



ARTICLE

Socialist Intermediaries: The Institutions and Practices of Transnational Communism

Intermediaries as Change Agents: Translating, Interpreting, and Expanding Socialism

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The last decade has witnessed immense growth in the study of the Soviet Union and the world. The transnational wave is still cresting and new geographies have opened alongside new analytical paradigms.¹ The Russian Revolution is now inseparable from its global reverberations.² The closed Moscow of the 1930s has become cosmopolitan.³ Instead of a bipolar struggle we have a “global cold war” with flash points and opportunities for actors across the Global South.⁴ The Iron Curtain has become a “semi-permeable membrane.”⁵ Globalization had a “red” counterpart, linking the “Second” and “Third” worlds.⁶ And “socialist internationalism” was entangled with an array of competing

¹ David Priestland, *The Red Flag: A History of Communism* (New York, 2010); David C. Engerman, “The Second World’s Third World,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12:1 (2011): 183–211; Constantin Iordachi and Péter Apor, “Studying Communist Dictatorship: From Comparative to Transnational History,” *East Central Europe* 40 (2013): 1–35; Brigitte Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians* (New York, 2015); Talbot C. Imlay, *The Practice of Socialist Internationalism. European Socialists and International Politics, 1914–1960* (Oxford, 2018).

² Aadeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR* (Ithaca, 2019); Tatiana Linkhoeva, *Revolution Goes East: Imperial Japan and Soviet Communism* (Ithaca, 2020); and Alexey Golubev and Irina Takala, *The Search for a Socialist El Dorado: Finnish Immigration to Soviet Karelia from the United States and Canada in the 1930s* (East Lansing, 2014).

³ Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge, MA, 2011).

⁴ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York, 2007); Tobias Rupprecht, *Soviet Internationalism after Stalin: Interaction and Exchange between the USSR and Latin America during the Cold War* (Cambridge, England, 1997); Robert J. McMahon, *The Cold War in the Third World* (Oxford, 2013); Ali Raza, *Revolutionary Past: Communist Internationalism in Colonial India* (New York, 2020); Nana Osei-Opare, “Uneasy Comrades: Postcolonial Statecraft, Race, and Citizenship, Ghana-Soviet Relations, 1957–1966,” *Journal of West African History* 5:2 (2019).

⁵ Michael David-Fox, “The Iron Curtain as Semi-Permeable Membrane: The Origins and Demise of the Stalinist Superiority Complex,” in *Cold War Crossings: International Travel and Exchange Across the Soviet Bloc, 1940s–1960s*, ed. Patryk Babiracki and K. Zimmer (College Station, 2014); Jonathan Valdez, *Internationalism and the Ideology of Soviet Influence in Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, England, 1993); Patryk Babiracki and Austin Jersild, eds., *Socialist Internationalism in the Cold War: Exploring the Second World* (Cham, 2016).

⁶ Oscar Sanchez-Sibony, *Red Globalization: The Political Economy of the Soviet Cold War from Stalin to Khrushchev* (New York, 2014); James Mark et al., eds., *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World* (Bloomington, 2020); Elidor Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World* (Ithaca, 2017); Theodora Dragostinova, *The Cold War from the Margins: A Small Socialist State on the Global Cultural Scene* (Ithaca, 2021).

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global projects.⁷ A student wishing to study Africa's engagement with the Soviet Union, for example, now has a wealth of new approaches to inform and inspire.⁸

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022—launched while this thematic cluster was mid-revision—has rocked the historical field. It is too early to know whether we have entered a new historiographical moment, but calls to “de-colonize” the field promise to bring new scrutiny to the “imperial turn,” while creating new urgency for national frames not only in Ukraine but Central Asia and elsewhere.⁹ Some might suggest that the very framing of “transnationalism” provides a naturalizing veil for Soviet empire-building.¹⁰

In light of recent events, is a coherent picture of the Soviet Union and the world even possible? Scholarship under the banner of Soviet empire, Soviet nationality policy, and socialist internationalism and transnationalism has illuminated an array of geographies and spanned each decade of the twentieth century. How can one draw connections among the *eras* of transnational activity? And how can one build on the insights of the imperial frame without being regarded as empire's handmaiden?

To integrate the discreet eras of transnational socialism and to offer a useful frame for further study, we propose a focus on actors, practices, and modes to trace how nebulous terms like “socialist internationalism” actually functioned and changed over time. Although all four articles in this cluster have at least one foot in the Soviet context, we choose the term “socialist” in the hope that this framework may be instructive for a broader geography of socialist states and movements. We propose the term “socialist mediation”—embodied by “socialist intermediaries”—as a fruitful framework for elucidating the characteristic practices and tensions inherent in transnational Communism and as a conceptual bridge to link its discrete eras.¹¹ As these articles suggest, a biographical sensitivity is often suited to reveal the diverse ways individuals interpreted, translated, and transformed socialism and its emergent institutions in new contexts. By the same token, this approach permits a vantage from which to appreciate transnational socialism's flexible but frequently precarious reliance on its intermediaries.

What is meant by “socialist intermediary” and where does the term originate? As we elaborate below, we have in mind those individuals summoned—by vocation or by circumstance—to pursue the interests of socialism to novel, transnational, and transcultural audiences. Their experiences are characterized by three recurrent dynamics: the combined tension of privilege and vulnerability inherent among imperial intermediaries; the imperative to interpret and translate socialism, often in heterogeneous ways, in contrast to imperfect synonyms like “representatives” or “transmitters” of socialism; and the pursuit of transformation. In their most extreme form, socialist intermediaries pursued something akin to spiritual conversion and, in a lesser register, promoted “mere” cultural

⁷ Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin, eds., *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge, England, 2017); Timothy Nunan, “‘Neither East Nor West,’ Neither Liberal Nor Illiberal? Iranian Islamist Internationalism in the 1980s,” *Journal of World History* 31:2 (2020): 43–77.

⁸ Vladimir Gennadyevich Shubin, *The Hot “Cold War”: The USSR in Southern Africa* (London, 2008); Maxim Matushevich, “Journeys of Hope: African Diaspora and the Soviet Society,” *African Diaspora* 1 (2008): 57–58; Sergey Mazov, *A Distant Front in the Cold War: The USSR in West Africa and the Congo, 1956–1964* (Stanford, 2010); Irina Filatova and Apollon Davidson, *The Hidden Thread: Russia and South Africa in the Soviet Era* (Johannesburg, 2013); Priya Lal, *African Socialism in Postcolonial Tanzania: Between the Village and the World* (Cambridge, England, 2015); Lukas Stanek, *Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War* (Princeton, 2020); Hilary Lynd and Thom Loyd, “Histories of Color: Blackness and Africanness in the Soviet Union,” *Slavic Review* 81:2 (2022): 394–417.

