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# Complementary assistance: multilateral exchanges between the Soviet Union, China and Eastern European countries in Cold War Mongolia

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## ABSTRACT

During the Cold War, large-scale urban development projects were launched in Mongolia with technical assistance from various socialist countries – China, East Germany (the GDR), Poland, Czechoslovakia and, above all, the Soviet Union. Looking at the involvement of these dissimilar countries to Mongolia, this article challenges simplistic narratives about bilateral East-South exchanges, and frames socialist development assistance as multilateral, asymmetric and complementary. It argues that some of the iconic projects of socialist development in Mongolia could hardly be called products of any one donor's aid programme, and instead required the cooperation of various providers, collaborating on multiple, interconnected fronts. Such multilateral assistance was marked by highly hierarchical racialised divisions of labour, and created strong interdependencies between various countries involved in Mongolia.

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## Introduction

On 11 July 1961, Mongolia hosted a remarkable celebration commemorating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its Communist Revolution.<sup>1</sup> The commemoration involved a military parade, mass demonstrations, shock-work campaigns organised by miners, and other activities demonstrating the support of the masses for the socialist regime.<sup>2</sup> Specialists from Russia, China, Poland, and North Korea arrived in the country to help prepare the staging for the anniversary. Delegations from 20 different countries came to Mongolia to witness the commemoration – from all the Eastern Bloc countries, as well as India, Indonesia, Yugoslavia, Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, Mali, Nepal, Algeria, and Iraq. The Polish delegation included members of the highest political strata, such as First Secretary Wladislav Gomulka.<sup>3</sup> These international visitors witnessed the unveiling of

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<sup>2</sup>Apparat TSK KPSS, f. 5, op. 49, d. 455, l. 108, Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii (RGANI), Moscow.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, l. 110.

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newly constructed facilities, symbolising the extent of socialist international assistance provided to Mongolia. Among these were a department store and a hotel, constructed with the aid of China in the Mongolian capital Ulaanbaatar, a Soviet house building factory and a television centre, a Czechoslovak leather manufacturing plant, and a Korean secondary school, named the ‘Mongol-Korean friendship’.<sup>4</sup> These facilities served as central meeting points for international delegations, where they delivered speeches and pledged further technical support for Mongolia’s ongoing development.

During the Cold War, Mongolia emerged as an important direction for development assistance from multiple countries: the Soviet Union, China, East Germany (the GDR), Poland and Czechoslovakia, among others. Exchanges with these countries brought about unprecedented transnational circulations of people, goods, technologies, and expertise to the country. During the socialist era, observers described urban Mongolia as a single huge construction site, with masses of foreign specialists involved in development projects, and thousands of lorries from Russia and Czechoslovakia circulating throughout the country.<sup>5</sup> How did the multiplicity of these exchanges and the unprecedented circulation of goods and people from across the world shape development projects in Mongolia?

Recently, there has been a proliferation of studies on ‘socialist globalisation’, which have discussed the relations of the state-socialist countries with the Global South and has become one of the fastest growing subfields of Cold War history. Studies of Second-Third World interactions have helped to bring the history of European communism together with the histories of decolonisation and globalisation.<sup>6</sup> A subset of literature explores the Chinese dimension of socialist globalisation.<sup>7</sup> While the first wave of this scholarship was largely focused on high politics and economic development projects, more recent research has turned its attention to quotidian encounters between actors from Europe and the Global South.<sup>8</sup> This literature has discussed multiple material and immaterial encounters – the development of industrial facilities, schools, hospitals, and housing projects, shaped by the heterogenous motivations of actors involved. Yet, in the majority of cases, this literature operated with a framework of bilateral exchanges, analysing encounters between specific pairs of countries across the East and South. Cases of multilateral international collaboration, such as the above-mentioned building boom

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Charles Bawden, ‘Mongolia Re-Visited’, *Journal of The Royal Central Asian Society* 47:2 (1960), 131.

<sup>6</sup>James Mark and Paul Betts, *Socialism Goes Global: The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the Age of Decolonisation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Alessandro Iandolo, *Arrested Development: The Soviet Union in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali, 1955-1968* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022); Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Anna Calori, *Between East and South: Spaces of Interaction in the Globalizing Economy of the Cold War: 3 (Dialectics of the Global)* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019); Oscar Sanchez-Sibony, *Red Globalization: The Political Economy of the Soviet Cold War from Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>7</sup>Jan Zofka, Péter Vámos, and Sören Urbansky, ‘Beyond the Kremlin’s Reach? Eastern Europe and China in the Cold War Era’ *Cold War History* 18: 3 (2018); Austin Jersild, *The Sino-Soviet Alliance: An International History* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Elidor Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World* (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 2017); Elizabeth McGuire, *Red at Heart: How Chinese Communists Fell in Love with the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Jeremy Scott Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Split and the Third World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Lorenz Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2009).

<sup>8</sup>Kristin Roth-Ey, *Second-Third World Spaces in the Cold War: Global Socialism and the Gritty Politics of the Particular* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022); Christina Schwenkel, *Building Socialism: The Afterlife of East German Architecture in Urban Vietnam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

dedicated to the Mongolian Revolution, are rarely discussed.<sup>9</sup> The focus on bilateral exchanges, prevalent in the literature on ‘socialist globalisation,’ is incapable of properly addressing the increasingly international and globalised character of development in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> After the Second World War, development trajectories were shaped by multiple conduits of globalisation, such as colonial and postcolonial links, and networks set up by the United States and Western European countries.<sup>11</sup> Historians of technology have argued that the most radical changes to the globalising world are being written, not through law and diplomacy, but rather by transnational logic of infrastructure and technological transfers crossing the Cold War divide.<sup>12</sup> A focus on multiple actors may provide us with valuable insights about socialist development assistance. Such a framework may be useful to move beyond typical dichotomies of dispatcher and receiver, foreign and local, to instead foreground questions of collaboration, division of labour and reveal nuances about civilisational and racial hierarchies in the Eastern Bloc.

