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### Irreconcilable Differences

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Review by Ryan Irwin, University at Albany, SUNY

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*Irreconcilable Differences*

What was the Sino-Soviet Split? Jeremy Friedman tackles this question with creativity and nuance in *Shadow Cold War*, framing the Sino-Soviet relationship as a second Cold War. This conflict was harder to comprehend than the capitalist-Communist clash, especially to Western observers who assumed the protagonists were on the same side, but the stakes were just as high. In Friedman's retelling, this was a fight to define the meaning of revolution. China and the Soviet Union both believed that modernization and revolution went hand-in-hand and that oppressed peoples would achieve dignity only when industrialized countries lost their stranglehold on world affairs. However, this similarity could not paper over their genuine ideological differences—rooted in alternative views about the relative importance of socialism and freedom—and these differences became irreconcilable against the backdrop of decolonization.

In substantiating this claim, *Shadow Cold War* bridges two distinct historiographies. First, Friedman brings the Sino-Soviet Split into dialogue with New Cold War history, which has used new archives to transform scholarship about the superpower contest.<sup>1</sup> Past historians have tended to blame the split on interpersonal wrangling—China's Mao Zedong and the Soviet Union's Nikita Khrushchev famously hated each other—or the timing of Beijing's Great Leap Forward, which overlapped with Moscow's repudiation of Stalinism.<sup>2</sup> Similar to many New Cold War historians, Friedman puts precedence on ideology.<sup>3</sup> The Bolsheviks, he argues, saw revolution in the context of Russian history. "Unlike the Chinese Revolution with its nationalist emphasis and rhetoric," Friedman explains, "[Vladimir] Lenin made demolishing Russian nationalism one of the regime's early political objectives" (7). Convinced that the Tsar had used nationalism to mask economic inequality, the Bolsheviks saw capitalism as the root cause of Russia's problems, and championed policies that promised to make the Soviet Union into a more egalitarian, productive, and socialist society.

In contrast, anti-imperialism oriented China's understanding of revolution. Mao came to power by mobilizing anti-Japanese nationalism, and he consistently treated class as a malleable device that could be altered through loyalty and education. His principle objective was not to create an anticapitalist society; he wanted to repel foreign influence, thereby delivering independence to the Chinese masses. History, in other words, determined how Soviet and Chinese theorists defined revolution, and then shaped their policymaking preferences in power. In Friedman's mind, the similarities between the two countries were superficial.

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<sup>1</sup> A primer is Odd Arne Westad, "The Cold War and the International History of the Twentieth Century," in Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, ed., *The Cold War: Origins, Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1-19.

<sup>2</sup> Representative scholarship includes Herbert Ellison, ed., *The Sino-Soviet Conflict: A Global Perspective* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1982); Lorenz Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Odd Arne Westad, ed., *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945-1963* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Although the violence of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution resembled the violence of Joseph Stalin's collectivization programs, deeper differences separated these projects:

Violence was used with an eye toward creating the most obedient and effective economic and political machine [in China] rather than as a means of breaking entire classes of people who did not fit into the Marxist schema (12).<sup>4</sup>

This distinction frames *Shadow Cold War's* second intervention, which focuses on decolonization. The scholarship here has tended to emphasize themes of racial solidarity and tensions between the so-called First and Third Worlds.<sup>5</sup> Friedman sets his eyes on rehabilitating the revolutionary side of the postcolonial moment, and, in the process, revealing the nature of Second World-Third World relations during the 1960s. African and Asian nationalists had big dreams in these years, and they flocked to China and the Soviet Union because the former was ostensibly free of foreign influence and the latter had achieved industrialization without capitalism. Friedman adeptly recounts the interactions between China, the Soviet Union, and various decolonized countries. Too often, he argues, we tell this story on Europe's terms, forgetting the dynamism of Chinese and Soviet foreign policy and the aspirations of Asian and African socialists. "But something important is lost if we do not see the second half of the twentieth century for what it was: an attempt by many around the world to catch up to the most developed countries and achieve a more just and egalitarian division of wealth on both a domestic and international scale" (224). The ambition of such an effort seems impossible today.

*Shadow Cold War* unfolds in two parts. Act one shows how the debate over postcolonial sovereignty heightened tensions between Moscow and Beijing. Khrushchev's attempt to coexist peacefully with the West always clashed with Mao's espousal of self-reliance, but these disagreements remained dormant until Europe relinquished control of its African colonies during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Decolonization created an audience. And African and Asian leaders not only wanted unified societies and developed economies; they laid claim to the mantle of revolution, and asked tough questions about how to create free, unified, modern societies from the rubble of empire. As Chinese and Soviet leaders reoriented themselves in this environment—and presented their ideas about the ideal relationship between capitalism and imperialism—long-simmering differences boiled over and semantic distinctions became irresolvable disagreements. Moscow wanted to replace capitalism with socialism, while Beijing saw socialism as a tool to combat imperialism.