⁹ Botakoz Kassymbekova, “On Decentering Soviet Studies and Launching New Conversations,” *Ab Imperio* 1 (2022): 115–20.

¹⁰ The long and complex genealogy of the concept of “the Russian world” (*russkii mir*), its post-Soviet reactivation and intensive politicization, and its assiduous state-sponsored promotion in Putin's Russia as “a global project” is relevant in this respect. See the Russian World Foundation (Фонд “Русский мир”) at <http://www.russkiymir.ru/russkiymir/en/fund/about>. It would be an important scholarly endeavor to assess the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the official—political or journalistic—discourses on the “Russian world” and the new practices associated with it.

¹¹ The usage of the terms “communist” or “socialist” has been a matter of continuous debate. Here we employ the broader “socialist” to refer to the variety of Marxist-inspired movements, regimes, and practices, whereas we use “Communist” to denote strictly the parties and states which used the term as a self-ascribed category, or to refer to the final stage of socialist development in Marxist philosophy.



change, but in all cases these pursuits stood in contrast to narrow policy outcomes or superficial realignments.

INTERMEDIARIES AS DESIGNATED SUBJECTS OF STUDY EMERGE FROM IMPERIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY. Although the term was perennial topic of inquiry, Frederick Cooper and Jane Burbank's *Empires in World History* (2010) elevated it to new visibility, where imperial intermediaries played key roles in establishing and maintaining an empire's "rule of difference."¹² For Burbank and Cooper imperial rule is inseparable from a reliance on intermediaries due to its inexorable state of expansion. This centrifugal movement inherently stretches the social fabric of an empire's dominant or titular group, which cannot be dispatched infinitely, hence the reliance on designated representatives. Among the paradigmatic intermediaries they cite are indigenous conquered elites, colonial settlers, and slaves. They demonstrate how imperial states balance "incentives" and "discipline" for intermediaries, highlighting the inherent tension of imperial rule that, at best, produces "contingent accommodation" between the state and its agents, whose relative autonomy inevitably creates "subversive possibilities."¹³

Scholars of Eurasian empires have noted that intermediaries were often selected from among diasporas, creating a dynamic that informs our understanding of socialist intermediaries. Intermediary communities developed in symbiosis with their host states, profiting from their alterity while being subject to restrictions. In the Ottoman context Phanariot Greeks became diplomats and Balkan Christian slaves became Janissaries.¹⁴ Armenian traders extended networks across the Russian, Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires. Imperial intermediaries can be thought of as embodying the "legal pluralism" of imperial rule, whose particular arrangement of privilege and obligation is especially stark.¹⁵ According to Yuri Slezkine, an empire's intermediaries lived by their "wit, craft, and art" rather than by direct production, confining their "*raison d'être* [to] the maintenance of difference, the conscious preservation of the self and thus of strangeness," especially preserved via practices like dietary law and endogamy.¹⁶ Natalie Rothman cautions against assuming intermediaries to be inherently in-between figures, hence her attention to their own rhetoric and embeddedness in institutions that enable their activity.¹⁷ In turn, we note that socialist intermediaries often shared this imperative to preserve their distinctions, especially because entry into their rank was more voluntary than heritable under Soviet conditions.¹⁸ Even Erik Scott's Georgians as "familiar strangers" forms a novel hybrid of voluntary and heritable mediation in the Soviet context, requiring performance no less than passport nationality. In short, imperial intermediaries are not simply born; they are made via institutions and self-fashioning.

The above discussion has focused on the positionality of socialist intermediaries, but we must also clarify the nature of socialist translation and interpretation.

We note that much scholarly attention to the precarity of group boundaries has been explicitly and implicitly informed by Bruno Latour, whose notion to "reassemble the social" would place intermediaries at the cusp of novel "associations."¹⁹ The perceived incommensurability between cultures opened spaces for intermediaries to interpret and translate, and thereby articulate new connections or reinforce existing ones. In his elegant discussion of *tongchi* interpreters, the Muslim subjects of Xinjiang trained in Confucian schools who mediated local Muslims' interactions with the Qing administration, Eric Schluessel observes actors "endowed with the capacity to translate what they

¹² Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, 2010).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁴ Christine Philliou, *Biography of an Empire: Governing Ottomans in an Age of Revolution* (Berkeley, 2011); Constantin Iordachi, *Liberalism, Constitutional Nationalism, and Minorities: The Making of Romanian Citizenship, c. 1750–1918* (Leiden, 2019).

¹⁵ Jane Burbank, "An Imperial Rights Regime: Law and Citizenship in the Russian Empire," *Kritika* 7:3 (2006): 397–431.

¹⁶ Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, 2004), 7–8, 19.

¹⁷ E. Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empire: Trans-imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul* (Ithaca, 2014), 4, 5.

¹⁸ Erik Scott, *Familiar Strangers: The Georgian Diaspora and the Evolution of Soviet Empire* (Oxford, 2016).

¹⁹ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York, 2005).



transport, to redefine it, redeploy it, and also to betray it.”²⁰ Their ability to exploit the “information gap” between Muslims and the state provoked resentment from both sides. Schluessel argues that the tongchi’s “constant motion across a gap between two modes of representation drew attention to the difference between them,” which ultimately worked to undermine the very purpose of Confucian schools: namely, to produce “agents of transformation” and inculcate Confucian values on the colonial frontier.²¹ This is a sobering assessment of the intermediary vocation for the imperial center.

Although varying by degrees, an agenda of transformation was implicit in much modern imperial mediation, whether to make imperial subjects Russian, Confucian, “civilized,” or some other formulation. However, as is generally agreed, in most colonial empires this mission was highly contingent, hidden, or poorly supported. Its pace was glacial—often purposefully so. With the champions of socialism, however, the transformative agenda tended to be explicit, urgent, and institutionally supported. Therefore, instead of a static picture such as Qing Xinjiang, in which boundaries between groups may have hardened, we find a dynamic picture of change, characterized by interpretation and translation, to be sure, but also going much further, into pleading, hectoring, and even violence. This was not the gradual change promised for colonial subjects of dubious readiness for new civilization. Rather, this was the urgent task of sharing the universal truth to an audience who should not be made to linger in darkness.

