

**This is an electronic reprint of the original article.
This reprint *may differ* from the original in pagination and typographic detail.**

Author(s): Mikkonen, Simo

Title: Beyond the superpower conflict: Introduction to VJHS special issue on cultural exchanges during the Cold War

Year: 2013

Version:

Please cite the original version:

Mikkonen, S. (2013). Beyond the superpower conflict: Introduction to VJHS special issue on cultural exchanges during the Cold War. *Valahian Journal of Historical Studies*, 10(20), 5-14. <http://www.valahianjournal.info/20--2013-.htm>

All material supplied via JYX is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of the repository collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone who is not an authorised user.

Beyond the superpower conflict: Introduction to VJHS special issue on cultural exchanges during the Cold War

Simo MIKKONEN*

Research on Cold War has often been considered to a separate research paradigm and has thus been given the same of Cold War Studies. There are journals, research centers and institutions in the western countries many of which were born already during the Cold War. The Cold War was a western paradigm that was partly adopted in the socialist countries during the Cold War, but mainly as a concept outside scholarly research. Cold War studies used to be very political by nature, concentrating on international politics, high-level diplomacy and military affairs. But since the end of the Cold War, drastic changes have taken place in the field. Culture and social approaches that were hardly even in the margins within the Cold War studies have quickly transformed the whole field.¹ One of the important factors for this was the opening of borders and access to primary sources that had remained closed for most researchers throughout the Cold War. This change is well reflected in the articles of this volume.

The issue at hand sprang from a conference held in Finland in 2012 under the title *East-West Cultural Exchanges and the Cold War*, a conference that was born out of the perception that research on cultural Cold War, and more broadly, on cultural issues related the Cold War had for some time been on verge of a breakthrough. Yet, joint conferences that would bring together researchers interested in the cultural and social dimensions related to the Cold War had been much fewer than the amount of new research would seem to suggest; particularly so when compared to the amount of conferences tackling the more traditional domain of the Cold War politics.

* University of Jyväskylä, Department of History and Ethnology. Email: simo.mikkonen@jyu.fi

¹ P. Major and R. Mitter, "East is East and West is West? Towards a Comparative Socio-Cultural History of the Cold War," in *Across the Blocs. Cold War Cultural and Social History*, ed. R. Mitter and P. Major (London: Frank Cass., 2004); P. Romijn, G. Scott-Smith and J. Segal, ed., *Divided Dreamworlds? The Cultural Cold War in East and West* (Amsterdam UP, 2013).

The Conference in Jyväskylä was a clear testimony of the interest towards cultural issues related to Cold War, but also of the rise of new research on the theme. What was originally purported as a small conference of three days without parallel sessions in a faraway Finnish small town eventually became a four-day conference with participants from 23 different countries, with close to 80 oral presentations in three parallel sessions. Focus of the conference was fixed on the exchange of culture over the Iron Curtain during the Cold War era, with proposals ranging from examination of cultural diplomacy to small-scale networks that often ran contrary to state interests. As a result, in more than 20 thematic sessions different forms of cultural engagement, implications of the flow of cultural influences, encounters of different kind and state attempts to use culture to its own ends were discussed.

This special issue is a collection of some of the papers in the conference. Common for them all is that they address themes of culture and society that have remained outside the immediate focus in research for several years, being shadowed by high-level diplomacy and grand politics. Shortly put, these articles represent the new breed of Cold War studies that aim driving home the point that even in the international setting and the domain of high politics, it is not always major politicians and state actors that matter. Often socio-cultural issues have had major impact on what direction politics have taken as some of the articles suggest. Major example of the influence of socio-cultural issues is the end of the Cold War. Even if politicians played an important role when they decided not to repeat events of Hungary in 1956, or Prague in 1968, it were the people that were in the focus, with major politicians mostly reacting slowly or standing passive as the events unfolded.

Another core feature in practically all of the articles is the focus beyond the superpower conflict. Cold War studies used to be primarily about the US point of view concentrating on US foreign relations, or directly to US-Soviet conflict.² In some ways, the dominant perspective in the Cold War studies is still one of the superpowers, even if this would seem to be a quickly crumbling fact. Cold War studies have paid little attention to European initiatives and connections over the Iron Curtain that emerged and developed in the shadow of the superpowers.³ Articles of

² First monographs on cultural Cold War primarily investigated US projects directed towards the Soviet Union, see e.g. R. Wagnleitner, *Coca-colonization and the Cold War. The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* (North Carolina UP, 1994); W. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945–1961* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997); Y. Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War. Raising the Iron Curtain* (Pennsylvania State UP, 2003); more balanced perspective can be found in, D. Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The struggle for cultural supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford UP, 2003).

