Reviews

Sino-Soviet Relations, Decolonization, and the Global Cold War

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These two books broaden our understanding of the parameters of the Cold War, place the problem of imperialism at the center of study, and suggest similarities between the Soviet Union and the United States in the decolonizing world. The Cold War and decolonization intersected with each other, as Leslie James and Elisabeth Leake emphasize in the introduction to their edited volume, and were never “isolated, parallel phenomena.” The ideological battle between the United States and the Soviet Union—or their contrasting “imaginative projects” about social structures, economies, political systems, and culture—was central to the Cold War and shaped the Global South as well (2). While both the Soviet Union and the United States, in different ways, drew on histories of opposition to imperialism, “each also negotiated complicated past and present projects of empire” (7). Contributors to *Decolonization and the Cold War* explore fascinating episodes and individuals, from Lebanon to the Congo, illustrative of the two intersecting histories. Perhaps the loudest accusations of imperialism came from the Chinese, who claimed special solidarity with the Global South against the twin threats of Western imperialism and “socialist imperialism.” The Sino-Soviet rivalry in global context is the subject of the excellent book by Jeremy Friedman.

The United States and the Soviet Union both expected high levels of conformity to their “models of development,” explains Simon Toner in his study of agricultural programs in Vietnam. Both North and South Vietnam interacted with their superpower patrons to envision “the state guiding a malleable peasantry to serve its economic interests” (43–44). “Developmentalist thinking,” argues Benjamin Siegel in his study of assistance programs in India, crossed “national borders and Iron Curtains” (23). The two superpowers both accorded a significant role to state planning and guidance in the process of development, a vision generally appealing to numerous state builders in the decolonizing states, according to Siegel and Ryan M. Irwin (21–42, 208).

Imperial impulses and Cold War anxieties connected parts of the otherwise distant globe. Moshik Temkin describes the visit and expulsion of Malcolm X by the French in February 1965 as an example of their use of travel control to insulate France from decolonization. The travels of the African American activist in 1964 included visits to Mecca in Saudi Arabia and to postcolonial leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Gamal Abdel-Nasser of Egypt, and Sékou Touré of Guinea (223). Regarding the Soviet Union, Hanna Jensen draws on the extensive literature on the Soviet ethno-territorial state to explore the work and ideas of B. G. Gafurov, the director of the Institute for Oriental Studies in Moscow. One of Gafurov’s main interests was to show cultural and historic connections of the Tajiks to Persio-Islamic civilization. This approach served to “strengthen the image of the Soviet Union as a benefactor of foreign diaspora communities and as a homeland for ‘liberated’ minority nations abroad,” argues Jensen (150).

The Global South was far from passive in its reception and reworking of imperial or neo-imperial programs, and regional responses to the Cold War were shaped by local dilemmas. The Lebanese thinker and politician Charles Malik, argues Andrew Arsan, creatively managed to “refashion and manipulate the discursive and material forces of the Cold War” (112). William Carruthers explores how Egyptian archaeologists at Mit Rahina (ancient Memphis) helped shape notions about Egypt’s future and the meaning of decolonization (167–82). Anna Belogurova traces how ethnically Chinese migrants in radical political organizations in Malaya under British dominion evolved to articulate a vision of a multiethnic and independent Malayan nation (125–44). Security officials in Pakistan and India, explains Paul McGarr, frequently manipulated their counterparts at MI5 and the CIA.

1 Page numbers in this section refer to articles in the collection edited by James and Leake.
and were thus far from “unwitting victims of Western intelligence” (297). Like the Chinese after 1958, sometimes postcolonial movements had to confront the fact that socialists could simultaneously be imperialists. Irwin explores the secession movement of Moïse Tshombe for Katangan statehood (but allied with Belgian colonialism) against the nation-building efforts of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo (203–18). The secessionist leader was “implicitly challenging the idea that colonialism was the principle threat to African freedom,” argues Irwin (206). The Chinese too were forced to rethink some of the truths taken for granted in the struggle against imperialism, as the principal threat to sovereignty increasingly seemed to be socialist Moscow rather than neocolonial Paris or London.