This language often took religious overtones. And while the application of the concept of “political religion” to the study of socialism remains controversial, the debate’s very endurance is at least one indicator that the framework of socialism as a *revolutionary faith* has analytical relevance.²² In turn, socialism’s protean nature as underground ideology, revolutionary faith, and later, regime type, rendered it a distinctive sort of diplomacy. Soviet socialist intermediaries were not simply diplomats pursuing state interests but, oftentimes, prophets seeking converts. Particularly in the early days of the Russian conspiratorial underground and in the heady years of revolution, socialism’s emissaries sought not mere negotiation nor diplomatic recognition but rather to dismantle international boundaries. And even as the Soviet Union’s foreign relations normalized in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the pilot light of socialism as a political faith was never extinguished. To consider the range of endeavors commonly labeled “socialist internationalism” in the postwar era as mere alliance-building or the mundane pursuit of “soft power” would be to ignore the revolutionary spiritual project that began formally in 1917.

What is gained from adding the lens of intermediaries to this well-known picture of revolution? It allows us to see more clearly the paradox of socialist mediation. If imperial intermediaries were drafted to strengthen the imperial “rule of difference,” and their acts of mediation hardened boundaries of communal identity, then socialism’s intermediaries sought to eradicate these differences. In service of a universal truth, they sought to overcome the crystallization of difference that mediation inevitably wrought. In other words, socialist proselytization is another vantage from which to observe socialism’s utopian nature, akin to the ironic truth that the revolution charged with presiding over the state’s disappearance actually resulted in its engorgement. In this way, each socialist intermediary needed to work toward his or her eventual redundancy, often by making their mediation as imperceptible as possible.

This conundrum of socialist mediation led inexorably to the importance of translation. This is because, first, in a narrow sense, the tenets of Marxism or Communist party statutes needed to be rendered into new languages. And, second, socialism was more than an economic program but rather

²⁰ Eric Schluessel, *Land of Strangers: The Civilizing Project in Qing Central Asia* (New York, 2019), 82. Here Schluessel quotes from Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), 81.

²¹ Schluessel, *Land of Strangers*, 82, 114–115.

²² Yuri Slezkine, *House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton, 2017), 1002 n.1; Andrei A. Znamenski, *Socialism as a Secular Creed: A Modern Global History* (Lanham, 2021); Richard Shorten, “The Enlightenment, Communism and Political Religion: Reflections on a Misleading Trajectory,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 8:1 (2003): 13–38. On the religious dimensions of other types of internationalism see Milan Babik, *Statecraft and Salvation: Wilsonian Liberal Internationalism as Secularized Eschatology* (Waco, 2013); and Norman Bentwich, *The Religious Foundations of Internationalism: A Study in International Relations through the Ages* (London, 1959).



a utopian social vision which could only be clarified and interpreted by individuals. As Serguei Oushakine suggests, even within the Russophone context the October Revolution required “intra-cultural translation” to create new cultural forms, since there was not always a distinct “source text.” This situation led to “creative adaptation” by those who “channeled, transformed, and/or distorted Marxist rhetoric and ideas.” He even proposes that endemic to the translation process was a “political pasteurization” which softened the revolutionary political energy, rendering it “harmless.”²³

Third, the intermediaries’ focus on their audiences meant that translation was not only about exegesis but also about creation, entailing the fabrication of equivalencies in new contexts. Ironically, if differences were indeed to be eradicated, it was by emphasizing—and often inventing—commensurabilities, and making the foreign appear indigenous. And the socialist eschatology was not only concerned with visions of the good life. Equally important was the elaboration of danger, whether in the form of counterrevolutionaries, capitalist encirclement, or fascist armies. In turn, part of the translation process was to convey shared dangers to audiences which may not have known they were under threat. It was often the appearance of socialism’s enemies that prompted its intermediaries to retranslate—or at least reorient—the essence of socialism, as evinced in this cluster. In the process, socialist intermediaries expanded the boundaries of the universal, even when it threatened to dilute its message.

Recent scholarship on empire and cultural diplomacy emphasizes the power and creativity of translation. Schluessel observes that the essence of tongchi interpreters was “mimetic”; in other words, “to fabricate a reality” that was plausible to Chinese state officials.²⁴ Leah Feldman reminds us of Lenin’s dictum that “Soviet ideology’s success in the East—its miracle (*chudo*)—[lay] in its universal and translatable ideology” which, she argues, invested the message and the act of translation itself with “spiritual and scientific authority.”²⁵ By the 1950s, Eleanor Gilburd argues, literary translation in the Soviet Union became a “utopian urge to bridge not only linguistic but also ideological divides,” and translators became authors in their own right.²⁶ Each of these scholars connects translation with periods imperial expansion, fragility, or contraction, which in turn impels us to the frame of the individual.

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE FOREGROUNDS A BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH IN ORDER TO AMPLIFY THE INTERMEDIARIES’ REMIT AND EMPHASIZE THEIR INTERPRETIVE ESSENCE. We are not the first to note the revelatory potential of biography in imperial and transnational socialist history.²⁷ This is due to the guiding premise of biographical writing which, by embedding an individual life within its social context, allows the individual and the social to illuminate each other, offering a “fruitful approach to reexamining, and perhaps reconfiguring, the categories of class, gender, and ethnicity as they interact at the level of the individual.”²⁸ Apart from classical biography, which is a frame brought by the historian to a life, studies like Alexis Peri’s in this cluster employ the biographical lens from within, using the life writing of letter-writers who narrativized their lives as socialist women. We suggest that the individual, as a primary “site” where socialism was interpreted and practiced, holds promise for broader inquiries in the collective identities formed in the socialist world.

²³ Serguei Oushakine, “Translating Communism for Children: Fables and Posters of the Revolution,” *boundary 2* 43:2 (2016): 173–74.

²⁴ Schluessel, *Land of Strangers*, 107.

²⁵ Leah Feldman, “Red Jihad: Translating Communism in the Muslim Caucasus,” *boundary 2* 43:3 (2016): 223.

²⁶ Eleanor Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die: The Soviet Lives of Western Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), 10–11, 103, and chap. 3.

²⁷ Michael David-Fox, *Crossing Borders, Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Pittsburgh, 2015); Katherine Holt, “Performing as Soviet Central Asia’s Source Texts: Lahuti and Džambul in Moscow, 1935–1936,” *Cahiers d’Asie centrale* 24 (2015): 213–38; Samuel J. Hirst, “Comrades on Elephants: Economic Anti-Imperialism, Orientalism, and Soviet Diplomacy in Afghanistan, 1921–1923,” *Kritika* 22 (Winter 2021): 13–40; Tetsu Akiyama, *The Qirghiz Baatir and the Russian Empire: A Portrait of a Local Intermediary in Russian Central Asia* (Leiden, 2021).

²⁸ David Nasaw, “Introduction” to AHR Roundtable: Historians and Biography, *American Historical Review* 114 (June 2009): 576.