³ Few notable exceptions include A. Vowinckel, M. Payk and T. Lindenberger, ed., *Cold War Cultures. Perspectives on Eastern and Western European Societies* (New York: Berghahn, 2012); S. Mikkonen and P. Koivunen, ed. *Beyond the Curtain: Entangled Histories of the Cold War-Era Europe* (New York: Berghahn, 2014, forthcoming).

this issue, in turn, focus mostly on these European countries and their viewpoint that has mostly escaped the focus so far. It can also be safely said that these articles are all about countries or people that have formerly been seen as objects of action rather than active subjects.

Reorientation of Cold War studies from superpower relations to intra-European connections during the Cold War era has important repercussions. While there are a plethora of existing studies about relations of different nation-states to other countries, also during the Cold War, these are often nationally-oriented. The problem is that they do not often connect themselves to the wider Cold War picture and by emphasizing bilateral connection miss the point that Cold War era connections were already multilateral by nature. Multilateralism was not multilateralism in the sense we understand it today that there were multiple governments present thinking solutions to common problems. Rather, during the Cold War era, foreign relations in Europe were extremely rarely issues of one country alone, but others need to be taken into account. This problem can be circumvented in many different ways. In this issue, many of the articles already discuss connections beyond the bilateral setting, but multilateralism is taken further as certain themes occur in different articles, providing points of reflection for the points raised in other articles.

By addressing several points of multilateral particularly intra-Europe connections during the Cold War, one of the aims of this issue is to alter the way in which these connections are perceived. In these articles, European countries and peoples appear as independent actors rather than as subordinates to superpower politics. It cannot be denied that the Cold War affected these countries and their people. Yet, while the Cold War studies typically see countries outside the superpowers as subordinates and interprets actions primarily in the framework of the Cold War, perspective is very much different if we move on to use archival materials and testimonies from these countries.⁴ Intra-European relations for them were not often about the Cold War but about normal intercourse between two countries often with shared cultural background and history, thus, with more things in common than separating. There have been national studies suggesting to this direction, but they have too often being sidelined as special cases, exceptions for the rule. Thus, internationally, studies that would escape the Cold War confines have been much fewer.⁵ In many ways, this is unbearable from the European perspective: even if we are talking of European history, it is the Soviet Union and the United States that are interpreted to have been the major players internationally. Undeniable, both countries had intellectual, political, and cultural impact on European countries. Yet, Europe was not a passive recipient,

⁴ M. David-Fox, "The Implications of Transnationalism," *Kritika* 12, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 885–904.

⁵ For one exception about such studies of Cold War Europe, see S. Autio-Sarasmo and K. Miklóssy, *Reassessing Cold War Europe* (London: Routledge, 2011).

but rather an active that left not only national, but an international and transnational mark both within Europe, but also globally.

One more feature comes forth from the articles of this issue that also runs contrary to former suppositions about the Cold War era. It used to be so that the concept of the Cold War itself presupposed that the countries located east of the Iron Curtain were detached from their western neighbors and that these countries have only recently started to become like their western neighbors. All of the articles complicate such picture. It is positively confirmed that the Cold War era saw not only the division of Europe into two warring camps, but that there were also plenty of connections over the so-called Iron Curtain.

It has already been mentioned that this issue comes with a clear European perspective, with only two articles clearly addressing little discussed topics related to Soviet foreign connections. With perspective outside the superpower conflict, the focus becomes subject to qualitative changes. Instead of big political schemes, transnational and other small-scale networks increase in importance. Although the scale of selected individual cases becomes smaller as a result, they have often been much more influencing on individuals than proceedings in the highest political level towards which people are sometimes indifferent or even ignorant.⁶ Furthermore, the cases presented in this issue were rarely isolated, but representative cases that were repeated elsewhere, in other countries, or in different professional networks, sometimes even personal connections. This can be seen in how articles of this issue that deal with different European countries bring forward similar cases even when national settings and cultural contexts are different. As a result, factors that make these countries and people different become less important and similarities are being underlined. This should not be too surprising in Europe where dozens of nations have been living side-by-side for several centuries. Only the last hundred years have seen distinct national borders being established, but still, particularly the Cold War era has been considered as an age of division of Europe, during which Eastern and Western Europe would have grown far apart in a matter of few years. Such division is very much artificial as this issue points out.