Mongolia offers a privileged case-study to explore multilateral dynamics of socialist assistance. Long term, evolving exchanges with multiple socialist countries played an instrumental role in the development of the country during the Cold War. The Soviet Union provided the most assistance to Mongolia, taking obligations to construct numerous industrial and mining facilities, food processing and construction industry plants, energy infrastructure, and housing.<sup>13</sup> China was the second major donor to Mongolia, especially in the 1950s, during a period of ‘peaceful coexistence’ with the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup> On par with the Soviet Union, China provided assistance in the form of grants and loans, covering the costs for the construction of large-scale development and infrastructure projects, including residential districts, major industrial facilities, railroads, highways, power and heating infrastructure.<sup>15</sup> After Mongolia established diplomatic relations with Eastern European countries in 1950, these countries became increasingly involved in the assistance, especially the GDR, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Bulgaria and Hungary.<sup>16</sup> Exchanges with these countries further accelerated once Mongolia joined the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (hereinafter referred to as CMEA) in 1962. By the 1970s, international assistance to Mongolia had reached 80% of the overall investments in the country and as much as 96% of Mongolian exports were directed to socialist countries.<sup>17</sup> Due to the paramount importance of international assistance, Stephen Kotkin has

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<sup>9</sup>For cases of multilateral collaboration, see: Max Trecker ‘The “Grapes of Cooperation”? Bulgarian and East German Plans to Build a Syrian Cement Industry from Scratch’, in Anna Calori, Anne-Kristin Hartmetz, Bence Kocsev, James Mark and Jan Zofka, eds., *Between East and South*, (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), 33-58; David C. Engerman, *The Price of Aid: the Economic Cold War in India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 129-30.

<sup>10</sup>Sara Lorenzini, *Global Development: A Cold War History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Stephen J. Macekura and Manela Erez, *The Development Century: A Global History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Corinna R. Unger, Nicholas Ferns, Jack Loveridge, and Iris Borowy, eds., *Yearbook for the History of Global Development: Volume One: Perspectives on the History of Global Development* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022).

<sup>11</sup>Łukasz Stanek, ‘Mobilities of Architecture in the Global Cold War: From Socialist Poland to Kuwait and Back’, *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* 4:2 (2015).

<sup>12</sup>Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London: Verso, 2016); Alexander Klose, *The Container Principle* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015).

<sup>13</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 456, l. 64-76, RGANI.

<sup>14</sup>Sergey Radchenko, ‘New Documents on Mongolia and the Cold War’, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 16 (2007), 342; Sergey Radchenko, ‘Mongolian Politics in the Shadow of the Cold War: The 1964 Coup Attempt and the Sino-Soviet Split’, *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8:1 (2006), 95-119.

<sup>15</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 355, l. 219-232; d. 354, l. 154-55, RGANI.

<sup>16</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 355, l. 232-236, RGANI.

<sup>17</sup>D. Sodnom, ‘Kompleksnaia Programma v Deistvii’, *Ekonomicheskoe sotrudnichestvo stran-chlenov SEV* 1 (1976), 14-22.

asserted ‘the inescapable international character of Mongolian history’, while Mongolian historians refer to the country’s development during socialist times in terms of cosmopolitanism.<sup>18</sup>

Providers of assistance to Mongolia were highly dissimilar in terms of economic and political indicators. While the Soviet Union held the leading position in the Bloc; the western periphery of the Bloc, and especially Central Europe, were often far more advanced than the centre in terms of technological expertise, industrial efficiency, and consumer development. The Central Europeans were more inclined to cultivate ties and connections to the West and take the lead in the development of ‘socialist consumerism’. China under Mao, in contrast, pursued a policy of rapid industrialisation, and especially after 1958 promoted policies of acceleration and austerity. These further exacerbated the divide between the countries and eventually led to the Sino-Soviet split.<sup>19</sup> These diverse trajectories shaped assistance in dissimilar ways. The aim of Soviet assistance to socialist countries in Africa and Asia centred on non-capitalist development. Promoting this ‘Soviet model of development’, the Soviet Union put an emphasis on the establishment of industry and infrastructure, with the goal of the comprehensive development of the industrial base of the country.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, the literature on the assistance of Eastern European countries underscores the significance of mercantile rationale in the consideration of development projects, which interfered with the political decisions taken in Moscow.<sup>21</sup> Chinese assistance was marked by the ideology of anti-imperialism, as the country pictured itself as the part of the developing world, while critiquing the Soviet Union for ‘great power chauvinism’.<sup>22</sup>