In turn, the New Diplomatic history of recent years has also become more “actor-centered,” increasingly examining a range of intermediaries and “non-state” actors, who can diverge from and also illuminate state perspectives. As Jan Hennings and Tracey Sowerby write, “the role of individual actors raises important questions about where the boundaries lay between personal and monarchical, internal and external, and how these tensions interacted with diplomatic processes.”²⁹ In a narrow sense, our intermediaries are part of an ever-expanding list of “new diplomats.” However, we prefer to think of diplomats as part of a more capacious group of intermediaries who moved not just between states but also between cultures and incipient movements, which included both officials and quite “ordinary” people, all of whom were invested in the tasks of interpreting and expanding socialism in new contexts.

We hope this special issue will build upon existing studies of socialist mediation in its many guises, regardless of their preferred terminology. For instance, the nature of “socialist literature” was not self-evident but emerged via intellectual exchange in venues like the Comintern and the Soviet Writers’ Union.³⁰ And how could one liberate the downtrodden in a society with no proletariat? Was feminine veiling a permissible expression of national culture or a symptom of exploitation? The answers to these questions required exegesis and invention, often leading to the hardening of cultural differences rather than their diminution.³¹ Nevertheless, it was in mediation that intermediaries interpreted, personalized, and transformed socialism, lending weight to the contention that certain aspects of the Soviet experience are best studied in the peripheries.³²

MODES OF SOCIALIST INTERNATIONALISM AND TYPES OF INTERMEDIARIES

From the positionality of socialist intermediaries and the nature of translation, we reach their characteristic modes. Which actors, artefacts, and practices were specific to different phases of socialist mediation? What would a preliminary history of socialist internationalism look like through the lens of intermediaries? The various modes of transnational socialism were shaped by the evolution of the international system, by new technologies of industrial production and mass communication, and by war and revolution. The path-breaking emergence of the world’s first socialist state built upon a Russian revolutionary tradition and armed its intermediaries with new institutions from which to clarify their visions of socialism and develop new methods of mediation.

Just like other mass ideologies that emerged after the French Revolution, socialism claimed a global vocation: its emancipatory promise targeted all working people, who were exploited through selling their labor. The first International Working Men’s Association (IWMA), founded in London in 1864, was primarily an alliance of workers’ trade unions formed to fight labor exploitation. The Second International (1889–1916) was established in Paris as an association of over twenty proletarian parties. The change from trade unions to parties reflected the organizational maturation of labor movements and their integration into the political life of various countries, but also the split with the previously dominant anarcho-syndicalist and trade-unionist orientations. In addition to these splinters, the Great War revealed another dividing factor that subverted proletarian solidarity and brought the Second International to an end: the enduring power of nationalism.³³

The absence of a party system in the Russian empire led to alternative modes of socialist mediation, impelling diverse groups of socialists to build conspiratorial movements dedicated to the capture of

²⁹ Jan Hennings and Tracey A. Sowerby, eds., *Practices of Diplomacy in the Early Modern World c. 1410–1800* (London, 2017), 7.

³⁰ Amelia Glaser and Steven S. Lee, eds., *Comintern Aesthetics* (Toronto, 2020).

³¹ Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, 2004).

³² Sergey Abashin, Andrew Jenks, “Soviet Central Asia on the Periphery,” *Kritika* 16:2 (2015): 359–74.

³³ Roman Szporluk, *Communism and Nationalism: Karl Marx versus Friedrich List* (Oxford, 1993).



power and the adoption of revolutionary principles in their everyday lives. This revolutionary culture was shaped by literature, which offered models of faith, egalitarianism, and asceticism, which in turn shaped political practice. Russia's socialists pivoted between the informal "schools" of revolution—the émigré circles in Europe and Siberian exiles—publishing journals and experimenting with political tactics, including assassination and other violent means.³⁴

The establishment of the Soviet state following the Bolshevik Revolution marked a new stage in the history of proletarian internationalism. Communism became a ruling ideology, and the Soviet Union not only championed emissaries of socialism worldwide but also provided them with a safe haven when necessary. The Third Communist International (Comintern, 1919–43) was better structured and more far-reaching than its precursors, though the democratic exchange of ideas was foreclosed as the Soviet state seized control, employing expulsions and violent purges.³⁵ However, particularly in its initial decade, the Comintern operated as much "horizontally" as "vertically," as Katerina Clark demonstrates in this cluster. Brigitte Studer emphasizes that "Cominternians" created their own distinctive "cultural space," characterized by women's agency, militancy, and personality cults, while providing entrepreneurial opportunities for apportioning workers' aid. Equally important, "Cominternians" were compelled to absorb the emergent Bolshevik political culture, including its "biographical matrix" of state intervention and personal transformation, which became a model and elusive standard for future socialist intermediaries.³⁶

Scholars might also focus on the violent and unsuccessful mode of socialist mediation of the Polish-Soviet War (1919–20) or the rival "revolutionary" and "reformist" branches of proletarian internationalism, the latter represented by the London-based Labour and Socialist International (1923–40). In addition, the ideological cleavage between Stalin and Trotsky over the idea of universal revolution versus "socialism in one country" led to the establishment of the Fourth international, in opposition to the Comintern.³⁷ Although arguably marginal in the larger socialist world, the Fourth International proved resilient, gathering Trotskyist recruits from Latin America, Europe, and Asia.³⁸

As the Comintern addressed its attention beyond Soviet borders, a simultaneous effort sought to integrate—and then transform—the formerly tsarist territories won by the Reds in the Civil War. The study of Soviet nationalities policy launched a concerted reevaluation of the Soviet form of empire but has not traditionally been told as a story of intermediaries. In Central Asia, for instance, many of the first generation of "national" Bolsheviks had attended Russian-native schools, thereby continuing the tsarist-era reliance on intermediary intellectuals.³⁹ In a peripheral environment with few indigenous socialists, the Soviet regime cultivated tenuous allegiances with ideologically adjacent groups, such as the Jadids, who interpreted the tenets of socialist revolution though an Islamic lens. The early Soviet state continued the tsarist practice of relying on Tatars as teachers, translators, and political actors.⁴⁰ One could even consider the Slavic wives of local party elite as intermediaries of Bolshevik culture.⁴¹

In this first decade of revolutionary socialism, the distinction between domestic and foreign activity was not always clear to the Soviet state or its intermediaries, leading to a heterodox but short-lived

³⁴ Irina Paperno, *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism: A Study in the Semiotics of Behavior* (Stanford, 1988); Andy Willimott, *Living the Revolution: Urban Communes & Soviet Socialism, 1917–1932* (Oxford, 2016).

