

### **Competing Socialisms: The Sino-Soviet Rivalry in Africa During the Cold War**

**Veranstalter:** Kirsten Bönker, Universität Bielefeld; Thoralf Klein, University of Loughborough

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**Bericht von:** Thomas Burnham, History, University of Oxford

In light of the ongoing circumstances brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, the international conference „Competing Socialisms: The Sino-Soviet Rivalry in Africa During the Cold War“ was hosted online by the Center for Interdisciplinary Research (Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Forschung, ZiF) at the University of Bielefeld from 17 to 18 May 2021. Scholars based in Europe, Africa, and Asia were assembled to explore different aspects of the Sino-Soviet rivalry in Africa during the Cold War in a way which crossed disciplines and transcended geopolitical boundaries.

The conference began with a warm welcoming address by MARC SCHALENBERG (Bielefeld). The conference conveners, KIRSTEN BÖNKER (Cologne / Bielefeld) and THORALF KLEIN (Loughborough) then gave opening remarks introducing the aims of the conference. They highlighted the trend of internationalizing the history of the Sino-Soviet split, as well as the necessity of incorporating „glocal“ approaches which recenter the on-the-ground impacts of the Sino-Soviet rivalry in African countries and the agency of African governments and social movements in the Cold War. The organizers further highlighted the fundamental importance of applying multidisciplinary approaches to Cold War history, stressing the need to draw upon various sets of expertise for the complex and transnational topic of Sino-Soviet engagement with Africa.

The two-day conference was split into three thematic parts. Each part was punctuated by an opportunity for open discussion between the conveners, presenters, discussants, and audience members. The first part dealt with Moscow's and Beijing's political, military, and economic strategies in Africa. In the first presentation, JODIE YUZHOU SUN (Shanghai)

shared her paper exploring the support of the People's Republic of China (PRC) for rebel movements during the Simba Rebellion from 1963 to 1965. Her presentation dug into this crucial episode in Sino-African relations in the Mao era by providing a history of China's effort to expand the socialist world revolution through its assistance to what is today the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Sun's paper showed how China's strategy developed and evolved in response to the activities of different factions within the Simba Rebellion, revealing that there was a marked preference for those actors who Beijing perceived to be less beholden to the Soviet Union. In his commentary on the paper, ANDRES HILGER (Moscow) highlighted the apparent differences between Chinese and Soviet interventions in Africa evident in Sun's paper. He further noted the importance of taking account of the PRC's domestic politics when considering the development of its foreign policy over time.

THOMAS C. BURNHAM (Oxford) looked at the same topic from a comparative angle, contrasting the Soviet and the Chinese experiences of rendering assistance to rebels in the Congo Crisis from 1960 to 1965. His presentation highlighted the similarities between the two socialist countries' experiences with assisting different Congolese rebel groups at different times, illustrating how both countries had difficulties in the pivotal task of mustering the support of regional partners. In her commentary, Kirsten Bönker turned attention to the enormous role of multilateral organizations in the Congo Crisis, especially the United Nations, indicating the importance of bringing in a comparison of Soviet and Chinese conceptions of nationhood, state sovereignty, and multilateralism. In a similar vein, Thoralf Klein raised two issues for further consideration. The first was the issue of China's particular perspective on military peacekeeping regarding its approach to the Congo Crisis. The second was the importance of discerning whether Beijing took account of Moscow's difficulties in rendering assistance in the early Congo Crisis in its own efforts later on.

For the final paper of the first part, Kirsten Bönker gave a presentation shedding light

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on the domestic representation of Soviet economic aid to Africa. Her paper interrogated the convergence of the cultural and economic dimensions of Soviet engagement with Africa. It did so by summarizing the many issues faced by Moscow in its paternalistic effort to provide economic assistance to Africa before holding that effort against portrayals of Africa found in Soviet travelogues. Bönker showed that these travelogues and other Soviet print media for domestic consumption sought to simultaneously situate Africa in its Otherness for the Soviet audience and enhance the perception of Soviet geo-political prominence, all the while promoting „international friendship“ with Africans themselves. STEPHEN MERL (Bielefeld) commented on the issues with the delivery of Soviet assistance to Africa but also suggested reconsidering the robustness and efficacy of Soviet products as well as the long-term impacts of Soviet knowledge transfer and development aid.