One of the aims of this issue, then, is to gap the East-West division set by the traditional Cold War studies. Even if political realities in the early Cold War often distorted geographical and cultural facts, already from the mid-1950s cultural, geographical, and sometimes evens linguistic similarities between European nations supported various kinds of bridge building over the so called Iron Curtain. In many ways, the Iron Curtain was quite real. Even if most Western countries were free in

⁶ U. Hannerz, "The Withering Away of the Nation?" *Ethnos* 58, no. 3–4 (1993), 377–391; M. Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Cornell UP, 1999); S. Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (Cambridge UP, 2011).

their foreign policy, NATO, and sometimes direct U.S. policies, put limits on the movement of people and goods from West to East. Similarly, the Soviet Union strictly guarded other socialist countries and their connections abroad.⁷ Socialist countries were encouraged to be in touch with each other instead of the West that had been for many of these countries the natural direction when seeking foreign contacts.⁸ Thus, it is no wonder that when the Soviet Union relaxed control over Eastern Europe, several countries seized the chance to engage in different kind of interactions with their Western neighbors. Despite limitations being quite real and not vanishing anywhere overnight, they did not prevent all interaction. Some recent studies have shown that the barrier dividing the socialist and capitalist worlds was not fully impervious. Despite seemingly bipolar structure, beneath the surface there were organizations, companies, professional networks, even individuals creating their own networks.⁹ These findings are being reaffirmed in this issue.

The major point of departure during the Cold War era would seem to have taken place around the mid-1950s, after Stalin's death.¹⁰ It is in many ways ironical that when theories of the Cold War were being asserted in the West, and Cold War icons such as the Berlin Wall were still in the future, strictest limitation on travel and interaction over the Iron Curtain were already being lifted. The Soviet Union that had been closed to foreign travel apart from few isolated exceptions since the early 1930s started to open its positions finally in the mid-1950s. In retrospect, this allowed countries in Eastern and Western Europe to start building bridges and connections over the Iron Curtain, even if this was not the original objective of the Soviet Union. While the change after the mid-1950s has been confirmed by many scholars, they have quite often traced the impact of western, typically American culture, on the East. Studies that would examine genuine interaction or the role of socialist countries and societies in this process are much fewer.

⁷ A. Applebaum, *Iron Curtain. The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944–56* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

⁸ A. Gorsuch and D. Koenker, ed., *Socialist Sixties. Crossing Borders in the Second World* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2013).

⁹ G. Péteri, "Nylon Curtain: Transnational and Transsystemic Tendencies in the Cultural Life of State-Socialist Russia and East-Central Europe", *Slavonica* 10, no. 2 (2004): 113–23; Autio-Sarasmo and Miklóssy, *Reassessing Cold War Europe*, 6; M. David-Fox, "The Iron Curtain as Semi-Permeable Membrane. Origins and Demise of the Stalinist Superiority Complex," in *Cold War Crossings: International Travel and Exchange across the Soviet Bloc*, ed. P. Babiracki and K. Zimmer (Texas A&M UP, forthcoming 2014).

¹⁰ See e.g. S. Mikkonen "Winning Hearts and Minds? The Soviet musical intelligentsia in the struggle against the United States during the early Cold War," in *Twentieth Century Music and Politics*, ed. P. Fairclough (Ashgate, 2013).

The Soviet focus and non-focus in the Cold War

Majority of articles in this issue have clear European focus. But the two articles with focus on the Soviet Union reveal some very important points about why socialist countries within the socialist orbit were allowed to pursue policies that were not in the Soviet interests. The sole article of this issue to tackle extra-European connections makes claims that have relevance for this otherwise euro-centric issue. Jeremiah Wishon examines the Soviet-Indian cultural diplomacy after the Second World War up until the late 1960s. First important point is that the turning point in the mid-1950s that started to reverse the stiff bilateralism and slowly gave way to multilateral connections, was from the Soviet point of view something very different. Soviet focus became fixed from the mid-1950s increasingly towards the third world, well beyond Europe. Most of the Eastern Europe was considered by the Soviet Union to be a conquered area. It was the rest of the world, particularly developing nations that were of most interest. Even so, many of the forms of Soviet cultural diplomacy remind those it had formerly used in Europe and towards the United States. Furthermore, Wishon introduces themes brought forward in many of the other articles, those of transnational networks, and links between ideology, identity and foreign policy. In this respect, Wishon's article is a healthy reminder that in Cold War relations, superpowers were influential and should not be completely disregarded, even if their influence was indirect and sometimes contrary to original intentions. Furthermore, Wishon's article is an important addition to another theme in Cold War studies that has been ascendant during the recent years, that of the Third World, developing nations and connections that the Cold War adversaries built towards these relations.

