

Review - The Sino-Soviet Alliance: An International History

Written by Wonhee Lee

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WONHEE LEE, JUN 27 2015

The Sino-Soviet Alliance: An International History

By Austin Jersild

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014

Pursuing a multipolar world order since the early 1990s, Beijing and Moscow have continuously evolved the primary characteristics of their partnership in response to varying geostrategic environments. Watching Moscow face Western sanctions and tilt towards Beijing following the Ukraine conflict, one can assume that Moscow's recent entente with Beijing signals a new era of the partnership, which is essentially different from the two-decade period when Moscow actively sought a balancing role between the West and the East. Rather, a much closer partnership of these days is reminiscent of the fraternal relationship China and Soviet Russia sought to foster during the 1950s to compete with the Western bloc.

In *The Sino-Soviet Alliance: An International History*, Austin Jersild seeks to identify the cause of the bitter Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s and to draw implications for geopolitical dynamics in Eurasia at the present time. By focusing on Soviet advising programs and cultural missions in China, he illuminates the unintended resentments built through Soviet imperialism. Drawing on archival materials from China, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and the Soviet Union, the book reconstructs the working-level communications and interactions among the Soviet Union, its Central and Eastern European allies, and China in the 1950s and 1960s. According to the author, the tensions between imperial practices of the Soviets and frustrations of the Chinese with "great-power chauvinism" gradually mounted in the course of the intrabloc exchange, finally leading to a series of events that fueled the intense confrontation. Therefore, changing mutual perceptions of Soviet advisors and their Chinese counterparts forms the main pillar of the author's narrative about the Sino-Soviet relationship in the early Cold War era. The author goes even further in emphasizing that "these contrasting perceptions of the relationship have complicated Russian-Chinese relations to the present day" (p. 213).

The book displays three distinctive characteristics which demarcate it from early works on the Sino-Soviet relationship. First, to illustrate the mutual frustration between the Chinese and Soviet Russians, the author successfully decenters Mao Zedong and Nikita Khrushchev by presenting a wide variety of first-hand accounts from Chinese and Soviet officials of different levels. However, strategic intentions of Beijing and Moscow are fairly covered as well in the comprehensive and sophisticated analysis of the uncomfortable perception of contradictions with each other. By reconciling the views of bloc advisors and working-level officials with those of top decision-makers, the author places major political events in Sino-Soviet relations, such as Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign in 1956 or Mao's Great Leap Forward movement in 1958, along a continuum of mutual perceptions ranging from mentorship to rivalry. Second, making a break from conventional wisdom that Soviet industrial planning and technology transfer were vital to the reconstruction of the Chinese economy, the author brings to light the pivotal role of the Central Europeans as the "leading people" of the socialist bloc. To be more specific, the author sees that the Central Europeans' competitive advantages over the Soviet Russians—in terms of access to Western economies, industrial planning, and technological development—facilitated bloc exchange with China. Finally, the book superbly illustrates how the Soviets, in coordination with the Central Europeans, attempted to project cultural sources of power

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into its vision of socialist internationalism and how the Chinese reacted to European high culture that reminded them of Western imperialism. In this vivid description of the Central Europeans' cultural missions in China—for example, the Czech Philharmonic's visit to China in 1959 and its performance of the music of famous composers such as Antonín Dvořák and Bedřich Smetana (p. 150), the author reaffirms their special position in intrabloc exchange.

In accordance with this analytical framework of the book, each chapter of pieces together the dynamics of tripartite entanglement within the socialist bloc in the 1950s and 1960s. Chapter 1 introduces numerous sources of the tensions Soviet advisors and technicians and Chinese officials and workers experienced on the shop floor such as different cultural standards and pay scales. The subsequent two chapters cover the Central Europeans' industrial and cultural exchange with the Chinese during the 1950s to reveal inevitable contradictions between Western-oriented economic planning and high culture of Central Europe on one side, and the agrarian economy and revolutionary folk culture of China on the other. Chapter 4 details the Chinese leadership's concern for the unity of the bloc, critics of Moscow's "great-power chauvinism," and sense of pride in exercising political influence on the bloc's handling of the crises in 1956. Chapter 5 explores the Soviets and Central Europeans' rejection of radicalism and revolutionary politics in China represented by the Great Leap Forward in 1958. China's failed attempts to court Central European advisors after Khrushchev's withdrawal of bloc advisors from China in 1960 are described in Chapter 6. The last chapter examines how the Friendship Society, the institution designed to promote the knowledge about the Soviet Union and to improve the Sino-Soviet relationship, was gradually taken over and transformed by the Chinese in their own way by the early 1960s.

In comparison to the detailed analysis of the contributions of the Central Europeans made to the bloc advising system, the discussion about the Central Europe-Soviet Union political relationship is not as persuasive. In particular, the book at times treats the Central Europeans as a monolithic body and describes their collaboration with the Soviet leadership amid simmering tensions between Beijing and Moscow as "the compromise" made by bloc leaders in the wake of the crises in 1956 (pp. 125, 142, 176, 223). At the same time, the author makes clear that "Czechoslovak stability" provided great comfort to the Chinese who hoped to cultivate close ties with the "counterrevolutionary" Czechoslovak people (p. 84). This indicates that Soviet relationship with Czechoslovakia was to some extent different from that with Hungary or Poland. Indeed, unlike Imre Nagy of Hungary and Władysław Gomułka of Poland, Antonín Zápotocký and Antonín Novotný of Czechoslovakia did not jeopardize their local leadership, maintaining relatively stable political ties with the Kremlin throughout the 1950s. In addition, it is worth pointing out that East Germany and the Soviet Union had maintained a staunch alliance against West Germany even before the crises in Hungary and Poland. To summarize, the Czechoslovaks and East Germans' intimate ties with the Soviets throughout the 1950s—which can be construed as far deeper than "the compromise" — might have left the Chinese little room for maneuver when they continued to appeal to the Central Europeans in the 1960s.

The Sino-Soviet Alliance exemplifies how socio-cultural history can neatly intersect with the history of the Cold War. More than six decades have passed since China and the Soviet Union signed the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance. Nonetheless, the author's excellent multidimensional analysis of the Beijing-Moscow relationship of the 1950s provides the readers with valuable strategic insight. It remains to be seen how Xi Jinping's slogan of the "Chinese dream" to rejuvenate the Chinese nation and Vladimir Putin's desire to make Russia a resurrected great power will affect mutual perceptions of the Chinese and Russians in years to come.

About the author:

Wonhee Lee is a Ph.D. student in the Department of History at the University at Albany, State University of New York (SUNY), specializing in U.S. public policy history and international history. Before joining SUNY, he worked as a researcher at the U.S.-Korea Institute (USKI) at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, DC. His academic interests lie in U.S. foreign policy in Asia, international relations in Eurasia, and cross-Strait relations. He received his M.A. degree in International Affairs and International Economics from the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at Johns Hopkins University.

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