³⁵ Olga Hess Gankin, Harold Henry Fisher, *The Bolsheviks and the World War: The Origin of the Third International* (Stanford, 1940); E. H. Carr, *Twilight of the Comintern, 1930–1935* (New York, 1982); Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern: The History of the Third International* (London, 1985). I. S. Drabkin et al., eds., *Komintern i ideia mirovoi revoliutsii: Dokumenty* (Moscow, 1998).

³⁶ Jochen Hellbeck, "Galaxy of Black: The Power of Soviet Biography," *American Historical Review* 114:3 (2009): 623.

³⁷ Leon Trotsky, *The Third International After Lenin* (New York, 1996).

³⁸ Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929–1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham, 1991).

³⁹ Ian W. Campbell, *Knowledge and the Ends of Empire: Kazak Intermediaries and Russian Rule on the Steppe, 1731–1917* (Ithaca, 2017); Adrienne Lynn Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton, 2004), 75; Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan*.

⁴⁰ Danielle Ross, *Tatar Empire: Kazan's Muslims and the Making of Imperial Russia* (Bloomington, 2020); Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism* (Seattle, 2006).

⁴¹ Maria Aleksandra Blackwood, "Personal Experiences of Nationality and Power in Soviet Kazakhstan, 1917–1953" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2018); Edgar, *Tribal Nation*, 93.



array of institutions. For instance, the 1920 Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku addressed audiences within and beyond domestic borders. Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev posited a Muslim Communism that would supersede national categories and borders. The capacious category of the “East” enveloped much of the former and contemporary colonial world in a common condition of backwardness requiring liberation.⁴² With cartographic distinctions less important, it was the quality of cadres—the socialist intermediaries—whose training became the focal point of institutions such as the Communist University for the Workers of the East (KUTV, 1921–38), where foreign and domestic students learned together until divergences between Stalinist and foreign political contexts became too stark.

As the era of “socialism in one country” hardened boundaries with the capitalist world, the Soviet Union turned to culture as an ambitious sphere of proselytization, with foreign visits choreographed and conversion courted. The All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) could be considered a latter-day House of the Catechumans.⁴³ As interpersonal, transnational connections became limited by Stalinist autarky, cultural connections became more rarified and spiritually rooted. Katerina Clark has demonstrated how, against a backdrop of domestic terror and increasing cultural censorship, the Soviet Union—led by the intermediaries she calls “cosmopolitan patriots”—proffered itself as the spiritual home of world culture.⁴⁴

The work of VOKS and Soviet literary elites with foreign parties was built upon ongoing developments within Soviet cultural politics, especially the institutionalization of the creative unions and the canonization of socialist realism in 1934.⁴⁵ Cultural producers on the Soviet periphery were challenged to turn ecumenical traditions into national channels and to transform oral traditions into new forms of prose, especially the realist novel. These cultural imperatives required intermediaries in the form of “Eastern hands” from the center, such as Petr Skosyrev and Nikolai Tikhonov, to teach the finer points of genre and proletarian spirit, as well as “native” producers to disseminate new content in traditional forms, such as the Kazakh *akyn* Jambul and the émigré Iranian poet Lāhūti.⁴⁶ And the creation of a broader Soviet multinational culture required the development of an unprecedented translation system, hence the cumbersome but eminently modular practice of the *podstrochnik*.⁴⁷ As Samuel Hodgkin observes, Soviet Eastern literature transformed the professional ambit of the writer, who became a cultural worker and political actor with new incentives as well as dangers, a change even more harrowing beyond Soviet borders, where the Writers’ Union’s “internal polemics and aesthetic criteria were often incomprehensible” to left-leaning authors.⁴⁸ But because of Soviet culture’s international essence, it was fated to be defined by proselytization and translation, tasks which remained highly dependent upon the choices and abilities of individual intermediaries.

Although World War II is usually considered a historiography apart, there is every reason to include it in a broader history of socialist internationalism that can be illuminated through the lens of its intermediaries. At a diplomatic level, an actor-driven discussion of the negotiations among the Allies could rejuvenate a static scholarly picture. An examination of the most visible pantheon of Soviet cultural intermediaries, such as Ilya Ehrenburg and Tamara Khanum, finds them expanding prewar

⁴² Masha Kirasirova, “The “East” as a Category of Bolshevik Ideology and Comintern Administration: The Arab Section of the Communist University of the Toilers of the East,” *Kritika* 18:1 (2017): 7–34; Leslie Page Moch and Lewis Siegelbaum, “Transnationalism in One Country? Seeing and Not Seeing Cross-Border Migration within the Soviet Union,” *Slavic Review* 75: 4 (2016): 970–86.

⁴³ Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (Oxford, 2011); A. V. Golubev, *Obraz soiuznika v soznanii rossiiskogo obshchestva v kontekste mirovykh vojn* (Moscow, 2012).

⁴⁴ Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome*.

⁴⁵ Angelina Lucento, “Painting against Empire: Béla Uitz and the Birth and Fate of Internationalist Socialist Realism,” *Russian Review* 79 (October 2020): 578–605.

⁴⁶ Samuel Gold Hodgkin, “Lāhūti: Persian Poetry in the Making of the Literary International, 1906–1957” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2018); Katharine M. Holt, “The Rise of Insider Iconography: Visions of Soviet Turkmenia in Russian-Language Literature and Film, 1921–1935” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2013).

⁴⁷ Susanna Witt, “The Shorthand of Empire: *Podstrochnik* Practices and the Making of Soviet Literature,” *Ab Imperio* 14:3 (2013): 155–90.

⁴⁸ Hodgkin, “Lāhūti,” 28–30.



objectives, while the dynamics of mediation were ever-present in the Soviet army, where literate, urbane national minorities shared their linguistic and cultural knowledge with rural recruits.⁴⁹ But the biggest breakthrough in modes of internationalism was the collapse of state boundaries and, with it, the distinction between state and civilian actors, with ramifications made clear by Alexis Peri and Michael David-Fox in this cluster. Vengeful Red Army soldiers on European territory were also purveyors of their own brand of violent, compensatory socialism.⁵⁰

After World War II, the Soviet Union's superpower status fueled the expansion of global socialism as an alternative path of development. Eastern Europe was forcefully incorporated into the Soviet camp—through a militant means of socialist mediation. The process of Sovietization relied on a new set of socialist intermediaries, from repatriated cadres trained in the Comintern to thousands of Soviet experts or “advisors” dispatched to various ministries in the satellite countries, to Soviet shock workers or collectivized peasants who traveled to Eastern Europe to share their experience in building socialism. Moreover, Sovietization was not exclusively a one-way street. Occasionally, the Soviets learned from East European countries.⁵¹ Through intensive exchanges and common development, Socialist countries became part of an increasingly entangled if still hierarchized world, mediated by the laborious activity of intermediaries at various levels. The death of Stalin made possible the discontinuation of some of the most insidious forms of unequal cooperation (see the exploitative mixed Soviet-local companies, the withdrawal of the Soviet advisors, and so on) and the affirmation of national modes of socialism not only in Tito's Yugoslavia, but also in Hungary, Romania, Albania, and China.