This article takes a viewpoint from the perspective of the bricks and mortar of Mongolian construction sites to conceptualise socialist assistance to Mongolia as multi-lateral, asymmetrical and complementary. It argues that stories of bilateral international exchanges, prevalent in literature, may be unable to accurately account for the specificity of development aid to socialist Mongolia. In fact, some of the most iconic showcases of socialist assistance to Mongolia could hardly be called products of any one donor’s aid programme. Rather, these projects required coordinated efforts of agents from various countries collaborating on multiple, interconnected fronts. In the process of delivering construction projects and rendering them operational, Mongolian actors resorted to multiple sources of assistance, seeking equipment, specialists, infrastructure, and labour. Due to diverse requests, the capacities of providers, and the motivations of actors involved, such assistance was highly asymmetrical. While the Soviet Union invested in costly, large-scale infrastructure projects in the country, Eastern European countries tended to limit their assistance to the provision of high-tech industrial facilities, sophisticated industrial equipment, and the posting of specialists. Chinese assistance stood out by sending many migrant workers to the country, whose work was integral for carrying

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<sup>18</sup>Stephen Kotkin and Bruce A. Elleman, *Mongolia in the Twentieth Century: Landlocked Cosmopolitan* (Armonk, NY, London: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 18; Ole Bruun and Li Narangoa, ‘A New Moment in Mongol History: The Rise of the Cosmopolitan City’, in Li Narangoa and Ole Bruun, eds., *Mongols from Country to City: Floating Boundaries, Pastoralism and City Life in the Mongol Lands* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2006).

<sup>19</sup>Jersild, *The Sino-Soviet Alliance*, 220-21.

<sup>20</sup>Alessandro Iandolo, ‘The Rise and Fall of the ‘Soviet Model of Development’ in West Africa, 1957-64’, *Cold War History* 12:4 (2012), 683-704.

<sup>21</sup>Zofka, ‘Economic Dimensions’, 338.

<sup>22</sup>Jersild, *The Sino-Soviet Alliance*, 18.

out construction projects in the country. Multilateral and asymmetrical assistance required a high degree of collaboration between international actors and created mutual dependencies among them. These interdependencies rendered international assistance as complementary. This article shows that co-dependencies were sometimes stronger than politics. At the onset of the Sino-Soviet split, Chinese companies did not immediately leave Mongolia, continuing contributing to development projects even in the face of political confrontation.

Discussing asymmetries in the assistance of European countries, the Soviet Union and China, this article exposes the high level of civilisational, technological and racial hierarchies which were present across the socialist world. While the socialist world had decreed racism out of existence, socialist development reproduced colonial thinking and practices, and the peoples of the Global South continued to be marked as racial others in the European mind.<sup>23</sup> East-South collaboration was often highly asymmetrical, as it involved sending white-collar workers and high-tech products from technologically advanced European countries, while outsourcing manual labour to the South.<sup>24</sup> This article extends the geographic focus of the current research to include Asia and China. It shows that socialist construction projects were marked by these hierarchical racialised divisions of labour, in which Chinese workers were racialised and discriminated along with other labourers from the South.

A vision of the complementary nature of socialist assistance helps to contribute to the literature on Sino-Soviet involvement in the Global South.<sup>25</sup> This literature, mostly focusing on high-level decision making, has demonstrated that different interpretations of ideology, conflicting national interests and understandings of development priorities in the Soviet Union and China shaped two dissimilar models of developments. Jeremy Friedman argues that in the context of the Sino-Soviet split, assistance from both countries to Third World countries was seen as the result of rivalry – a form of competition between two antagonistic models of development.<sup>26</sup> Discussing the involvement of both countries in Mongolia, Sergey Radchenko uses the similar term of ‘Sino-Russian competition’.<sup>27</sup> Using the perspective of Mongolian construction sites, this article shows a story of co-dependant collaboration, rather than competition. Chinese cooperation with other socialist countries created hierarchical relations of co-dependency, in which Soviet and Eastern European development projects were based on Chinese infrastructure and mass labour. Despite the fact that Chinese labour was integral for delivering projects, celebrated as results of Soviet or European assistance, it was mostly

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<sup>23</sup>Eric D. Weitz, ‘Racial Politics without the Concept of Race: Reevaluating Soviet Ethnic and National Purges’, *Slavic Review* 61:1 (2002); Hilary Lynd and Thom Loyd, ‘Histories of Color: Blackness and Africanness in the Soviet Union’, *Slavic Review* 81:2 (2022); David Rainbow, *Ideologies of Race: Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union in Global Context* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019).

<sup>24</sup>Alena K. Alamgir, ‘Race Is Elsewhere: State-Socialist Ideology and the Racialisation of Vietnamese Workers in Czechoslovakia’, *Race and Class* 54:4 (2013), 67-85; Quinn Slobodian, *Comrades of Color: East Germany in the Cold War World* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015); Christina Schwenkel, ‘Rethinking Asian Mobilities: Socialist Migration and Post-Socialist Repatriation of Vietnamese Contract Workers in East Germany’, *Critical Asian Studies* 46:2 (2014): 235-58.

<sup>25</sup>Op. Cit. 10.

<sup>26</sup>Friedman, *Shadow Cold War*, 6.

<sup>27</sup>Sergey Radchenko, ‘Sino-Russian Competition in Mongolia’, in Gilbert Rozman and Sergey Radchenko, eds., *International Relations and Asia’s Northern Tier: Sino-Russia Relations, North Korea, and Mongolia* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 111-26.



invisible in the official rhetoric. Interdependencies created by complementary assistance in some form continued even after the Sino-Soviet split.

This article also provides a more detailed picture of intra-Bloc relations and the differences between Soviet and Eastern European development assistance. While the involvement of the Soviet Union in Mongolia is consistent with the ‘Soviet model of development’, centred on the comprehensive development of the industrial base of the country, this article demonstrates that the Soviet leadership did not intend to develop Mongolia single-handedly, but insisted on shaping development obligations with Eastern European countries and, in the 1950s, China.<sup>28</sup> This Soviet vision of multilateral development shattered during the Sino-Soviet split and against the more pragmatic motivations of Eastern European actors, and created many misunderstandings and difficulties in collaboration.