The other article with clear focus on the Soviet Union does not directly examine Soviet Cold War policies, but instead, addresses features that were very important part of the Cold War era interaction over the Iron Curtain. Transnational networks, and the flow of ideas and goods over the Iron Curtain, are in the focus in Dmitry Kozlov's article that discusses how the centuries-long role of seaports persisted even during the Cold War era Soviet Union. Even though the Soviet Union kept its borders tightly controlled since the late 1920s, it still needed its fleet for commercial purposes.¹¹ After the Second World War, commercial fleet had to be expanded drastically. This made Soviet seaports places where access to rest of the world was different from other parts of the country. Kozlov's article makes an important reminder that while connections to foreign countries are often considered to be unevenly distributed along the center-

¹¹ Limitations and exceptions of western travel are discussed e.g. in M. David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to Soviet Russia, 1921–1941* (Oxford UP, 2011); on drastic changes that took place after the mid-1950s, see e.g. A. Gorsuch, *All This is Your World. Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad after Stalin* (Oxford UP, 2011).

periphery axis, we have borders areas, but also seaports that may have unusual accesses abroad. Kozlov discusses how different goods, practices and ideas moved along with Soviet ships and seamen to people living in cities with big harbors pointing out that the patterns of succumbing to western consumerist standards were common throughout Europe, even in the Soviet Union.

Scholarly networks transcending ideological borders

One recurrent theme in several articles of this volume that certainly deserves increasing attention from the academe is scholarly connections and their important role in building transnational networks beyond the Cold War setting. In her article, Leena Riska-Campbell brings forward an example of US bridge building that was not bilateral, nor directed towards the Soviet Union or any particular country in Eastern Europe. Typically, the United States is seen to be occupied with Vietnam in its foreign policy in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, as Riska-Campbell points out, administration of the US President Johnson started a policy that was multilateral by nature, attempting to bring together its efforts with European nations, both East and West, aiming at something completely new. This new approach led eventually to one of the most successful examples of East-West scholarly interaction in the form of the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA). Naturally, there were national security calculations involved in its establishment, but even so the case of IIASA reveals that US officials left quite a lot of room to maneuver to non-American players. Perhaps even more importantly, Riska-Campbell's case reveals how different American objectives were even from those of the Western European countries. Negotiations that eventually led to the establishment of IIASA did not only involve difficult negotiations with the socialist countries, but also with Western European countries. In many ways, IIASA was an early representative of what was to become a new normal towards the end of the Cold War.

Different priorities and aims set for scholarly connections between western European countries are further emphasized by Beatrice Scutaru's article discussing cultural diplomacy between Romania and France. Her focus is on the French teaching and the role of language teachers as cultural intermediaries. Unlike the United States that did not consider it important to build scholarly or scientific connections with the socialist sphere, which it felt had little to give, France was very early on active in this field. Furthermore, France emphasized humanities and the role of culturally oriented sciences. While France has sometimes been considered to be a special case among the Western countries in that it was rather autonomous in its foreign policy, also towards the Soviet Union, there has been surprisingly little research done on the connections between France and East European nations. This has been despite the fact that France had had very close ties to many of these countries before the Second World

War and it attempted to re-establish these connections immediately after the Second World War. When it became possible after the mid-1950s to rebuild cultural and scholarly connections, French seem to have immediately seized the opportunity as is suggested by Scutaru.

But successes were not without failures and sometimes international politics came in the way of science. In his article, Timo Vilen discusses such intersections of politics and science, which were in few areas as visible as in the field of Soviet studies, or Sovietology, referring to study of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was naturally loath to give any other country than itself the right to make interpretations about what the Soviet Union was. But while the Soviet Studies were in many ways an American Cold War creation, many active scholars also attempted to reach over the Iron Curtain, not least in order to get more knowledge. But instead of concentrating on the US Sovietology of which there are already good studies, Vilen focuses on the fate of Soviet studies in Finland. As a western democracy neighboring the Soviet Union Finland had potential to become a major player in the field Soviet studies. But political realities on both sides of the Iron Curtain cut short the development of Sovietology in Finland. Scholarly connections, then, potentially broke Cold War bilateralism, but they could as well fall victim to it as Vilen has pointed out.