Since the 1950s, the socialist world greatly expanded well beyond Eastern Europe and kin Marxist regimes ruled about one quarter of the world. Socialist intermediaries throughout the Bloc sought to establish a close association with anti-colonialism as a related movement of emancipation. The result was a vast array of “brotherly socialist regimes,” and new forms of internationalism within the Cominform.⁵² Newly liberated countries, such as Cuba, acted as centers of world proletarian revolution and involved themselves in political conflicts around the world. The Soviet Union made its own ambitious play for the hearts and minds of Asians and Africans, celebrating its own peripheral republics—and their education, literature, film, health care, and even religion—as models of socialist development, thereby creating opportunities for new Soviet intermediaries to seize opportunities for travel and patronage.⁵³ Meanwhile, bids for socialist autonomy in Hungary and Czechoslovakia resulted in repression, leading to tensions but also pluralism among competing socialist internationalisms, with Yugoslavia (and to a certain extent even Ceaușescu's Romania), China, and Cuba competing for the role of alternative catalysts of the Third World, whose statesmen, in turn, utilized this competitive field to further their own interests.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Shaw, “Making Ivan-Uzbek,” 10, 53–54.

⁵⁰ Oleg Budnitskii, Susan Rupp, “The Intelligentsia Meets the Enemy: Educated Soviet Officers in Defeated Germany, 1945,” *Kritika* 10:3 (2009): 629–82.; Brandon M. Schechter, *The Stuff of Soldiers: A History of the Red Army in World War II through Objects* (Ithaca, 2019).

⁵¹ Constantin Iordachi and Arnd Bauerkämper, eds., *The Collectivization of Agriculture in Communist Eastern Europe: Comparison and Entanglements* (Budapest, 2014).

⁵² Geoffrey Swain, “The Cominform: Tito's International?” *Historical Journal* 35:3 (March 1, 2010): 641–63. For propaganda reiterations of the proletarian solidarity as a central ideological tenant of socialist internationalism see: *Marxism-Leninism on Proletarian Internationalism* (Moscow, 1972); Shitov Nikolai Fedorovich, *V. I. Lenin i proletarskii internatsionalizm (1917–1924 gg.)* (Moscow, 1974); Liuben' P. Petrov, *Proletarian Internationalism* (Sofia, 1981); *Socialist Internationalism: Theory and Practice of International Relations of a New Type* (Moscow, 1982).

⁵³ Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan* (Ithaca, 2018); Masha Kirasirova, “‘Sons of Muslims’ in Moscow: Soviet Central Asian Mediators to the Foreign East, 1955–1962,” *Ab Imperio* 4 (2011): 106–32; Rossen Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema between the Second and the Third Worlds* (Montreal, 2020); Eren Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: the Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943–1991* (New York, 2017).

⁵⁴ Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, 2010); Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill, 2015); Timothy Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan* (New York, 2016); Jan C. Behrends et al., eds., *Fremde und Fremdsein in der DDR: Zu historischen Ursachen der Fremdenfeindlichkeit in Ostdeutschland* (Berlin, 2003); Jan Zofka, Péter Vámos & Sören Urbansky, “Beyond the Kremlin's reach? Eastern Europe and China in the Cold War era,” *Cold War History* 18:3 (2018): 251–56; James Mark et al., “‘We Are With You, Vietnam’: Transnational Solidarities in Socialist Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 50:3 (2015): 439–64.



The commitment to “peaceful coexistence” with the West witnessed the return of culture as a venue to pursue Soviet supremacy and the cautious emergence of popular diplomacy, creating situations where “anybody could be an ambassador or a traitor.”⁵⁵ A new network of bilateral “friendship societies” in the socialist camp and beyond resulted in opportunities for ordinary people to interpret the charged meaning of “friendship” and to represent socialism, albeit within limits defined by the state.⁵⁶ Still, the 1950s saw the rapid expansion of intermediary venues and organizations that lasted through the end of the Soviet era, such as youth festivals, student exchanges, state-sponsored tourism, veterans’ groups, pen-pal correspondences, athletic competitions, and folklore troupes, to name but a few.⁵⁷

And the socialist mediation of literary translators was instrumental in shaping the contours of the Soviet Thaw. Gilburd contends that translated texts transformed socialist culture by “advance[ing] new languages, roles models, and behaviors,” and “redefin[ing] what was thinkable.” She considers Soviet readers the “co-creators of Soviet translations and the ultimate interpreters,” who transformed and appropriated Western texts into “Soviet scenarios” with their “intense feelings” and reading practices.⁵⁸ Ironically, by expanding the boundaries of “universal culture” to include both Western and Soviet elements, literary translators contributed to undermining the sanctity of socialism. Thus the most successful translation was done in the wrong direction!

In the 1960s and 1970s, pluralist border regimes within the Bloc—such as the Friendship Borders—and beyond, such as Yugoslav *gastarbeiters* and diaspora groups. These unwitting agents of socialism and even anti-systemic figures—such as hippies, dissidents, and other countercultural groups—offer a productive challenge to the concept of socialist intermediaries since they retain the elements of privilege and vulnerability, translation and interpretation, yet with questionable allegiance to socialist change.⁵⁹

The above history of socialist internationalism started in Europe and the United States, shifted to Moscow, and eventually became a multicentered formation with nodes across Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Europe. Rather than emphasizing unilateral Soviet hegemony, we observe the emergence of organizing institutions—often under Soviet aegis—whose efforts to coordinate and control could be undercut by the dynamism of expansion, the agency of intermediaries, and the heterogeneity of socialist interpretation. We seek not to downplay coercion or violent expansion but to put them in context of other modes of socialist mediation, including conspiratorial networking; the Comintern’s political and cultural training; the proselytism of socialism as hearth of world culture; and the radical expansion of personal diplomacy in war and peace.