This article follows the development projects completed with foreign assistance in Mongolia, from the late 1950s to the 1970s, looking at how Mongolian actors dealt with various challenges on the way towards making the projects operational – planning, the provision of infrastructure, and contracting the required labourers. This article is based on Russian, German and Mongolian sources. Most documents came from the recently declassified archive of the Soviet Embassy in Mongolia to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, which contains notes, information, letters from and minutes of conversations of the employees of the embassy.<sup>29</sup> The reports of diplomats offer valuable material for analysis, providing an insight into how the development of various projects looked on the ground. This archive contains reports with the description of activities of other countries, based on observations and regular meetings with representatives from Eastern European countries. However, these sources are not free of limitations. Being based on Russian perceptions, they have a strong Soviet bias, leaving less space for Mongolian voices and providing only limited information about Chinese activities in Mongolia. These gaps are supplemented with German and Mongolian sources.

## Negotiating assistance with multiple providers

A good entrance point for the discussion of the multilateral dynamics of socialist assistance to Mongolia is the obligation to build a silicate brick factory in Mongolia, signed by Wladislav Gomulka upon his visit to Ulaanbaatar for the Revolution anniversary in 1961.<sup>30</sup> Mongolian officials started looking for ways of securing technical assistance for brick production in the country in 1957. The leader of the Mongolian People’s Republic, Yumjaagiin Tsendenbal, sent a letter to Soviet officials, asking them to consider providing economic aid to Mongolia to help the country complete their forthcoming plan of economic development.<sup>31</sup> He sent a letter with a ‘shopping list’, asking ‘Soviet friends’ to provide machinery, equipment, technical aid, and a brick factory, among other things, estimated at an amount of RUB 250-300 million. This factory, he explained, would help Mongolia solve its housing crisis, establish the socialist model of development

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<sup>28</sup>Nikolay Erofeev and Łukasz Stanek, ‘Integrate, Adapt, Collaborate: Comecon Architecture in Socialist Mongolia’, *ABE Journal* 19 (2021), 1-37.

<sup>29</sup>f. 5, RGANI.

<sup>30</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 456, l. 5-7, RGANI.

<sup>31</sup>Referentura po MNR, f. 39, op. 250, d. 23, l. 7, Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii (AVP RF).

in the country, pursue the collectivisation of the agriculture and the industrialisation of the country. This aid, he explained, would help Mongolia to develop its own construction industry, and to continue the collectivisation of agriculture and the industrialisation of the country.<sup>32</sup>

Upon receipt, Tsedenbal's request was scrutinised by Soviet experts. They came up with a long-winded report containing economic justifications, which substantially curtailed Mongolian requests. As the report stated, Mongolia might actually need only one factory for prefabricated wooden buildings instead of projected two.<sup>33</sup> They also suggested making better use of the existing auto repair shop instead of asking for a new one. They were against delivering standard houses, since the transportation costs would be high, and instead suggested producing housing locally. Similarly, they were not convinced that Mongolia needed a silicate brick factory, since there were four brick factories and with these and one more then under construction by the Chinese, Mongolia could cover the country's need for bricks if used efficiently. They suggested sending a group of experts for further economic examination of this question. After such a revision, the estimated amount of aid was lowered to less than half of what requested, to RUB 113 million.<sup>34</sup> This report was not a final decision, but just one iteration of the negotiation process. Yet, it gives some insight into the Soviet-Mongolian negotiation of assistance. The priorities of Soviet assistance were articulated through the logic of a master plan for the development of the country and other long-term plans for economic development. Major Soviet loans were provided to help fulfil each of the five year economic plans for the development of the country.<sup>35</sup> In this planning, Soviet planners took into account projects, constructed by other countries, such as the Chinese brick factory, although they may not have the complete information on the capacity and operational state of these foreign facilities. Disagreement on many items also reveals that Soviet planners and their Mongolian counterparts had different visions about the priorities in the development of the country.

To assess the feasibility of the construction of a silicate brick factory, a group of Soviet experts came to Mongolia. Their report confirmed the earlier assumptions that the silicate brick factory would be unprofitable for the Mongolian economy. In another iteration of the negotiations, Moscow instead proposed the provision of a factory for prefabricated panel housing production to help solve Mongolia's housing crisis. Construction costs would be covered by the Soviet loan, and the plant would be made operational by the anniversary of the Revolution.<sup>36</sup> At the peak of the mass housing campaign, the export of house building factories was becoming a widespread phenomenon in the Soviet Union.<sup>37</sup> Mongolian officials agreed on a housebuilding factory; however, they seemed to be left unconvinced that they didn't need a silicate brick factory and they continued looking for assistance to obtain it. They soon turned to Eastern European countries with this request.

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid, l. 8.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid, l. 13.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid, l. 11-12.

<sup>35</sup>D. Bavuu, 'Razvitie Stroitel'stva v MNR', *Ekonomika stroitel'stva* 9 (1963), 50.

<sup>36</sup>f. 41, op. 261, d. 22, l. 27, AVP RF.

<sup>37</sup>Nikolay Erofeev, 'The I-464 Housing Delivery System: A Tool for Urban Modernisation in the Socialist World and Beyond', *Fabrications* 29, no. 2: (2019), 207-30.