*Shadow Cold War's* second act explores the costs and consequences of this intellectual tussle. Ultimately, Moscow chose to contort itself, Friedman argues, stretching its resources to outmaneuver China and remain relevant in places that shared China's mantra. This effort succeeded, but it emptied the Kremlin's coffers and unmoored the country's convictions, effectively ending the prospect of a global working-class revolution. By the 1970s, the Soviet Union sounded a lot like China. Rather than leading to a unified Second World-Third

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<sup>4</sup> This distinction dovetails with the scholarship of Stephen Kotkin, including *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) and *Stalin* (New York: Penguin, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Representative scholarship includes Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Color Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Robert Rakove, *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Ryan Irwin, *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

World front, this victory merely divided African and Asian leaders—many of whom saw Moscow as coeval to Washington—making it easier for the West to reestablish its influence after the 1970s. China, meanwhile, responded to its defeat abroad by reforming its economy, which Friedman treats as a natural extension of Chinese anti-imperialism. If one appreciates socialism’s ambiguous place among China’s communists, Deng Xiaoping’s programs were less remarkable than they appeared at the time.

Friedman’s analysis is astute. A stupendous amount of research went into *Shadow Cold War*, giving the narrative a fresh feel. The book draws on materials from China, Russia, and numerous other countries. Friedman uses this research to explore unfamiliar voices, and his overall thesis lends elegance to an otherwise dizzying compendium of events, decisions, and locales. *Shadow Cold War* is a diplomatic history with an argument about ideas, and one potential critique of the book is its handling of intellectual nuance. Lenin shows up in the introduction and conclusion, but there is little sense of how Friedman’s actors digested Lenin’s writings over time, and while anticapitalism and anti-imperialism are explained well, the terms occasionally shortcut longer, messier expositions of thinkers and their institutions. Diplomacy and conflict drive *Shadow Cold War* forward, so even when Friedman stops to explain how Beijing and Moscow threw words at each other, this jujitsu feels like background noise. It would be interesting to see Friedman’s thesis represented as intellectual biography, rooted in a different sort of archive and focused on shades of intellectual gray and change over time.<sup>6</sup> Who drove intellectual discourse in China and the Soviet Union in these years? How did the concept of revolution evolve as the Sino-Soviet Split unfolded? Did debates about race, which crested with decolonization, alter the meaning of communism?

Beyond these questions, *Shadow Cold War* challenges Cold War scholars to rethink their assumptions. For instance, do we need the Cold War? Historians have proved that the superpower conflict meant different things to different people, and even when politicians employed comparable vocabularies they gave their words different meanings, rooted in regional history, local politics, and strategic convenience. Can an ideological struggle have meaning if ideology means something different to every participant? New international history has forced historians to grapple with this question, and by treating the Sino-Soviet Split as a “shadow” Cold War, Friedman tacitly stretches the riddle to its conceptual limits. In his hands, the Cold War was not a fight over communism and liberalism; it was a contest to determine the contours and endpoint of revolution. Framed in this manner, one might ask whether it is time to cast the Cold War aside. After all, revolution, capitalism, and imperialism have long, rich, historical epistemologies. They are bigger than the Cold War, and if Friedman is correct that Soviet and Chinese leaders were fighting over these deeper issues—and I’m convinced by his argument—perhaps we should contextualize their conversation in a literature about sovereignty and globalization after the nineteenth century.

This raises a question about periodization. When did this story—whatever we call it—begin? Friedman has unearthed a remarkable number of documents and explained these documents carefully. But his argument is bigger than his story, which is meant as a compliment—he has said something important. It would be interesting to tell his story from World War I. Many of Friedman’s protagonists were born in the 1890s, so their convictions probably hardened long before Friedman indicates, and their engagement with Lenin’s writing—their ideas about capitalism and imperialism—surely changed over time. Similarly, the challenge of

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<sup>6</sup> Representative examples might be Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals Who Remade Asia* (London: Allen Lane, 2012) or David Milne, *Worldmaking: The Art and Science of American Diplomacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).

decolonization would look different if contextualized in a longer story about the networks that connected revolutionaries during the early twentieth century. Friedman hints, for example, that African and Asian decolonization presented Moscow and Beijing with distinct, new challenges. These distinctions are left implicit, and it would be fascinating to learn how the geography of revolution shaped debates about capitalism and imperialism.

Few books nudge their readers to revisit long-held assumptions. *Shadow Cold War* is an impressive piece of scholarship that draws upon an inspiring base of research, and Friedman's thesis makes it impossible to view the communist world monolithically. The book deserves an audience, especially among scholars who are interested in the Cold War, the diplomacy of ideas, and the twentieth century.