

Sino-Soviet relations, 1949-70

Why did the comrades fall out?

Key concept

Change and continuity

Before you read this

Check what the USSR did to help Mao before 1949. How was this likely to affect relations between the two superpowers?

The Cold War confrontation between the USA and the USSR has had the unfortunate consequence of obscuring other conflicts. Notably the US/USSR standoff has overshadowed the troubled relationship between the USSR and China between 1949 and 1970. The Sino-Soviet split was one of the key events of the Cold War. The gradual deterioration in the relationship between the Soviets and the West is easy to understand, given the ideological gulf, the struggle for supremacy and the fear and misunderstandings of each other. The acrimony and hostility that developed between the Chinese and Soviet Communist parties is more difficult to explain. Why did two powers ostensibly committed to the same goal of ridding the world of capitalism and imperialism, united by the same ideology of Marxism-Leninism and both members of the socialist bloc of states, almost end up at war in 1969?

The question of interpretation

The breakdown, as with most family feuds, occurred gradually, albeit with key flashpoints. We will look at these in a little more detail below. First, we need to outline the four main views that have been put forward to explain why this breakdown occurred.

■ The first explanation sees the breakdown arising out of ideological differences over the correct

interpretation of Marxism-Leninism, which turned into a contest for the political and ideological leadership of the socialist bloc.

■ The second explanation sees it in more traditional terms, essentially as a power struggle between the two states.

■ The third explanation focuses more on the individuals, notably Mao Zedong, Stalin and Khrushchev, highlighting the personal suspicion and antipathy between them.

■ The final explanation sees this as an evolving process, caused by the unequal terms of the original treaty drawn up in 1950.

Let us turn now to examine the key moments between 1949 and 1970.

A bad start?

It should have been a major landmark for global communism. The victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in October 1949 seemed to confirm that the triumph of socialism and the downfall of capitalism were inevitable. The Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) now had a significant ally in its global contest with capitalism. The joint resources of the two Communist states amounted to a potentially enormous force — military, ideological, economic, political — to advance the international revolution. So what went wrong?

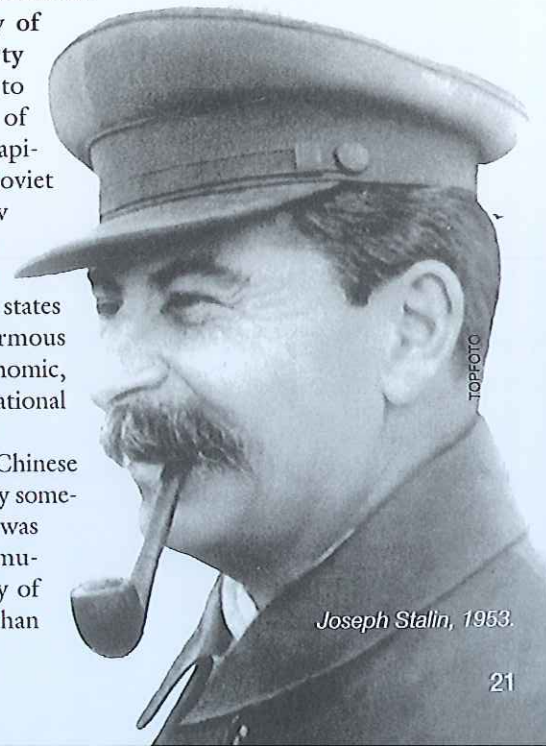
The relationship between the Chinese and Soviet Communists was already somewhat strained before 1949. Stalin was suspicious of the Chinese Communists. Their revolutionary strategy of relying on the peasantry (rather than

Marxism-Leninism:

term coined in USSR post-Lenin to describe Stalin's philosophy of the Russian revolution, combining Marx's analysis of capitalism (as inevitably falling) with Lenin's doctrine of revolutionary activism (to speed the advent of inevitable failure).

victory of the Chinese

Communist Party: the CCP, formed in 1919 and, aided by the USSR until 1927, was intermittently in conflict with the Chinese Nationalists, who governed China 1911-49.



Joseph Stalin, 1953.

Japanese occupiers: in 1931 Japan invaded Manchuria in northern China. The Japanese forces advanced down the eastern coast of China. In 1936 the CCP forced Chiang Kai-shek (the Chinese government's leader) to agree to combined opposition to Japan's advance, thus precipitating the Japanese attack on Chinese forces at the Marco Polo Bridge in 1937 and the onset of full-scale hostilities in the Second World War's Asian theatre.

