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**Alsu Tagirova. "Soviet Public Diplomacy in China: "Small Steps" towards Bilateral Rapprochement (1978-1985)." *Cold War History* 17:4 (2017): 405-423. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2017.1307180>.**

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In an age of mass opinion, diplomacy is inescapably public in nature. States not only conduct relations with one another, but directly engage each other's societies and unofficial influencers. Among actual or potential allies, cultivating a positive image cements, or fosters, cordial relations. Between adversaries, it is used to undermine domestic cohesion or hinder the policies of a rival state.

Public diplomacy is especially significant when collective values are part of the stakes of a rivalry, as they were during the Cold War, a contest of ideologies and social systems as well as military power. Historians of this period have explored in detail the role of public diplomacy in the conduct of superpower relations.<sup>1</sup> What about relations among Communist states? Could there be a meaningful public diplomacy between systems that not only shared an ideology, but one committed to eliminating the very structures of an independent civil society that public diplomacy targets?

This is the context of Alsu Tagirova's study of Soviet public diplomacy towards China. She charts the evolution of this policy in the context of both changing Soviet practices in this field and radical shifts in Sino-Soviet relations. She notes the early enthusiasm of the 1950s, especially after the death of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, and the impact of his successor Nikita Khrushchev's reform and revival of the Soviet apparatus of cultural relations in 1957-1958. It is interesting to learn here that the Soviet-Chinese Friendship Association was the first of the new Friendship Associations created under this reform.

It is more surprising to learn that, a decade on, cultural activities only ceased with the Cultural Revolution, three years or so after the Sino-Soviet split had erupted publicly and imposed severe damage on most aspects of the bilateral relationship. Cultural ties, it seems, survived longer than other ties.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: Raising the Curtain* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2003).

This fact assumes greater significance in the context of Tagirova's main focus –Soviet policy from 1978-85– and her core argument that Soviet public diplomacy initiatives in this period helped pave the way for the breakthrough in the Sino-Soviet relationship that followed. Drawing on sources from both countries, including Russian state archives, she recounts in detail a series of Soviet efforts to improve cultural relations with China in response both to adverse international developments (as the United States moved towards full normalisation of Sino-American relations) and domestic stagnation.

Initial forays yielded no success. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, in 1979 added fresh obstacles to a rapprochement. Even when Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping sent Yu Hongliang, a senior Foreign Ministry official, on a secret mission to Moscow to begin a political dialogue in 1982, he rejected a Soviet proposal to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sino-Soviet Friendship Association.

But from early in the following year, China began to respond to Soviet attempts to revive official cultural relations. The key figures driving Soviet efforts –they were always *demandeur*– were Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Kapitsa and head of the Soviet-Chinese Friendship Society, Sergei Tikhvinsky. A series of contacts and reciprocal visits of literary and artistic figures, and Friendship Society officials, followed.

Tagirova concludes that public diplomacy was an important part of the 'small steps' policy which, together with growing trade, allowed the Soviet Union and China to revive a limited degree of bilateral co-operation in the early 1980s. She does not suggest that this contributed directly to the rapprochement in Sino-Soviet relations that began after Mikhail Gorbachev became Soviet leader in 1985. This was, rather, a consequence of the new thinking and policies that the new General Secretary brought to this role. Tagirova sensibly ascribes more modest achievements, arguing that the cultural contacts "laid the groundwork for further development of bilateral contacts" (422) that were to take place when high politics eventually made normalisation possible.

It is less clear, though, that thanks to these contacts "Soviet and Chinese propaganda had convinced [Soviet and Chinese] peoples that despite the differences that existed at a governmental level, the people of the other country were a brotherly nation" (422). This is not least because, as Tagirova notes, many of these initiatives "were kept secret...out of fear of failure" (422). They were anything but public.

This raises the larger question of whether the developments analysed here are best described as 'public diplomacy,' and even whether such diplomacy was conceivable between Communist countries. These states exerted tight control over their respective societies, and worked constantly to minimise the possibility of unapproved views taking root. In such circumstances, the prospects of appealing directly to the society, and the influencers, of another country –as public diplomacy requires–were at best very limited. When the West succeeded in influencing Soviet opinion, the attraction it exerted was at least as material as cultural or ideological, an option hardly available to the Soviet Union in the early 1980s.

Tagirova acknowledges the "peculiarities" of Soviet public diplomacy with China (406). Every contact and visit described here had to be approved by both countries, which "enjoyed absolute control" over the organisations involved in them (421). Only from 1983 were these exchanges "widely announced to the general public and extensively advertised in the media" (418). Perhaps it is better to understand them as 'official cultural relations' rather than "public diplomacy."

Understood in these terms, Tagirova's contribution is to show how the Soviet Union used official cultural ties as a convenient, ambiguous, low-risk way to probe China's interest in improving relations—and how China, in eventually responding, signalled in turn that it was ready to contemplate this, should larger political circumstances permit.

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