

THE SOCIALIST BLOC AS HISTORY

BY AUSTIN JERSILD

New scholarship on the Cold War, often aided by the opening of Soviet archives in 1991, includes discoveries about the importance of smaller states far from Washington, D.C., and Moscow that wielded surprising influence over the great powers. In the socialist world, figures like Fidel Castro, Erich Honecker, Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh frequently manipulated Soviet leaders to realize local aims and ambitions. Castro explicitly played on socialist solidarity and opposition to imperialism to goad Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev into the misguided placing of ballistic missiles in Cuba. East German fears about the exit of substantial portions of its population to the West led to the construction of the Berlin Wall, the tragic symbol of the “captive” peoples within the socialist bloc. ■ Mao’s efforts to reunify the Chinese mainland and build socialism at home demanded hostility to America for its support of the Nationalists (the Guomindang) in Taiwan, which eventually posed a dilemma for reformist Soviet leaders seeking improved relations with the West. Vietnamese communists in the north were similarly frustrated by Khrushchev’s doctrine of “peaceful coexistence” and by Soviet reluctance to risk confrontation with the United States over Vietnamese unification. Local leaders with local agendas and ambitions frequently used the conflict between the super-powers for their own ends. Closer to home, historians of the future are likely to see the events of Sept. 11, 2001 as the last episode in the history of the Cold War, when Islamic holy warriors, once the beneficiaries of American money and arms in opposition to the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan, turned their resources against institutions of American power.

Sino-Soviet Collaboration

The current research on the Cold War is helping scholars ask new questions about the nature of the socialist bloc, that vast space that extended from East Germany to China and even southeast Asia. Last year I was fortunate to be able to conduct research on Sino-Soviet relations for three months in Soviet archives in Moscow. After 1945 in the Chinese Northeast (Manchuria) and then throughout the mainland after the communist revolution in 1949, the Soviets advised and trained the Chinese on everything from fossil fuel development, defense-related industries and the formulation of a five-year plan to university curriculum development, the press, the translation of Mao's works and policy toward small-scale trade. There were vast cultural, educational and industrial exchanges that brought thousands of Chinese students and professors to the Soviet Union, and numerous advisers and specialists from the Soviet Union to China. It was an extraordinary effort at collaboration, which both the Russians and Chinese emphasized was different from relations of exchange between capitalist societies and peoples and from traditional European colonialism in China.

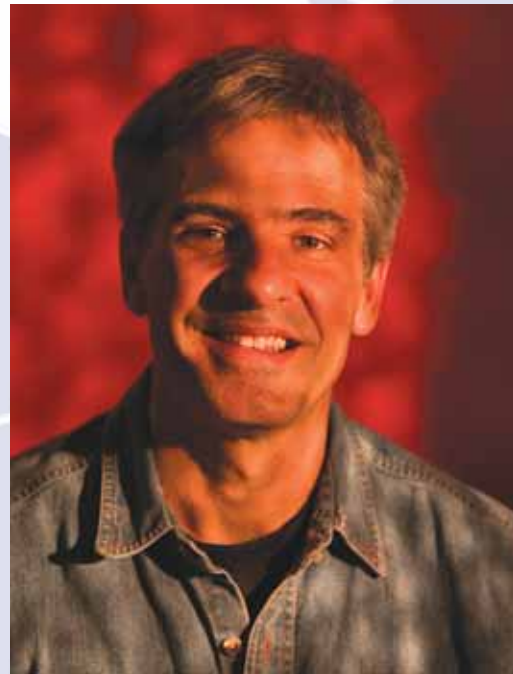
I tried to look beyond embassy reports and foreign policy documents to discover materials suggestive of the broader dimensions of the exchange. In an economic archive in Moscow, buried deep within materials generated by enormous industrial bureaucracies concerned with everything from cement production to communication cables, I read reports produced by factory directors, industrial managers and economic specialists tasked with extending their activities to China. The "great friendship" also produced numerous travel memoirs, journalistic accounts and theoretical discussions about the nature and significance of socialist cooperation. In the background to all these discussions was a keen awareness of America's wealth, power and contrasting social system.

Soviet Bloc Fragmentation

From there I spent two months in Beijing, where I read 1950s Chinese newspaper articles on the exchange. I originally studied Chinese almost 20 years ago when my wife and I spent an academic year at a university in Shanghai. There we met many older Russian-speaking Chinese

colleagues who had studied in the Soviet Union in the '50s. During that period, radical revolutionary impulses emerged in China that eventually challenged the practices and attitudes of a Soviet Union which, by the late 1950s, had become a very conservative and traditional superpower. The eventual Sino-Soviet split in 1960 was a significant moment in the fragmentation and weakening of the socialist bloc. By the mid-1980s, of course, the new language of opportunity was English, as China was in the process of reorienting itself to the West and market reform. The pace of change in both contemporary Russia and China is extraordinary. Emerging middle classes throughout the former socialist world suggest that the passing of the socialist bloc was a fortunate event for the many peoples of vast "Eurasia," even as the new difficulties of conforming to the demands of the global economy are of increasing concern.

The socialist bloc struggled with many of the same dilemmas and problems that plagued the Soviet Union. Soviet institutions, plans and advising programs were shaped by common Soviet practices of economic exchange and organization and common Soviet assumptions about the virtues of (European) high culture in the lands of the East. The strong Chinese memory of European colonialism, however, created an explosive situation ripe for misunderstanding and conflict. Open archives and the advantage of historical perspective will slowly but surely establish the basis for a new and rich field of research and exploration.



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