1945 Soviet-Kuomintang Treaty of Friendship and Alliance: something of a misnomer. While it granted Soviet economic concessions and defence facilities to the Chinese, the Soviets used it to justify stripping Manchuria of much of its industrial machinery (resisted unsuccessfully by the Chinese). Also the Soviets gave captured Japanese weapons to the CCP.

the workers) to overthrow the ruling elites was at odds with the Soviet model of revolution. In addition, the sense of independence the CCP acquired in their struggle against both the Japanese occupiers and the Chinese nationalists aroused fears in Stalin that the CCP might not be easy to control once in power. Even after the war, Stalin continued to keep Mao at arm's length. Between 1947 and 1949, Mao requested three times to meet with Stalin and was refused each time. Eventually, under pressure from the new CCP government, the Soviet ambassador in Beijing set up a meeting. On 6 December 1949, Mao boarded a train for Moscow.

The negotiations for the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance began on 20 January 1950. Mao wanted military security against US attack, economic assistance to build socialism and the repudiation of the 1945 Soviet-Kuomintang Treaty of Friendship and Alliance and its replacement with a new Sino-Soviet treaty. Stalin was looking for loyalty (personal, political and ideological) from Mao, particularly in presenting a united front against the USA, and also some territorial concessions in Manchuria.

The outcome was that the Soviets promised economic, trade, technological and military support and advisers to the Chinese (although much less than the Chinese wanted). The Chinese acknowledged Soviet leadership of the global communist movement, and committed themselves to adopting the Soviet model of economic and political development. However, the Soviets insisted on territorial concessions in Manchuria and Xinjiang. The unequal nature of this treaty, and Stalin's tactics in driving for territorial concessions, brought mistrust and suspicion into the relationship. The cracks in the Sino-Soviet alliance were there right from the start.

Questions

- To what extent does the Sino-Soviet split suggest that nationalism was more important to Communist leaders than Marxism-Leninism?
- If peaceful coexistence was possible with the West, why was it not an option for the Russians and Chinese?
- If it was such a short step from a war of words to actual conflict, why did the two sides not take it?

The ideological contest

The first signs of a rift emerged in the field of ideology. Both the CCP and the CPSU were committed believers in Marxism-Leninism. They wanted to construct socialism and communism in their own nations, and to establish communism globally. Ideology should have provided a common language and framework for action. However, it did not. This was mainly because it was ambiguous in one key area: *how* to build communism nationally and globally. The initial disagreement came in 1955, when the Chinese, faced with economic problems, wanted to revert to the rapid economic development policies that Stalin used in the 1930s, by pushing ahead with rapid industrialisation and collectivisation concurrently. The Soviets were opposed to the policy which became known as the Great Leap Forward (1958-60). It was an abject failure, and the Soviets withdrew their economic advisers from China in 1960.

Further ideological disagreements followed. When Khrushchev got up at the Twentieth

Key points

- The context of the pre-1949 relationship is important in understanding why the Soviets and Chinese quickly began to distrust each other after 1949. (*Continuity:* the relationship between the two communist states was affected by the previous 20 years of history.)
- The split was exacerbated by the personalities of the leaders involved, who were unable to develop constructive working relationships. This was especially true of Mao and Khrushchev during the key years 1956-60. (*Change:* the successive changes of leader in Moscow in the period 1949-69 meant that there was little consistency of approach.)
- Although the two states shared a common set of beliefs and values about the present and the future, ideology proved to be a major factor in creating division. It was vague about how to bring about change, which created the opportunity for disagreement. It also spoke in dogmatic terms, which made compromise difficult to achieve. (*Change:* Marxism-Leninism was constantly being updated and reinterpreted, which created competition as to who had the right interpretation.)
- The emergence of a new bloc of socialist states after 1945 created the need for a leader. The growing gap between the USSR and China meant that their rivalry spilled over into a determination to attract allies from the socialist countries, deepening and broadening the split. (*Change:* the new international situation caused new ways of acting and thinking.)
- The Chinese desire to achieve nuclear capability in order to ensure its security made the Soviets increasingly wary of the Chinese threat. (*Change:* the Chinese became more than just an ideological and political threat when they acquired nuclear weapons.)
- The border issues between the two states had been unresolved since before 1917 and continued to act as a shadow on the relationship after 1949. (*Continuity:* hangovers from the past weighed heavily on the present at times.)

Congress of the CPSU in February 1956 and delivered a 4-hour condemnation of Stalin, the Chinese reacted negatively. They argued that Khrushchev had betrayed the faith, and was in danger of lapsing into revisionism (a deadly sin in the world of Marxism-Leninism). They were critical because they believed that Khrushchev's attacks on Stalin's cult of personality were indirectly aimed at Mao too. Mao and the Chinese decided to defend Stalin, and in so doing to oppose all of Khrushchev's ideological innovations. This led to the third disagreement, over Khrushchev's desire to promote peaceful coexistence with the capitalist powers. The Chinese favoured a more militant, confrontational approach to international relations, and condemned Khrushchev as having reneged on a central plank of Marxist-Leninist ideology: the worldwide struggle to overthrow capitalism.