The celebration of the Revolution's anniversary in 1961 presented another opportunity to ask for assistance for the factory. Socialist ceremonies required that the event was marked by the provision of gifts and loans from socialist countries to Mongolia. Among other countries, Poland expressed the intention to provide a loan of RUB 40 million of assistance. Mongolian officials proposed using these funds for the construction of the silicate brick factory, among other requests.<sup>38</sup> Negotiations with Poland did not go smoothly either. The Poles also rejected some of the requests and proposed constructing alternative facilities with the loan.<sup>39</sup> They also seemed to be sceptical about the viability of the silicate brick factory. As the Polish Ambassador to Mongolia later reported, 'Polish specialists have repeatedly, including by official request, stated that due to the remoteness of the raw materials, building a [silicate brick] factory in Darkhan is economically unprofitable. However, the Mongolians insisted.'<sup>40</sup> The factory was included in the assistance plan and signed by Władysław Gomułka as noted in the beginning of this section. This exchange is indicative that despite all odds and the resistance of the Soviet Union, Ulaanbaatar was able to promote its vision of the priorities of development, convince and 'insist' on the decisions which they thought were right. Having multiple cooperating countries allowed them to gain more flexibility in the negotiations. Not only had Mongolian actors insisted that the Poles provided the factory, they also asked the Poles to amend their proposed project, including changing the capacity of the factory.<sup>41</sup>

Negotiating projects with multiple providers was not unusual for Mongolian actors. Discussing similar dynamics in Mongolian foreign policy, Sergey Radchenko has concluded that 'Ulaanbaatar has perfected the skill of playing their neighbours against one another.'<sup>42</sup> Not only the silicate brick factory, but also other projects from Tsendenbal's 'shopping list' were redirected to alternative donors once the Soviet Union proved to be reluctant to fulfil them. China took on obligations to build a woodworking factory as well as a metallurgical plant, which were also considered to be unprofitable by Soviet experts.<sup>43</sup> When, after the Sino-Soviet split, the delivery of Chinese projects in the country was disrupted, Mongolia again had to look for alternative providers. The project of the State Circus in the capital, initially undertaken by the Chinese and abandoned during the split, was completed with Romanian assistance in 1971.<sup>44</sup>

The involvement of multiple providers of technical assistance also created tremendous obstacles in the Soviet efforts to promote centralised planning in the country according to the vision of the 'Soviet model of development'. Soviet experts flagged the lack of information about assistance projects of third countries in Mongolia as one of the major obstacles in drafting Five-year plans for economic development.<sup>45</sup> Despite attempts to subordinate all foreign assistance into a general plan, it was never fully achieved. Even in 1974, subordinating the assistance of various providers into a plan still presented multiple challenges.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>38</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 456, l. 6-7, RGANI.

<sup>39</sup>For example, the Poles rejected the request to provide turbines and instead offered a glue plant. See: f. 5, op. 49, d. 354, l. 193, RGANI.

<sup>40</sup>f. 5, op. 63, d. 471, l. 62, RGANI.

<sup>41</sup>274, 1, 33, 1, National Central Archives of Mongolia (UTA).

<sup>42</sup>Radchenko, 'Sino-Russian Competition', 112.

<sup>43</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 648, l. 21-23, RGANI. On Chinese obligations, see: f. 5, op. 49, d. 354, l. 151, RGANI.

<sup>44</sup>f. 5, op. 66, d. 691, l. 39, RGANI.

<sup>45</sup>f. 47, op. 285, d. 17, l. 210, AVP RF.

<sup>46</sup>f. 5, op. 67, d. 585, l. 21, RGANI.

## Eastern European plants and Soviet infrastructure

Regarding the construction of industrial facilities, Mongolian officials often preferred assistance from Eastern European countries to Soviet aid. European state-socialist countries, especially the GDR and Czechoslovakia, were more industrialised and technologically advanced than the Soviet Union and had established closer trade relations with the West.<sup>47</sup> Motivated to enhance their export portfolios, these countries perfected the export of industrial equipment and complete plants.<sup>48</sup> Mongolian officials forged relations with these countries to secure sophisticated technologies. Czechoslovakia aided with the construction of a high-tech hospital in Ulaanbaatar, providing all the equipment. The meat-processing plant in the capital was another high-tech facility constructed with the aid of GDR. Not only was the factory fitted with German equipment, but the GDR also mediated the securing of technical equipment from capitalist countries. As a result, the plant was fitted with machines from a British company. To cover the expenses for these acquisitions, the GDR provided a loan in foreign currency, amounting to US \$700,000. German trade relations with capitalist countries were key in sourcing Swiss dyeing pigments for another German-assisted facility – a carpet factory in Ulaanbaatar.<sup>49</sup> Providers from the Soviet Union lacked such capacities. However, Eastern European aid had some drawbacks. In the case of the silicate brick factory, the Poles only took the obligations to provide equipment, technical documentation, supply construction machinery and to send specialists to Mongolia for the supervision of construction and to train local cadres.<sup>50</sup> However, the agreement didn't mention any assistance in the provision of the required infrastructure for the plant, nor the labour required to render it operational. Mongolians tended to request industrial facilities, along with the housing and supporting infrastructure required for their effective operation. In most cases, Eastern European countries were unable to fulfil these requests. Hungary rejected the request to deliver the plant complete with housing and auxiliary facilities.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, the GDR refused to provide production facilities at a state farm complete with housing and new transport infrastructure despite the requests.<sup>52</sup> Hence, Mongolian actors had to resort to local construction companies for these tasks.