Jeremy Friedman argues that the Soviets and Chinese had long maintained different visions of socialist revolution, in spite of their alliance during the 1950s. For the Soviets, “the cause of replacing capitalism with socialism would always remain their top priority, and anti-imperialism mattered insofar as it served that greater purpose.” For the Chinese, by contrast, whose recent history was shaped by the struggle against Western imperialism, “anti-imperialism remained the guiding focus of the revolutionary process,” and socialism was a useful tool in this effort (2). With the US Navy just off the Chinese coast protecting Taiwan, the Chinese possessed little patience for the Soviet notion of “peaceful coexistence” and accommodation with the opposing “camp” in the Cold War. There was a “cold war within the communist world,” as Lorenz Lüthi put it in the subtitle to his work almost a decade ago.²

The Soviets were not blind to the possibilities posed by what the early Comintern generally visualized as the East (vostok). “The road to India,” noted Lev Trotsky, “may prove at the given moment to be more readily passable and shorter for us than the road to Soviet Hungary” (quoted on 8). It was not until the postwar era of decolonization, however, that the matter of promoting revolution in the Third World became a pressing foreign policy concern for the Soviets. The United Nations declared 1960 to be the “Year of Africa,” and that year also happened to mark the unhappy exit of the socialist bloc advisers from China. China and the Soviet Union would take their emerging struggle to potential supporters in the newly independent states and those engaged in

“national-liberation movements.” As creators of very different revolutions and with different historical experiences, they came up with different responses to “the challenge of creating a theoretical revolutionary framework for the newly independent states” (34).

The Chinese did not and could not possibly win, Friedman argues; their own economy was a shambles in the wake of the Great Leap Forward and subsequent famine of the early 1960s, and they were hardly in a position to offer significant resources to foreign states. By 1966–67 their diplomatic standing further deteriorated with the onset of the Cultural Revolution. They changed the terms of debate, however, relentlessly focusing on the European, white, industrialized, and “revisionist” character of a Soviet socialism presumably divorced from the needs of impoverished peoples in the Third World. The “image endured of the Soviet Union as a satisfied, European power unwilling to engage in the revolutionary struggles of the developing world” (112). In response to relatively successful, if sometimes only rhetorical, Chinese inroads in the Third World, the Soviets continued with their commitment to the avoidance of direct war with the West while adopting a more vigorous approach to armed struggle. Left in the odd position of trying to “promote both anti-imperialism and détente at the same time,” the Soviet Union was a curious and never entirely convincing alternative to the United States in the Cold War (150).

China and the Soviet Union carefully watched each other and knew more about each other (largely because of the intense nature of collaboration during the “Great Friendship” and alliance of the 1950s) than they did about the “imperialists.” Prime Minister Zhou Enlai and Foreign Minister Chen Yi took their big trip abroad in late 1963 and early 1964, visiting the United Arab Republic, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Ghana, Mali, Guinea, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Not to be outdone, General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev immediately announced his first trip to Africa, attending a ceremony to celebrate progress on the massive Aswan High Dam in Cairo (112–17). In Accra on 15 January 1964, Zhou Enlai presented China’s eight principles of foreign aid, which included aid based on mutuality and equality, respect for sovereignty, interest-free loans, respect for the importance of training local cadres, and adherence to the principle that Chinese visiting experts would not enjoy a standard of living higher than their local counterparts. As Friedman points out, much of this was developed in response to criticisms emerging in the Third World about Soviet practices and attitudes: “When matched against the litany of complaints voiced by Guinea in 1961 and Mali in 1963 regarding the aid provided by the
USSR and the Eastern bloc, the origin of many of these points is quite evident” (117–18). The criticism also emerged from China’s experience in the socialist bloc during the 1950s, when they routinely voiced their frustrations with this same set of issues. Friedman identifies the key Chinese term that communicates much of this frustration: *zili gengsheng* (relying on one’s own forces, or self-reliance). The Soviets, by contrast, presumably fostered forms of dependency that were again indistinguishable from the policies and programs of the West.

