



**Danhui Li, Yafeng Xia.** *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1959-1973: A New History.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018. 342 pp. \$110.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4985-1166-7.

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The scale of the challenge to the United States posed by the alliance between the Soviet Union and China in the 1950s was huge, but proved to be short-lived. The onset of a split between the two allies from 1960 onward not only polarized the communist world but also led by 1973 to an astonishing reversal of Cold War strategic alliances, whereby China turned toward the US as an ally and against the Soviet Union. Since the fall of the Soviet Union and, particularly since the (restricted) opening of the foreign ministry archives in China in 2003, there has been a small wave of books and articles on the Sino-Soviet split. Initially, most of this work—including previous work by the authors of the excellent study under review—focused on the heyday of the alliance and the causes of mounting tension toward the late 1950s.[1] More recently, there have been important works that focus on the 1960s, the crucial decade in which tension between the two former allies evolved into rancorous antagonism.[2] The outstanding feature of this new study is the depth of its research, which draws on archival material in Chinese and Russian, together with the meticulousness and impartiality of the analysis. Danhui Li and Yafeng Xia adopt an “international history” approach to their subject and extend it into an innovative account of the impact of the Sino-Soviet split upon the com-

munist bloc, especially upon the parties in South-east Asia, notably Vietnam and Indonesia.

At the center of the authors’ attention are the questions of how and why the schism between the two powers occurred, how the split influenced Mao’s decision to launch the Cultural Revolution, and how the deteriorating relationship affected the wider politics of the Cold War. They start in 1959, when the alliance was in disarray as a result of the conflicting foreign and domestic policies of the two powers. However, they show that during 1960 steps were taken by both sides to preserve unity in the communist camp, which involved the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) making ideological compromises at the Moscow Conference in November 1960. The authors suggest that the grim situation in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) at this time made its leaders inclined to patch up relations, but show that this was only a temporary *démarche*. Once Mao demanded that domestic policy be guided by “class struggle,” his critique of the Soviet Union as a “revisionist” power intensified. Throughout the book the authors seek to link China’s foreign policy to domestic policy and differentiate between what they see as conflicts between the two communist parties and conflicts between the two states.

In the second chapter, state-to-state conflict is to the fore. The authors examine the riots in May

1962 by citizens in Yili in Xinjiang seeking to escape to the Soviet Union; the Cuban missile crisis; and the Sino-Indian border war. In 1962, too, party-to-party conflict escalated as the CCP fought to defend the Party of Labor in Albania and to advance its bold bid for leadership of the entire communist bloc. Despite shrill polemic and the emergence of pro-China factions in a dozen different communist parties, however, by 1964 the CCP's bid had failed. By this time, China's foreign policy was governed by the conviction that both the Soviet Union and the United States were mortal foes. Party-to-party relations, however, did not cease and chapter 5 explains how in 1965 a new bout of antagonism erupted over the Moscow conference in March that centered on the issue of aid to Vietnam and the need to stand up to the US. One consequence was that the PRC government stymied efforts by the Soviet Union to send military assistance to the Vietnamese in their struggle against the US. The authors conclude that by 1965 the efforts of the CCP to win the support of communist parties in Asia had suffered a stunning defeat.

The last chapter traces the deterioration of state-to-state relations from 1966 to 1973. The onset of the Cultural Revolution pumped up the volume of anti-Soviet polemic. The Chinese were concerned by the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968 and by the build-up of Soviet forces on the border. However, the authors—I think less than in some of their earlier work—rather downplay ideological leftism as a factor that motivated China to provoke military clashes with the Soviets at Zhenbao on the Ussuri River in Heilongjiang in March 1969. This was—following the Cuban missile crisis—arguably the closest the world came to a nuclear conflict, after the Soviets responded to the provocation with coercive diplomacy and nuclear saber-rattling. The authors see this event as the major factor that brought about the strategic realignment of China towards the United States, even though the latter was not formalized until 1973.

The big question remains how and why two great communist powers, initially united in friendship and by a strong opposition to the US, became grievous enemies in such a short time. Realists in international relations theory argue that the alliance was doomed from the outset, since traditional rivalry reasserted itself as the two states became aware of their national/imperial interests. In their respective books Lorenz Lüthi and Sergei Radchenko offer more multicausal explanations, with Lüthi stressing the role of ideology, particularly Mao's increasing leftism, as well as the personality clashes of Mao and Khrushchev. Radchenko also registers the importance of ideology alongside traditional competition for power and influence. The authors of this book see the struggle over ideology as “only for appearances' sake” (p. 45). They subscribe to a variant of “realism” that is couched in terms of the Soviet Union and PRC being at different stages of development and thus perceiving their national paths very differently. They see power politics motivating China's drive for dominance in the communist bloc but stress, too, that the norms of the bloc simply did not allow for the expression of state interests, based on ideas of sovereignty, equality, and independence. Ultimately, I was not convinced that the logic of power politics necessarily prevailed over ideology, since these were states whose *raison d'être* was inseparable from ideology, and China's bid for leadership could only be made in ideological terms. Ideology is perhaps best seen not as a causal factor of the schism, but as the lens through which both parties perceived the world of politics and defined their state interests accordingly. This certainly did not rule out *Realpolitik*—pragmatic concern with defense of borders, troop numbers, brinkmanship, or deterrence. Nor did it preclude in some circumstances the use of ideology in a cynical, instrumental fashion. But the new notions that emerged in CCP ideology in the 1960s—of the Soviet Union as a “social imperialist” and “revisionist” power—were critical in defining the general orientation of foreign policy and in providing motivations for ac-

tion and a repertoire of responses, even if, as the authors show, the immediate causes of action on both sides were often those of conventional power politics.

#### Notes

[1]. Shen Zhihua and Xia Yafeng, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Partnership, 1945-1959* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015) is the companion volume to the book under review. Important general studies include Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: the Sino-Soviet Split and the Third World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Mingjiang Li, *Mao's China and the Sino-Soviet Split: Ideological Dilemma* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012); and Austin Jersild, *The Sino-Soviet Alliance: An International History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

[2]. See, in particular, Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Sergei Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-67* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

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