We hope that a focus on socialist mediation can provide at least three distinct benefits. First, scholarship on intermediaries continues to refine our understanding of the hierarchy and direction of transnational activity, such as the pluralism and multipolarity of the early Comintern or the patronage opportunities for Third World leaders. Second, socialist intermediaries help to illustrate the heterogeneity of the socialist project in its various iterations. Third, it allows us to reappraise socialist states as uniquely reliant upon intermediaries. This holds especially true for the Soviet Union which, as an “anti-imperial” empire, was beset by the contradictions of pursuing dramatic cultural change in its peripheries. Soviet intermediaries often transcended the distinction between “internal” and “external” empire and can help historians forge connections between eras of Soviet and socialist history,

⁵⁵ Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die*, 76.

⁵⁶ Rachel Applebaum, *Empire of Friends: Soviet Power and Socialist Internationalism in Cold War Czechoslovakia* (Ithaca, 2019).

⁵⁷ Anne E. Gorsuch, *All This Is Your World: Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad after Stalin* (Oxford, 2011); József Böröcz, “Performing Socialist Hungary in China: ‘Modern, Magyar, European,’” *Cold War History* 18:3 (2018): 257–74; M.Iu. Prozumenshchikov, *Bol’shoi sport i bol’shaia politika* (Moscow, 2004); Manfred Zeller, “‘Our Own Internationale,’ 1966: Dynamo Kiev Fans between Local Identity and Transnational Imagination,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12 (Winter 2011): 53–82.

⁵⁸ Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die*, 11, 14, 17, 102.

⁵⁹ Ulf Brunnbauer, “Yugoslav Gastarbeiter and the Ambivalence of Socialism: Framing Out-Migration as a Social Critique,” *Journal of Migration History* 5:3 (2019): 413–37; Juliane Fürst, *Flowers through Concrete: Explorations in the Soviet Hippieland and Beyond* (Oxford, 2021); Ann Komaromi, “Samizdat and Soviet Dissident Publics,” *Slavic Review* 71:1 (2012): 70–90.



including the debatably “colonial” empire in the 1920s and 1930s, to World War II, and to the more “classical” empire in the postwar.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION OF THE THEMATIC CLUSTER

The four essays we bring together here invite the reader to consider the question: who could be a socialist intermediary? Because being an intermediary is above all a relational position, and because socialist states frequently expected their citizens to represent socialism to foreigners, we find that *professional* intermediaries could be complemented by *situational* intermediaries of otherwise “ordinary” citizens, called by circumstance or the state to represent socialism. Despite this important distinction, we welcome the reader to consider the commonalities of their position as intermediaries.

Charles Shaw’s article examines the life of Soviet entertainer Tamara Khanum (1906–91) to consider the formation and transformation of a cultural intermediary in each key stage of socialist internationalism. It considers how an ethnic Armenian born in Central Asia’s Fergana valley came to represent an image of liberated Eastern femininity to both domestic and foreign audiences. And it conceives of her genre of song, dance, and costume of various nationalities as a mode or technology of Soviet cultural politics, suited to mediate interethnic harmony at home and as a weapon of cultural diplomacy abroad. Shaw argues that her genre helped to define a distinctive translinguistic, emotional dimension for Soviet Central Asia’s diplomacy toward the Third World.

On the spectrum of vocational versus situational intermediaries, Khanum clearly falls in the former category. But by employing a biographical approach constructed from an array of texts, Shaw uncovers the moments and strategies of self-fashioning necessary to uphold this public role, thereby demonstrating its conditional, practiced nature. And by focusing on Khanum’s own life writings, he demonstrates how she reached her own heterodox convictions on nationality and the Soviet doctrine of Friendship of the Peoples that could both bolster and undermine her diplomatic mission. Her life of almost permanent costume embodied the state of privilege and asceticism that typifies intermediaries.

Katerina Clark’s article examines the personal and professional activities of another career intermediary, Emi Siao (Xiao San) (1896–1983), the most important literary figure connecting the interwar Soviet Union with Chinese Communists. Xiao is unique in this cluster as a non-Soviet citizen who tested the outer limits of Comintern fealty and translational autonomy. Xiao was fully embedded within the Soviet Writers’ Union, even earning a coveted apartment on Moscow’s Lavrushinsky Pereulok. After departing for China after the Great Terror, Xiao published accounts of Yun’an in Soviet and Comintern literary journals and reported for VOKS. But he also became a literary and political agent in his own right among China’s communists, promoting an indigenous form of mass literature to inspire the Chinese peasantry. Clark adapts Homi Bhabha’s concept of “in-betweenness” to demonstrate that Xiao’s position provided him with a flexible set of skills and sensibilities that enabled him to thrive in various settings.

More broadly, Clark demonstrates that Communist internationalist culture was not simply generated vertically (that is, from top-down models emanating from Soviet officialdom) but emerged horizontally, through laterally articulated networks and individual contacts, such as the connections Xiao forged at KUTV or his various international romantic liaisons. As she asserts, “we should not overemphasize the importance of bureaucratic structure at the expense of the agency exercised by their members,” which echoes our own convictions about the payoff of the intermediary lens. Xiao’s interpretation of socialism was also distinctive, characterized by a commitment to something Clark calls “soviet literature in both senses of the word.” In other words, he actively sought to reconcile diverging political and cultural centers, retaining hope in “a single cultural space united by the discourse of Marxism-Leninism.”

The anti-fascist “popular front” reordered proletarian alliances in the 1930s, but it was World War II that transformed the nature of socialist internationalism. The existential threat of the German penetration of Soviet borders rendered an urgent search for new actors and allies to preserve the world’s



only socialist state, including the British and Soviet civilian women who took part in what Alexis Peri terms “operation friendship.” Hardly a mundane exercise in alliance-building, everyday Soviet women articulated a socialism coterminous with womanhood in order to “bridge the ideological chasm” between socialism and capitalism, and press for funding, material donations, and the opening of a second front—things vital for Soviet survival. Her article traces the pen-pal correspondence between the Soviet Women’s Anti-Fascist Committee (AKSZh) and the Women’s British-Soviet Committee (WBSC), illustrating its tenuous nature despite the urgency to find common ground. Peri finds that “overlapping discourses of womanhood gave [women] a common language,” marked in both countries by an “uneasy blend of the conservative and the revolutionary”; of “vulnerability, domesticity, and maternity” as well as “equality and empowerment.” Womanhood and motherhood were big tents that encouraged emotional connection beyond ideological divides. Yet despite a shared purpose, the women’s letters revealed substantial divisions. Soviet women’s letters spoke of substantially more harrowing experiences of wartime hardship as evacuees and workers, and as widows and mothers. Was socialism also about stoicism and suffering? And did this bring the women together or demarcate unbridgeable differences?