This presentation naturally led to the second part of the conference, which engaged with Soviet and Chinese imaginations and emotionalizations of the „Other“ in Africa. In the first presentation, GESINE DREWS-SYLLA (Würzburg) examined Soviet poets Evgenii Dolmatovskii's and Evgenii Evtushenko's attendance of the first „World Festival of Negro Arts“ held in Dakar in 1966. She compared how the two poets portrayed Africa in ways which reflected exoticized conceptions of Africa prevalent in Europe as well as in ways which related to discourses about Soviet domestic politics at the time. In her commentary, Kirsten Bönker pointed out that both poets retained an easily discernible Eurocentrism in their portrayals of Africa, which was characteristic of Soviet literature. She added that Soviet literature combined the legitimate anti-colonial demands of African actors with established caricatures in a way which implied the moral superiority of the Soviet system versus that of the newly independent countries' former colonial powers.

Thoralf Klein examined visual representations of Africa in PRC propaganda from the 1950s to the 1970s. His paper delved into the world of Chinese propaganda posters and their portrayals of China's political, technical, and public-health assistance to Africa. He of-

fered a compelling overview of Chinese visual propaganda against the backdrop of the Sino-Soviet rivalry in Africa. Building on work which reflects on Chinese visual representations of Africa, his paper used visual analysis to illuminate how the posters not only created a stereotypical and malleable image of the 'African', but also obliquely depicted the PRC's competition with the Soviet Union in Africa across the Mao era and into the period of Reform and Opening. In his commentary, STEPHEN A. SMITH (Oxford) suggested that China's visual symbolism may have been more abstract than that of the Soviet Union and wondered to what extent the visual symbols worked without the accompanying language, underlining the issue of who exactly was meant to be the audience of the posters with their implied anti-revisionist tenor. He also conjectured that different pieces of visual propaganda might have been made at the behest of specific ministries and other state apparatuses in China rather than African audiences.

The third and final part dealt with education and knowledge exchange between Africa and the socialist world. VIKTOR M. SHAKLEIN (Moscow) presented his paper detailing the use of Russian language education as a tool of cultural diplomacy during the Cold War, building on his extensive personal experience teaching the Russian language in a number of African countries. Informed by his experience, his paper provided a historical and conceptual background before periodizing Soviet cultural diplomacy from 1956 onwards, linking its evolution to not only events within the Soviet Union but also in Africa and elsewhere. His presentation also uncovered aspects of Russian language education during the Soviet Union, showing how it developed from its early implementation in the „People's Democracies“ before being spread to other parts of the world. In addition to this, he discussed the organization of language conferences in Western countries as well as the impetus for supporting Russian language education in Africa. In her commentary, Gesine Drews-Sylla encouraged Shaklein to discuss further his personal experiences as a language instructor abroad and levied that their remains a need to further interrogate knowl-

edge transfer and how it was perceived, especially when it was in competition with other peurveyors of soft power.

ANDREA AZIZI KIFYASI (Basel / Dar es Salam) presented his paper on the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization (AAPSO) in the context of the Sino-Soviet Conflict from 1957 to 1967. Kifyasi argued that the use of AAPSO as an arena for the Sino-Soviet ideological dispute undermined its efficacy as a platform for pressing forward with national independence and decolonization, diluting the Afro-Asian movement's purpose as a „third force“ against colonialism and neo-colonialism. Furthermore, in charting the Sino-Soviet competition for influence over the Afro-Asian movement more widely, he concluded that Beijing's efforts directly contributed to its accession to the United Nations in 1971 but also that the Soviet Union ultimately gained the upper hand in the mid to late 1960s. POPPY CULLEN (Loughborough) noted the way that Kifyasi's paper had shown policies were not simply imposed by China or the Soviet Union on AAPSO, but that they were instead established through the interaction of all the parties. She further underlined the need to acknowledge the political salience of international organizations like the Organization of African Unity as well as regional political blocks and alliances at the time.

In the penultimate presentation, SVETLANA BOLTOVSKA (Berlin) explored Soviet educational aid as a state project. Based on interviews and other fieldwork, Boltovska discussed the experience of African students who studied the Soviet Union, analyzing their accounts of Africa's representation found in Russian-Soviet media on the one hand and the students' self-perception on the other. Her presentation highlighted how Soviet educational efforts had lasting impacts which merit further investigation. In his commentary, TOBIAS RUPPRECHT (Berlin) suggested a periodization of the educational assistance offered to African students and stressed the importance of training rather than ideology after the 1960s. He also mentioned that there had been a genuine concern at Lumumba University that Maoism might gain a foothold among international students.