The major Mongolian construction companies capable of delivering such infrastructure projects were founded after the Second World War with Soviet and Chinese support. The period of 'peaceful coexistence' between the Soviet Union and China introduced large-scale collaborative projects in the country, such as the cross-country railroad *Druzhba* (Friendship), completed between 1940 and 1956.<sup>53</sup> Both Soviet and Chinese construction companies constructed dams, bridges, and power lines for the railway in Mongolia.<sup>54</sup> Since the early 1950s, Soviet companies in Mongolia had carried out the construction of housing, roads and railroads and other infrastructure projects.<sup>55</sup> In 1965,

<sup>47</sup>Jersild, *The Sino-Soviet Alliance*, 221.

<sup>48</sup>Jan Zofka, 'The China Market: East German and Bulgarian Industrial Facility Export to the PRC in the 1950s', *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'Histoire* 30:3 (2023), 452-72.

<sup>49</sup>Mongolei, Verhandlungen zum langfristigen Abkommen über den Warenaustausch im Zeitraum 1966-1970, DC20/19138/35, Bundesarchiv Berlin (BArch); f. 5, op. 64, d. 433, l. 176, RGANI.

<sup>50</sup>State construction council 1957-1968, 274, 1, 33, 17-18, UTA.

<sup>51</sup>f. 5, op. 67, d. 588, l. 86, RGANI.

<sup>52</sup>f. 5, op. 68, d. 1624, l. 174, RGANI.

<sup>53</sup>Radchenko, 'New Documents', 354-151.

<sup>54</sup>On Chinese obligations, see: f. 5, o. 49, d. 355, l. 232, RGANI; On Soviet, see: f. 38, op. 245, d. 27, l. 28-30, AVP RF.

<sup>55</sup>Dandyzhapyn Maidar, *Arkhitektura i Gradostroitel'stvo Mongolii* (Moscow: Stroiizdat, 1971), 172, 177, 183.

two construction companies were created by the Soviet Ministry of Industry Construction (*Trest Minpromstroia*) specifically focused on infrastructural development.<sup>56</sup> By 1975, the number of Soviet construction companies in Mongolia had grown to nine.<sup>57</sup> China also established its construction companies, capable of delivering housing and the provision of construction and infrastructure projects: roads, railroads and bridges, power lines, and water supply infrastructure.<sup>58</sup> Both Soviet and Chinese companies also developed residential districts in Ulaanbaatar. In contrast, archival documents indicate no evidence of any Eastern European construction companies with such capacities operating in Mongolia.

The obligation to provide essential infrastructure for the Polish silicate brick factory was taken by the Soviet Union. The Polish factory was one of the several Eastern European facilities provided within the efforts to develop Mongolian industry, along with a Czechoslovak cement factory and a Chinese metallurgical plant.<sup>59</sup> All these plants were to be located in Darkhan – a town in the northern Mongolian steppes.<sup>60</sup> The focus of Soviet assistance in Darkhan was to supply these facilities with all kinds of infrastructure, including water and heat supply, roads and railroad connections, and above all, fuel and energy lines.<sup>61</sup> The planning and construction of infrastructure in Darkhan was a massive project, which required the effort of more than 34 Soviet organisations.<sup>62</sup> Soviet planners emphasised the importance of matching the requirements of Chinese and Eastern European industrial facilities. They explicitly stated multilateral complementary development as a key task in their planning efforts and aimed to ‘resolve the issue of mutual coordination of facilities in Darkhan, being constructed with the help of several foreign countries’.<sup>63</sup> Soviet companies also took on obligations to provide power lines to Darkhan. All industrial facilities were to be powered by a thermal power station that would connect Mongolia to the Soviet Eastern unified electric power system via the Gusinozerskaia thermal power plant in Siberia. The decision to supply electric power from abroad speaks to the dependence of Mongolia on development from the Soviets. Despite the declared goals of developing domestic electricity generation capacities, large-scale development projects depended on Soviet energy and logistical infrastructure until the end of the socialist period. The Soviet construction company Trust No. 1 took obligations to build a high voltage line, railroad connections, temporary worker settlements and, later, permanent residential districts in the area.<sup>64</sup> Subsequent development of Eastern European plants was dependent on this Soviet infrastructure. Polish and Czechoslovak factories were both tied to Soviet infrastructure; their construction started only in 1962, after the Soviet construction companies prepared the site and provided all the utility lines.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, construction of a Bulgarian fur factory in the area only

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<sup>56</sup>Uchrezhdeniia po vneshneekonomicheskim sviaziam, f. 365, o. 9, d. 673, l. 35, Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Ekonomiki (RGAE).

<sup>57</sup>f. 5, op. 68, d. 1622, l. 28, RGANI.

<sup>58</sup>On Chinese construction company, see: f. 5, o. 49, d. 648, l. 30, 55; d. 843, l. 123, RGANI.

<sup>59</sup>Bavuu, ‘Razvitie Stroitel’sstva’, 50.

<sup>60</sup>D. Hall, ‘Economic and Urban Development in Mongolia’, *Geography: Journal of the Geographical Association*, 72:1 (1987), p.74.

<sup>61</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 648, l. 88, RGANI.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., l. 89. f. 46, op. 283, d. 17, l. 21, AVP RF.

<sup>63</sup>f. 42, op. 266, d. 18, l. 82, AVP RF.

<sup>64</sup>Gosstroii SSSR, f. 339, op. 3, d. 2100, l. 63-70, RGAE. See also: Melkonian, ‘Darkhan’, 90-93.

