, the Soviet Union. Moscow had a gloomy record in human rights violations. Individual freedoms of speech, associations, religion, and expressions were constantly denied at home and threatened abroad. In Russia, the KGB dutifully applied a policy of “medicalization” to human rights activists, or, as the official propaganda portrayed them, dissenters. People like Andrei Sakharov or the intellectuals reunited in the so-called Helsinki Watch.
instance, the geopolitical reasons that had brought, in the first place, the American soldiers to Italy. But other local sources, oral interviews and unofficial accounts are needed to reckon with the multifaceted elements that such a continuous transatlantic exchange entailed. And this is precisely the challenge my current research project is engaged in. My main aim, indeed, is to assess the overall economic, environmental and socio-cultural impact that the enduring presence of hundreds of American military outposts in Europe has had throughout the cold war. The hope is that by adopting a bottom-up approach, it will be possible to render justice to the complexity of the cold war relations, something that traditional, top-down, diplomatic histories have too often left outside their purview.

Further reading