Turning to the influence of socialist ideas

among students in Africa, BAHRU ZEWDE (Addis Ababa) discussed the Ethiopian student movement and its connections with the global left, especially the Soviet Union. His presentation began by taking note of two factors which played a role in strengthening the linkages between the Ethiopian student movement and the ideas circulated by the Soviet Union. The first of these was that despite the explicitly atheist Marxist ideology of the students and their Soviet counterparts, the fact that they all had a history with the Orthodox faith was an important point of commonality. The second factor was the shared struggle against Italian fascism. Aside from these concrete links with the Soviet Union, Zewde's paper also confronts the ideological eclecticism of the Ethiopian student movement. Specifically, he described their enthusiasm for leftist texts which were globally influential. Among these were works which had popularized the Chinese revolution in the rest of the world, like Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China* or William H. Hinton's *Fanshen*. In his commentary, FELIX BRAHM (London) added that the ideological eclecticism of the Ethiopian student movement resembled the eclecticism of the global left, pointing to the fact that the movement was part of global processes.

The conference concluded with closing remarks by the conference organizers and a final opportunity for open discussion. Thoralf Klein acknowledged how fruitful the conference had been in terms of shifting perspectives of Cold War history away from the superpowers and towards not only Sino-Soviet competition but also African actors. He proposed that the conference had confirmed the need to continue investigating Cold War history in a way which acknowledges the multi-valent nature of international politics and recognizes the agency of actors outside of the traditional Washington-Moscow binary. The participants agreed that the conference had provided the opportunity to not only share their research with colleagues working in similar topics, but also to challenge the results of their work with evidence and perspectives on offer only by specialists in fields aside from their own. It was further agreed that work remained to be done to both make use of litera-

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ture in multiple languages and to consider the ramifications of one another's conclusions in future research.

**Conference overview:**

Marc Schalenberg (Bielefeld): Welcome

Kirsten Bönker (Cologne / Bielefeld) / Thoralf Klein (Loughborough): Introduction

*Political, Military and Economic Strategies, part I*

Chair: Thoralf Klein (Loughborough)

Jodie Yuzhou Sun (Shanghai): Chinese Support of Rebel Movements in the Congo Crisis (1963-65)

Commentary: Andreas Hilger (Moscow)

Thomas C. Burnham (Oxford): Assisting an Encircled Countryside: Briefly Comparing Soviet and Chinese Aid in the Congo Crises, 1960-1965

Commentary: Kirsten Bönker (Cologne / Bielefeld), Thoralf Klein (Loughborough University)

*Political, Military and Economic Strategies, part II*

Chair: Gesine Drew-Sylla (Würzburg)

Kirsten Bönker (Cologne): Representing Soviet Economic Aid Strategies or: Framing the Soviet Imagination of Being a World Power  
Commentary: Stephen Merl (Bielefeld)

*The Imagination and Emotionalization of the 'Other'*

Chair: Rachel G. Hoffman (Cambridge)

Gesine Drews-Sylla (Würzburg): Soviet (post-)colonial imaginations of Africa

Commentary: Kirsten Bönker (Cologne / Bielefeld)

Thoralf Klein (Loughborough): Fighting Imperialism – Forging Solidarity: Africa in PRC Propaganda, 1950s to 1970s

Commentary: Stephen A. Smith (Oxford)

*Between Export and Migration. Education, Knowledge Exchange and Foreign Language Policies, part I*

Chair: Kirsten Bönker (Cologne / Bielefeld)

Viktor M. Shaklein (Moscow): Cultural Diplomacy during the Cold War: Russian as a Foreign Language

Commentary: Gesine Drews-Sylla (Würzburg)

Andrea Azizi Kifyasi (Basel / Dar es Salaam): Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization (AAPSO) and the Sino-Soviet Conflict,  
Commentary: Poppy Cullen (Loughborough)

*Between Export and Migration. Education, Knowledge Exchange and Foreign Language Policies, part II*

Chair: Stephan Merl (Bielefeld)

Svetlana Boltovska (Berlin): Soviet Educational Aid as State Project: Intention and Realisation, 1960-1991

Commentary: Tobias Rupprecht (Berlin)

Bahru Zewde (Addis Ababa)

Commentary: Felix Brahm (London)

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