<sup>65</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 552, l. 52, RGANI.

started in 1972 when the territory was prepared, and all required infrastructure had been delivered by Soviet companies.<sup>66</sup>

The infrastructure constructed by Chinese companies similarly complemented the development projects of other countries. The Chinese built a thermal power plant in Sukhbaatar city which powered industrial facilities in the area.<sup>67</sup> Chinese assistance complemented the Soviet-assisted project of the Nalaikh coal mine, developed in 1955 as a major fuel source for the country.<sup>68</sup> When the main building of the mine was completed, the Mongolians asked for an additional budget for logistic infrastructure and housing.<sup>69</sup> This request was split between the Soviet Union and China: Soviet organisations took obligations to provide housing with a workers' club, while the Chinese provided transport infrastructure – buildings, roads, and a railroad – linking the mine to the capital.<sup>70</sup>

Eastern European countries were less motivated to lead the construction of their facilities. Infrastructure projects were expensive and labour-intensive. Instead of investing resources and labour in these projects, the export of industrial equipment met their interests better. Being based on infrastructure from other countries, these patterns of the division of labour highlight the hierarchies present in the Bloc. These hierarchies were exacerbated by the use of a migrant workforce in these development projects.

### Labour: Chinese migrant labourers and Soviet soldiers

Among the problems of Mongolian construction projects, the shortage of labour was the most significant. Mongolia possessed a predominantly rural population, almost completely lacking an urban working class. Despite all the forceful attempts to settle the country's nomadic population, they were still never able to cover the country's need for a workforce.<sup>71</sup> Mongolian construction projects therefore largely relied on a foreign workforce. The Soviet Union and Eastern European countries posted specialists to Mongolia. In 1959, there were 1,242 Soviet, 98 Czechoslovak, and 35 Bulgarian specialists working in Mongolia. These specialists were mostly skilled workers, with the majority having had a higher education.<sup>72</sup> The construction of such a large project as the East German printing workshop was supervised by only six German specialists: two engineers and four mounters.<sup>73</sup> Foreign specialists had strong financial motivations to go on trips to Mongolia and were consequently able to purchase cars and other luxury goods on their return home.<sup>74</sup> The role of foreign specialists was often limited to the supervision of construction and training of local cadres. The employment of specialists on low classified jobs was often disapproved of by the providing countries. For example, the Embassy of the GDR complained about the 'misuse' of their specialists sent to the carpet factory in

<sup>66</sup>f. 365, op. 6, d. 1874, RGAE.

<sup>67</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 648, l. 6, RGANI.

<sup>68</sup>f. 33, op. 220, d. 16, l. 8, AVP RF.

<sup>69</sup>f. 37, op. 240, d. 28, l. 3, AVP RF.

<sup>70</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 648, l. 55, RGANI.

<sup>71</sup>O. Myadar, *Mobility and Displacement: Nomadism, Identity and Postcolonial Narratives in Mongolia* (London: Routledge, 2020) 62-77.

<sup>72</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 355, l. 217, RGANI.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., l. 236.

<sup>74</sup>Anna Ivanova, *Magaziny "Berezka": Paradoksy Potrebleniia v Pozdnem SSSR* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2017), 87-92.

Ulaanbaatar. They saw it as an unacceptable situation that the Mongolian director was not 'listening to their advice and recommendations, and instead considers them merely as a workforce'.<sup>75</sup> A limited number of costly foreign specialists were unable to fulfil the labour demand for booming construction activity in the country.

In the 1950s, China supplied Mongolia with most of its construction workers. The provision of migrant workers was a particularly important aspect of Chinese assistance to Mongolia, which distinguished it from other donors. A major influx of Chinese workers started in 1956 and by the end of the decade, a total of 21,000 Chinese migrant workers had arrived in Mongolia.<sup>76</sup> The Chinese worked under two main types of contracts. The first category consisted of workers of Chinese construction companies. These were mainly rotational workers, coming to the country on temporary seasonal contracts to work on particular jobs, normally projects realised with Chinese assistance, including among them buildings in Ulaanbaatar, such as the Central Hotel, the State Department Store, and the Central Post Office.<sup>77</sup> The second category of Chinese workers came to the country to work for Mongolian companies. These workers were employed in all essential sectors of the economy, and particularly, at construction sites as carpenters, bricklayers, painters, plumbers, to the extent that 'literally any construction company in Mongolia relied on Chinese workers and no construction project is possible without them'.<sup>78</sup> Most projects constructed in Mongolia with the assistance of Eastern European states and the Soviet Union involved the labour of these workers. Chinese workers were employed in both Chinese, Mongolian and Soviet construction companies. For example, in 1959, the Soviet company for the construction of housing in the capital 'Forty thousand' employed 570 Chinese workers and another 226 Chinese workers were employed at the construction of the Soviet house building factory.<sup>79</sup> Out of 1,769 people employed on the construction of the Soviet-assisted Nalaikh coal mine, only 11% were from the Soviet Union, the rest were Mongolian and Chinese workers.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, hundreds of Chinese workers carried out the construction of Polish, Czechoslovak and German projects.<sup>81</sup> The Soviet Embassy gave a high assessment of these workers:

Regarding industrial, agricultural and communal facilities with technical assistance of socialist countries, it is impossible to not note the great role that Chinese workers who arrived in Mongolia in accordance with the 1955 agreement play in this matter. As qualified specialists, they work at all objects under construction with the help of the USSR, Hungary, and other countries.<sup>82</sup>

Soviet officials understood that their development projects relied on Chinese labour. When discussing the construction of housing and transport infrastructure in the country in 1956, Tsendenbal and Anastas Mikoyan considered solutions to help the labour shortage. According to Mikoyan, involving Soviet workers would not be possible, simply

<sup>75</sup>f. 5, op. 64, d. 433, l. 126, RGANI.