Much to the chagrin of the Chinese in the 1960s as well as dependency theorists throughout the world, the Soviets increasingly sought stability, recognition, and increased trade and exchange with the West (193–94).3 Thus the Soviets were determined to curtail any radical talk in the Nonaligned Movement and at the various conferences dedicated to Third World solidarity that emerged after Bandung in 1955 about “two imperialisms,” the “two superpowers,” and similar forms of “hegemony” coming from both the United States and the Soviet Union. They also worked to dampen the enthusiasm of radicals in favor of armed struggle, such as Che Guevara from Cuba, whose ideas and tactics they associated with the Chinese.4 Eventually a beholden Cuba would prove to be a useful southern voice for the bloc against the Chinese and Mao’s so-called “three worlds” thesis, which drew on a long tradition of theorizing about “intermediate zones” and China’s special contribution to the global revolution (206). The two superpowers made up the first world; Western Europe, Canada, Japan, and Australia were in the second world; and Latin America, Africa, and Asia and their shared problems of poverty and development made up the third world. China remained faithful to its criticism of the Soviets and “peaceful coexistence” from the late 1950s: both superpowers, its officials claimed, were eager to collude among themselves at the expense of China and the dispossessed peoples of the


Although the Chinese were defeated, and “gave up and went home,” as Friedman puts it, in part because they could not compete with Soviet arms and forms of material aid and support, they had profoundly influenced the global debate and struggle (213). The Soviets now carefully balanced their support for the Third World agenda with their determination to continue to trade and interact with the West. The Chinese challenge had “consolidated the political impact of decolonization,” which transformed the “revolutionary conversation.” Moscow won, but it did so on “China’s terms” (214). China’s interaction with the Third World contributed to a new global geography, with the North/South contrast overtaking the traditional distinction between East and West that was central to the early Cold War.

Friedman remains faithful to his distinction between the anticapitalist Soviet Union and the anti-imperialist China in his description of the different trajectories of the two countries in the 1970s and 1980s. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) could not compete with capitalism, and “had no reason to rule, even in the eyes of its General Secretary,” while the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) reinvented itself to continue its struggle for a “strong, united, independent, prosperous, and modern China” (221). As contributors to _Decolonization and the Cold War_ explain in greater detail, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) drew on the East Asian model of state-directed export production that was successful in places like Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and Japan. On a much larger scale, mainland China would benefit from a series of characteristics conducive to this model: a capable working class, the absence of democracy and workers’ rights, access to international capital, and firm state control exercised by the Communist Party. In places like Taiwan the practices of import substitution, or the local production of goods designed to reduce the need for expensive imports from abroad, had long been abandoned for an export-oriented strategy. Most important, as Christopher Miller argues, the problem of imperialism was perceived much differently by the 1970s. The port cities where European powers carved out special privileges through the early 20th century were part of the history of contemporary Special

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Economic Zones (SEZs), but with an important difference. In contrast to the “age of imperialism, the boom in SEZs that began in the 1970s was initiated and firmly controlled by developing-world states, not by rapacious Western imperialists” (James and Leake, 240). The PRC, once allied with the socialist bloc and then a supporter of Third World radicalism, now joined this trend.

The East Asian model, Patrick Neveling points out, in part was initially developed by the United States in Puerto Rico, a “blueprint for US development policies in the era of decolonization” (James and Leake, 64). Early efforts at import substitution before 1947 meant the construction of government-owned factories to replace imports of things like shoes, cement, and glass bottles. By the 1950s, however, a new model emerged: the Puerto Rico Industrial Development Company (PRIDCO) courted US investors and firms with customs and taxation incentives, government subsidies such as inexpensive leases for industrial lots, and “a cheap docile labour force, which was policed with a heavy hand.” PRIDCO distributed newsletters and brochures promoting “Puerto Rico’s potential as a site for textile apparel and other industries” (James and Leake, 67). These areas of development, sometimes called “export processing zones” or “free trade zones” or “foreign trade zones,” were early versions of what are now well-known in the PRC as “special economic zones.” They grew from 11 in 1970 to 96 in more than 24 countries by 1981, explains Miller (James and Leake, 240). The United Nations dedicated its efforts to promoting export-oriented strategies in the Third World, much to the chagrin of many countries in the Nonaligned Movement struggling to develop more traditional forms of economic autonomy and independence.

Cold War geo-political strategies created the global economic relationships of the present. The PRC of the 1970s chose the path embarked upon by Taiwan in the 1950s. The “imperialism” they feared, of course, now came from the Soviet Union rather than the United States. The so-called East Asian model or strategy was never politically feasible in the socialist bloc countries, who instead went into debt to satisfy the consumer and other demands of populations in an age of Ostpolitik and détente increasingly aware of the comparative affluence of their neighbors. The dilemmas of the contemporary

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era are a product of the global Cold War, a rapidly expanding field of study recently enhanced by new materials from the former socialist world.

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