Although the Soviet-British relationship fell victim to hardening interstate relations after 1949, the pen-pal formula was deemed worth repeating because it offered volunteers the chance for rare cross-border “acts of self-presentation” and provided the state with a sense of control. The pursuit of “friendship” via pen-pal correspondence became a hallmark of the transnational women’s movement and socialist diplomacy more broadly in the Cold War, but its World War II origins have not previously been recognized.⁶⁰ Peri’s article reminds us that the germ for this staple of public diplomacy lay within the exigencies of war and uncovers the writers’ experimentation and autonomy, within the bounds set by censors and organizational directives.

If Peri’s intermediaries were common citizens recruited by the state, Michael David-Fox’s intermediary—an underground Komsomol activist in German-occupied Smolensk named Lyusya Madziuk—was a situational intermediary in the extreme: a self-appointed upholder of Soviet civilization in the face of Nazi occupation, ministering conversion to the enemy when the banner of her faith had fallen. As part of an underground Komsomol organization, she distributed pro-Soviet leaflets and discussed Marx with a German soldier at her job at a canteen, even claiming to have spurred three soldiers to switch sides and join the partisans. As a Komsomol member of the Stalin generation, Lyusya relied upon a Soviet principle—*kul'turnost'*—to process harrowing events. In fact, her “deep internalization and individualized deployment of the concept” expanded the range of *kul'turnost'*, and helps explain her “simultaneously condemnatory and empathetic” view of German soldiers. David-Fox reveals *kul'turnost'* be a flexible and helpful intellectual framework among young Soviet citizen-intermediaries in their encounters with the enemy.

Lyusya’s testimony uncovers another form of cross-cultural encounter at war—the sexual relations between Wehrmacht soldiers and Soviet women—which provides an opportunity to interrogate and clarify the category of intermediary even further. As David-Fox reminds us, there was a continuum of sexual encounter ranging from rape and mutilation to semi-coerced and coerced liaisons, all the way to more consensual, long-term relationships, but all of which sprang from a power imbalance created by stark material and caloric need, economic and military power, and sheer brute strength. Some sexual encounters sprang from Russian women’s calculus for material improvement and therefore heightens the dynamic of vulnerability and privilege associated with imperial intermediaries. Lyusya—as Marxist confessor—was clearly a socialist intermediary, but were the Russian women who consorted with the enemy also intermediaries in their own ways? If they were not self-consciously representing socialism like Lyusya, then it would seem untenable. However, the divide between mediation and collaboration was not airtight. Even Lyusya and the other Komsomol activists exploited their femininity to gain the trust required for employment and conversation with German soldiers, nor can we exclude

⁶⁰ Applebaum, *Empire of Friends*; Christine Varga-Harris, “Between National Tradition and Western Modernization: Soviet Woman and Representations of Socialist Gender Equality as a “Third Way” for Developing Countries, 1956–1964,” *Slavic Review* 78:3 (2019): 758–81.



the possibility that they themselves engaged in more intimate connections with Germans given the above pressures. Still, the power dynamic in Smolensk too extremely favored the Germans to insist upon extending our category to accommodate the example of all consorts and victims, which causes us to remain in awe of those such as Lyusya who pursued their paths fraught with violence and risk.

In comparing the vocational and situational intermediaries, perhaps the most important takeaway is the overriding similarities between the two—each being defined by the intermediaries' characteristic tension of privilege and vulnerability, a keen awareness of their roles, and a remarkable personal commitment—a commonality perhaps exacerbated by the exigencies of war.

That the elevation of common people to socialist intermediaries happened during World War II accords with an understanding of the war as imbuing participants with a sense of their world-historical roles.⁶¹ Peri and David-Fox illuminate the war not simply as a bridge between eras of more prominent international engagement, but as a distinctive era of internationalism in its own right, when private citizens seized initiatives to mediate between belief systems, often at great personal risk, and expanded notions of socialism in the process. These contributions, in turn, encourage us to consider Soviet soldiers (both men and women) in occupied Europe as intermediaries and self-conscious representatives of socialist civilization, but also as pioneers of external encounters with non-Soviets.⁶²

Additionally, three of the four articles focus on women, which makes us wonder whether women were exceptionally well-represented among the ranks of socialist intermediaries or whether socialist states considered them to have innate abilities in this sphere. Women played decisive roles in the Comintern as “revolutionaries,” but in each of our three cases women were called to mediate not simply as “socialists” but as “women,” reflecting gendered Soviet thinking. David-Fox's case—by necessity—and Peri's case—by choice—show that the war affirmed women as underutilized cadres for socialist mediation, and that sex and womanhood were capacious enough to bridge the most unlikely ideological chasms, even with the potential danger of diluting socialist rigor. And as Khanum's case exemplifies, as the Thaw era privileged emotional connection in diplomacy and culture, women took advantage of new opportunities with their purportedly direct access to emotional expression. In all cases, socially constructed femininity formed a field of possibility and action, enabling its own brand of internationalism, both dovetailing and diverging from state interests.

Clark and Shaw illustrate the work of genre and creative modes—especially socialist realism—as a vessel to convey the socialist faith to new audiences, but one inexorably rooted in European-Russian cultural traditions, and therefore reliant upon intermediaries and their translations. The examples of Khanum and Xiao suggest that internationalist culture struggled to overcome its European roots, yet empowered creativity and heterodox interpretations among its practitioners. Clark brings up the question of “self-translation” in the life of Xiao, and the same notion could apply equally to Khanum and other cultural intermediaries for whom the transmission of genre required a sustained amplification of certain versions of the self and diminution of others. Socialist realism also emerges as a creative sensibility that encourages subjectification among its practitioners to become the very heroes that their scripts demanded.

Finally, Shaw and Peri move “friendship” beyond its clichéd form into an active category of analysis. In their cases the term becomes not a stale or cynical placeholder but, variously, an active pursuit, a zero-sum game, a subjectivity to be embodied, and a capacious category of engagement easily transmittable and translatable to audiences outside the socialist camp, thereby recovering some of its original promise and vitality.

While the case studies included in this cluster might differ in time and place, they all illustrate modes of socialist internationalism at work. The authors turn away from Soviet Union's better-researched official channels of communication and interaction to focus on ordinary actors at grassroots or semi-official levels. In turn, socialism in translation took on many hues: culturedness, progressive women's

⁶¹ Jochen Hellbeck, *Stalingrad: The City that Defeated the Third Reich* (New York, 2015).

⁶² Budnitskii, “The Intelligentsia Meets the Enemy”; Schechter, *The Stuff of Soldiers*, esp. chap. 7.



culture; motherhood, a realist lens of literature; or a translanguistic international affinity. Above all, the essays document ordinary actors as agents of change within and beyond the Soviet world, translating and expanding the boundaries of socialism.

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