By 1960, the two Communist states were on divergent rather than convergent paths. The Chinese desire for self-reliance and independence could not be reconciled with Moscow's desire for ideological and political pre-eminence in the socialist bloc. Two key issues drove them even further apart between 1960 and 1969: nuclear weapons and the competition for socialist support.

Nuclear weapons

China began the programme to develop nuclear weapons capability in 1953, using Soviet technology and advisers. In mid-1957, the Chinese and the Soviets signed an agreement which was supposed to see the Soviets supply missiles, a sample atomic bomb, and help for the Chinese to build their own bomb. In 1959, the Chinese said that Moscow had failed to keep its side of the bargain. When Moscow withdrew its advisers in 1960, the Chinese pressed ahead with developing their own bomb. The motivation was clear: to break the US-Soviet monopoly on nuclear weapons, provide security for China and raise its international prestige.

Progress was rapid. By October 1964, the Chinese had exploded their first atomic bomb. The first nuclear missile was launched in October 1966, and the first hydrogen bomb was exploded in June 1967. The Soviets were now faced with a socialist nuclear rival. The Chinese were not only increasingly ideologically independent of the USSR, but they were also able to show a military and strategic independence from Moscow.

Competition for allies

The Chinese and the Soviets both tried to persuade other states to join their 'gang', and so build a powerful bloc. The Chinese initially received support only from the maverick socialist state of Albania. But after the November 1960 Moscow conference of Communist parties, China attempted

Weblink

The Marxists website has a useful essay on the split at: <http://marxists.anu.edu.au/subject/stalinism/origins-future/ch3-1.htm> and a full definition at: www.marxists.org/glossary/events/s/i.htm.

You can read a transcript of Khrushchev and Mao's conversations at: www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~johnston/Mao-Khrushchev.pdf (just skip the long introduction) and you can see their statements laid out side by side at: www.osaarchivum.org/files/holdings/300/8/3/text/75-2-205.shtml.

Take a look also at the Cold War International History Project at: www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=topics.home&topic_id=1409.

revisionism: deemed by Soviets as a serious heresy within Communist ideology. Lenin described it as 'opposition to Marxism from within Marxism itself', i.e. a critical reinterpretation and partial rejection of Marxist theories in order to accommodate alternative theories of socialism/communism.

peaceful coexistence: coined by Trotsky in 1917, it described coming to terms with Marxism-Leninism's failure to encompass worldwide Communist revolution by coexisting with capitalism in world affairs.

to recruit other socialist states and non-ruling Communist parties to its line. The Burmese and Malayan Communist parties quickly followed the Albanians. In 1963, it was revealed that China had been engaging in secret (albeit unsuccessful) diplomacy to lure Poland, Hungary and East Germany away from the USSR. In 1964, Romania adopted a neutral position in the Sino-Soviet conflict.

This spilled over into relations with countries of the developing world. Beijing was increasingly critical of Soviet involvement in the struggle of the developing nations against the colonial powers. In particular, Mao criticised the meekness of Soviet actions in Algeria during the 1954-62 Algerian

China explodes its first hydrogen bomb, 17 June 1967.



Prague Spring: in early 1968 Czech premier Alexander Dubček and his government sought to relax the more totalitarian effects of Communist rule, while maintaining the supremacy of Communist ideology. Soviet leader Brezhnev ordered Soviet tanks to invade Czechoslovakia on 20/21 August to restore Soviet supremacy.

Ussuri River: borders the two countries. Both had concentrations of forces along the river.

War of Independence against the French, and the continued involvement of the Soviets in Vietnam (see TWENTIETH CENTURY HISTORY REVIEW Vol. 2, No. 1). The Chinese criticised Soviet actions, accusing them of colluding with the Americans and acting in a neo-imperialist manner. This criticism was repeated when the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia in August 1968 to crush the Prague Spring. The Sino-Soviet split was threatening to divide the entire socialist bloc in two.

Territorial disputes and armed clashes

The issue which brought the two states into direct conflict was that of border disputes. In March 1963, Beijing indicated that it wanted large chunks of Siberia and central Asia back, territory it claimed had been lost in tsarist times through unequal treaties which had favoured European powers.

