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1959: The Cold War as International History

As a Visegrad Fellow from 19 April – 19 June 2024 I explored the debate about what Western social scientists called the “convergence” of the socialist and capitalist worlds as part of the experience of industrialization. I explored multiple perspectives on this problem, including those of critics from within the socialist world, Chinese frustrated by what they portrayed as the shared practices of the Soviet Union and the United States, and radical figures in the Global South who posed questions about socialist bloc aid programs. Soviet and East European commentators were not sympathetic. The West was hoping for the “movement of the socialist countries to the market mechanism,” wrote V. Cheprakov in *Izvestiia*, and the “adoption by socialism more or less of the characteristic traits of capitalism.”¹ The broader context to the question of convergence was the meaning and nature of Khrushchev-era reform, which also inspired significant debate both within the socialist world and among the makers of foreign policy in the United States.

OSA Archivum holdings were highly useful to my exploration of this topic. RFE/RL researchers studied and followed the convergence debate closely, even as they posed skeptical questions about Western perceptions of the socialist world. I am drawing a contrast between the ideas and assumptions of Radio Free Europe/RL researchers in the early 1950s with those of the exhibit makers at the United States Information Agency in the late 1950s (based on my previous work at NARA in College Park, Maryland). The public in the West tended to be composed of “enthusiast-optimists” regarding change in Soviet foreign policy and Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech,” argued Dmitri Pospelovskii of Radio Liberty. Western scholars were misled by the new debates about profit, cost-accounting, efficiency, and so on, naively believing that economic reform would lead to the “democratization of the USSR.”² RFE and RL researchers were also frustrated by the growing number of accounts by journalists and travelers to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe that in their view were excessively optimistic about shared experiences and attitudes. With chagrin they noted the growing preponderance of Western accounts of adventure and intrigue in the socialist world that also rendered these lands

¹ V. Cheprakov, “Novye manevry teoretikov konvergentsii,” *Izvestiia* (7 March 1974), 4, in Folder: Konvergentsiia, 1968-1993, HU OSA 300-80-1, box 396. See also I. Fediakin, “Obvetshalye mundiry,” *Izvestiia* (4 July 1970), 4; V. Cheprakov, “Fa’l’shivaia teoriia,” *Izvestiia* (5 August 1970), 2; D. Ermolenko, “Nauchno-technicheskaia revoliutsiia i manevry burzhuaznoi ideologii,” *Pravda* (6 June 1973), 4; Iu. Zhukov, “Ikh osnovnaia oshibka,” *Znamia*, no. 2 (1973), 183; in Folder: Konvergentsiia, 1968-1993, HU OSA 300-80-1, box 396.

² 30 October 1969, “Teorii Konvergentsii i ikh protivniki,” D. Pospelovskii, in Folder: Konvergentsiia, 1968-1993, HU OSA 300-80-1, box 396.

comprehensible and recognizable.³ A French couple described a fun vacation to Sochi: “One might have been in any resort along the Mediterranean.”⁴

Instead RFE/RL researchers worked to inform the government and the public of what they considered a Soviet ruse. They identified the pattern of Soviet tactics: fancy hotels, solicitous guides, endearing interpreters, a focus on museums and cultural institutions rather than potentially embarrassing living conditions, supposedly “spontaneous” invitations to apartments to satisfy Western curiosity, and so on.⁵ The socialist states were dictatorships, they emphasized, with nothing in common with the civil societies and democracies of the West.⁶ My work with RFE/RL materials will allow me to draw a contrast between their ideas and those of the exhibit makers at USIA in the later 1950s, a contrast which drew on ideas about consumerism and shared characteristics between the worlds of socialism and capitalism.

The holdings of OSA Archivum were also useful to my work on Sino-Soviet and East-South relations, two other areas where the debate on convergence played an important role. The Chinese explored not just the shared forms of “hegemony” and “chauvinism” exercised supposedly by both the Soviet Union and the United States, but also the shared economic and cultural values that in their view amounted to another form of “convergence” between the superpowers. They complained that the socialist bloc had compromised with the West and sold its soul for the sake of consumer comforts and goods from the West. I benefitted from material on the Sino-Soviet split in OSA from roughly 1958 through the mid-1960s.⁷

The Chinese were determined to share their knowledge of Soviet “revisionism” with potential allies in the Global South, taking the debate on convergence to East-South relations. I focus on the West African country of Guinea-Conakry after 1958 under President Sékou Touré. The French departed quickly and were replaced by socialist bloc advisers and their programs. President Touré was disappointed, however, in numerous aspects of the Soviet advising program, trade, and its various forms of aid. Like other potentially friendly states in the Global

³ Göran Schildt, “Russland heute,” *Hamburger Abendblatt* (23-24 January 1954), and “How Business Gets Done in Russia,” *Fortune* (February 1953), in Folder: SU: General, 1954, HU OSA 300-4-3, box 1; Edna King, “A Housewife goes to Moscow,” *News Chronicle* (3 May 1954), and Marguerite Higgins, “Eine Fraue reist 20,000 km durch die Sowjet-Union,” *Welt am Sonntag* (19 December 1954), and Donald Soper, “What I found in Russia,” *News Chronicle* (4 December 1954), all in Folder: SU: General, 1954-1955, HU OSA 300-4-3, box 1.

⁴ Pierre and Helene Lazareff, “In Sochi, It’s All Such Fun,” *Washington Post* (17 November 1954), in Folder: SU: General, 1954-1955, HU OSA 300-4-3, box 1. Also “Tourism in the Sobiet Bloc,” *New from Behind the Iron Curtain*, vol. 5, no. 1 (January 1956), 3-12, in Folder: Iron Curtain, 1954, HU OSA 298-3-2, box 2.

⁵ 16 November 1954, “The Visitors’ USSR,” in Folder: SU: General, 1954-1955, HU OSA 300-4-3, box 1.

⁶ 23 November 1954, “Background Information,” RFE Research, Folder: 133. World Politics: Espionage: NKVD, KGB, 1954-1971, in HU OSA 300-4-3, box 22.

⁷ For example, HU OSA 300-80-1, box 379; HU OSA 300-5-90, box 93; HU OSA 300-5-90, box 91; HU OSA 300-5-30, box 92; HU OSA 300-4-3, box 8; HU OSA 300-4-3, box 6.

South, the Guineans wondered about what in practice distinguished the socialists from their colonial predecessors and their rivals in the West. The Russians “are more capitalistic than the capitalists,” said Touré.⁸ What was different or distinctive about socialist terms of trade, bauxite and natural resource development and its extraction, advising programs, credit and finance, and so on? Bauxite extraction, a key natural resource in Guinea-Conakry, was central to French colonialism. How would it be handled differently by the Soviets and East Europeans? The Chinese encouraged the Guineans in these skeptical questions about socialist bloc programs and claimed a special knowledge about the weaknesses of the socialist bloc based on the history of their “Great Friendship” of the 1950s.

OSA holdings and its helpful staff and active community allowed me to improve virtually all aspects of my current work on the international history of the Cold War.

⁸ David Lamb, “Guinea: Obstinate, Consistent Rule,” *International Herald Tribune* (19 June 1979), in Folder: Africa: Guinea: Background, HU OSA 301-0-3, box 22. Also, 11 January 1962, “Africa: Mikoyan on Guinea and ‘Imperialists,’” RFE Research, in Folder: Mikoyan, Anastas: 1959-1969, HU OSA 300-120-6, box 147; 22 December 1961, “Solod’s Retreat from Conakry,” RFE Research, HU OSA 300-8-3: 59/4-5.