Arts pioneering people-to-people connections

An important feature in intra-European Cold War era connections was that many of the most important connections were often non-governmental, operating beneath, or outside the government sphere. As for the Soviet Union, which aimed at using culture and cultural influencing to reach foreign political objectives, there was also the other direction which involved a flow of western influences to the Soviet Union. Sometimes it has been quite simplistically presented that the Soviet leaders simply tried to minimize western influences and prevent everything western from reaching the country. But two articles of this issue complicate this picture and point out that Soviet leaders after Stalin resorted to selective policies, encouraging influences considered less harmful and preventing others from reaching the Soviet Union.

Research on the role of arts can said to have led the breakthrough of cultural aspects in Cold War studies. Indeed, research on artistic connections, on movement of artists and on particular artworks has had a pioneering role in many ways. But when it comes to artistic influences, most of the attention has been put on the so-called dissident art in the Soviet Union, underground artists who were supposedly anti-Soviet. Much less attention has been given to how the Soviet art establishment reacted to the flow of western influences, and on their implications. Typically, Soviet art criticism is connected to Stalin-era Zhdanovshchina and to complete denial of western influences despite the fact that Stalin's death inaugurated a Thaw in the artistic world.

Indeed, there were several different stages in how the Soviet art establishment received western art currents. Kirill Chunikhin aims at filling this gap and presents a valuable overview on how western art was received in the Soviet Union until the end of the Cold War.

In his article about two Italian Communist authors that were favorably received in the Soviet Union, Duccio Colombo joins the vein of new research in which cultural connections are seen as important. Furthermore, instead of looking at the impact of superpowers on smaller European nations, Colombo examines how supposed ideological ties between Italian and Soviet communists enabled western authors to become acceptable for the Soviet Union. Cases chosen by Colombo are intriguing, with childrens' writer Gianni Rodari being first and foremost a western author and only secondly a communist, but the latter being the crucial element in his becoming acceptable for the Soviet leadership. In Colombo's other case, a Georgian-born film director Tamara Lisitzian who moved from Italy back to the Soviet Union became an important cultural mediator. She not only brought several Italian films to the Soviet Union, but also directed her own films based on Italian Rodari's works. Furthermore, Lisitzian even took Rodari's nonconformist ideas further suggesting that the role of cultural intermediaries was a very important role in how ideas were conveyed over the Iron Curtain.

New approaches to dissident networks

In the final section of this issue we have two articles that discuss the role of dissidents in the developments in the socialist area. Dissidence was a recurrent theme in the traditional Cold War studies. The United States aimed at influencing particularly Eastern Europe through different means and raise dissidence. This was logically followed by studies which sought signs of dissidence, its scope, and evaluating effectiveness of different means being used. After the fall of communism, especially in former People's democracies, there have been rows of memoirs by former dissidents and people that worked towards instigating dissidence.

Thus, while research on dissidents has often been conducted from the western point of view, emphasizing the US strategies, recent years have seen an increasing amount of research based on materials found from the countries where dissidence took place.

In this sense, Alexandra Tianu's article on the transnational networks of dissidents in the Eastern Central European states and her evaluation about how influential western ideas and influences eventually were on their thinking is highly welcome. Tianu suggests that instead of the remote United States, it was neighboring West Germany and Austria that provided the most fertile intellectual background for dissidents in the East. Thus, in order to understand how dissidence networks

operated, we should not be looking as much towards the United States, but rather to intra-European affairs where governments were not as actively involved, but instead, it was people building transnational networks.

Audrone Januzyte makes a similar case in regards to religion. So far, the important role of religion in the Cold War era has primarily been emphasized in personal memoirs. In the research, however, the role of religion has been much less in the focus. The political activity of the Polish pope John Paul the Second has often been mentioned, but the everyday life of religiously active people is still mostly missing. Yet, religion was early on considered by communists as one of the most hostile elements of the old rule after the October Revolution that had to be eliminated. In this sense, Januzyte tackles a topic that has been long overdue. In her article, religion is discussed as a form of dissidence, not necessarily to the political rule, but its ideological repercussions. Januzyte concentrates on Lithuania that was the only Soviet republic with a Roman Catholic majority, and moreover with more religious people than generally in the Soviet Union. This makes Lithuania a distinct area within the Soviet Union. In the case of Lithuania, religious contacts provided the core channel for transnational networks, and informal connections abroad. Even if religious connections abroad had to be conducted underground, there were multilayered objectives related to this activity that Januzyte addresses in her article.