When it proved impossible to resolve these border disputes via negotiation, the Soviets began a long arms build-up on the Chinese border, especially in Mongolia. In March 1969, open



A Soviet border guard watches Chinese troop movements across the frozen Ussuri River, 1969.

conflict broke out when the Chinese ambushed a Soviet patrol on the Ussuri river. The Soviets retaliated and killed 800 Chinese soldiers. Armed clashes continued, with the main one occurring on 13 August at Dzungarian gate. Moscow began making noises about the threat of a nuclear strike against China, and the Chinese government began making preparations for the 'inevitable' war with the USSR, moving whole sections of the population away from the border and into the Chinese interior. It appears that the Soviets' plans for a nuclear strike against China were much more developed than their plans for a strike against the USA.

The two states pulled back from the brink of war in September when the Soviet prime minister (Alexei Kosygin) travelled to Beijing for secret talks with his Chinese counterpart Zhou Enlai. They agreed to resume border negotiations. Although diplomatic hostilities continued, the immediate threat of all-out war had disappeared.

Conclusion

So why was there this schism between the CCP and the CPSU? Clearly over the 20 years after 1949, specific incidents — personality clashes (particularly between Mao and Khrushchev), unforeseen actions (as when Rodion Malinowski insulted Mao while drunk in November 1964) and border disputes — were important in worsening relations, but they were catalysts, rather than causes of this conflict. Two explanations seem to be crucial.

First, there were the contrasting expectations and attitudes surrounding the initial treaty in 1949/50. In 1950, the USSR was on the way to becoming a global superpower. It sat at the centre of a web of socialist states. China was just another ally, and one which was expected to show loyalty

Sino-Soviet split chronology

1 October 1949	Chinese Revolution brings Mao and CCP to power. People's Republic of China is born.
14 February 1950	Soviet-Chinese Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance.
25 June 1950	Korean War begins.
5 March 1953	Stalin dies.
1954	Khrushchev visits China.
25 February 1956	Khrushchev denounces Stalin in a 4-hour secret speech at Twentieth Congress of Soviet Communist Party.
1956	Onset of policy of destalinisation, including recognition of national roads to communism and peaceful coexistence with the West.
1958	Great Leap Forward begins. Soviets critical of Chinese economic policies.
1959	Soviets refuse to support Chinese in their border row with India.
June 1960	Row breaks out at Congress of Romanian Communist Party. Split comes into the open.
July 1960	Soviet Union withdraws economic and technical advisers from China.
November 1960	Moscow conference of 81 Communist parties.
1962	Mao criticises Khrushchev for backing down over the Cuban Missile Crisis.
16 November 1964	China tests its first atomic bomb.
January 1967	Red Guards surround Soviet embassy in Beijing during Cultural Revolution.
August 1968	Soviets crush Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia and Chinese accuse them of 'imperialism'.
1969	Border clashes between China and USSR.

and subordinate its interests to those of the USSR. For China, this treaty was the key moment in its early history. China expected to be treated as an equal, but instead was forced to recognise Soviet leadership, and yield territory. The next 20 years were spent trying to restore parity.

Second, there was ideology. The leadership of the socialist bloc was exercised by the state which had the authority derived from being the 'official' interpreter of Marxism-Leninism. When disputes arose, the conflict quickly became an ideological struggle. Which state was the true Marxist-Leninist one? Both claimed that their model of building socialism was the proper Marxist-Leninist one, and called on the other states to follow its road. Ideology created an unbridgeable gulf, affording no possibility of compromise. You were either a Marxist-Leninist or a revisionist. In spite of the fact that all the Communist states shared a common worldview and a common objective of building communism, their ideology actually produced disunity, division and conflict. From this point on, it was only a short step from a war of words to actual conflict.

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Further reading

Chung, J. and Halliday, J. (2005) *Mao: The Unknown Story*, Knopf. A controversial but compelling biography of Mao.

Ellison, H. J. (1982) *The Sino-Soviet Conflict: A Global Perspective*, University of Washington Press. A comprehensive text, if slightly dated, covering the conflict and its repercussions elsewhere.

Kennedy-Pipe, C. (1998) *Russia and the World 1917-1991*, Arnold. Excellent survey of Soviet foreign relations, including the debates with the Chinese.

Luthi, L. (2008) *Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World*, Princeton University Press. A detailed piece, outlining that ideology was crucial in bringing about the split between China and the USSR.

Ross, R. (1993) *China, the United States and the Soviet Union: Tripolarity and Policy-making in the Cold War*, Sharpe. An interesting piece which examines the three powers and their interrelationships.

Service, R. (2007) *Comrades: A History of World Communism*, Harvard University Press. A relatively balanced account of the global communist movement.

Taubmann, W. (2003) *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era*, Norton. Comprehensive biography which deals well with the human dimension of the Mao and Khrushchev relationship.

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