<sup>76</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 355, l. 219, RGANI; On Chinese involvement in Mongolia, see also: Radchenko, 'New Documents', 341-446.

<sup>77</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 355, l. 20, 231, RGANI.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, l. 223.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup>f. 39, op. 250, d. 23, l. 52, AVP RF.

<sup>81</sup>Around 200 people on East German printing works, and 300 on Czechoslovak assistance projects. See: f. 5, op. 49, d. 355 l. 223, RGANI.

<sup>82</sup>f. 41, op. 261, d. 22, l. 38, AVP RF.

because Mongolia couldn't afford them: 'for you to take the Soviet workers is very expensive'.<sup>83</sup> By contrast, he saw the involvement of Chinese workers as a generally acceptable solution, although suggested that it was a priority to develop the local Mongolian labour force. As he told Tsendenbal: 'in order for you not to end up with a mainly Chinese working class, you should develop your own working class'.<sup>84</sup> At the same time, Soviet leaders discussed the involvement of mass Chinese labour in other industrial projects in the Soviet Union.<sup>85</sup>

Indeed, Chinese labour was significantly cheaper for Mongolia than migrant workers from other countries. Chinese workers worked on the same conditions and received same salaries as Mongolian workers. The average salary of a Chinese worker was around MNT 180-300 (Mongolian tugriks) per month.<sup>86</sup> These salaries were fixed, even if Chinese workers overfulfilled the plan, their salaries would not change. The salaries of Eastern European and Russian workers were significantly higher. Russian workers in Mongolia received around RUB 450 per month, which was three times more than the salary of a similar construction site back home.<sup>87</sup> A German specialist earned between MNT 3,000 and 4,000 per month, which was ten times more than the average salary of a Chinese worker.<sup>88</sup> To compare, a Mongolian state farm employee earned only MNT 150 a month.<sup>89</sup> This was something of a similar pattern to other scenarios in China and Africa, where the Soviets were paid several times more than their local Chinese counterparts.<sup>90</sup>

The division between European and Chinese labourers was further reinforced by the language used. In Soviet reports, Chinese workers were referred to solely as workers (*rabochie*), despite the presence of highly skilled cadres from China in Mongolia. Highly skilled Chinese architects and engineers worked in Mongolian State Design Institute.<sup>91</sup> A more privileged term, 'specialists' (*spetsialisty*), was reserved for Soviet and European cadres. Being a 'specialist' did not necessarily imply a high level of qualification. The quality of Soviet specialists varied greatly. While in 1959, almost half of all Soviet 'specialists' had attained higher education, by 1973, more than 80% of Soviet 'specialists' had only received seven years of secondary education.<sup>92</sup>

The different attitudes of the Soviets towards their own workers and Chinese workers were further expressed physically. The housing conditions of Soviet workers were significantly different from often precarious living experiences of Chinese workers at Mongolian construction sites, where they often lived in barracks and other forms of temporary housing.<sup>93</sup> In other instances of East-South collaboration, Soviet and

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<sup>83</sup>Budyn Sumya, *Gerel Suuder: Yu. Tsendenbalyn Khuviin Temdeglelees [Light and Shadow, from Yu. Tsendenbal's Diary]* Translated by Sergey Radchenko (Ulaanbaatar: Ulsyn Khevelelin Kombinat, 1992), 91-94.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup>Austin Jersild, 'Socialist Advisers and the Dilemmas of the "Socialist World System": Sino-Soviet Exchange as a Model for Failure in Guinea-Conakry, 1950-64', *European Review of History* 30: 3 (2023): 436.

<sup>86</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 355, l. 220, RGANI.

<sup>87</sup>f. 5, op. 68, d. 1615, l. 99, RGANI.

<sup>88</sup>f. 5, op. 64, d. 433, l. 125, RGANI.

<sup>89</sup>Collective farms workers earned MNT 1815 a year: f. 5, op. 66, d. 692, l. 72, RGANI.

<sup>90</sup>Jersild, 'Socialist Advisers', 437.

<sup>91</sup>D. Bat, *Zurag Tosol* (Ulaanbaatar: Munkhyn useg, 2016), 196.

<sup>92</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 355, l. 217, RGANI; f. 5, op. 66, d. 692, l. 33.

<sup>93</sup>Nikolay Erofeev, 'Building the Space of Internationalism: Socialist Assistance to Mongolia in the 1950s-70s', in Marcus Cola and Paul Betts, eds, *Rethinking Socialist Space in the Twentieth Century* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, forthcoming).



European experts similarly tended to live in highly regulated expatriate communities, largely sealed off from contacts with locals.<sup>94</sup> Soviet reports often mention challenging living conditions for the Chinese workers:

More than half of Chinese workers continue to live with their families in temporary barracks and dugouts built by the workers themselves. There are significant difficulties in providing them with food, considering the specifics of their cuisine.<sup>95</sup>

Even though Chinese workers were paid less, they seem to be doing good job at construction sites. Soviet diplomats, often sceptical of Chinese activities, had to admit that ‘having sufficient qualifications, they [Chinese workers] are the backbone of teams for the construction of many large industrial facilities’.<sup>96</sup> However, despite heavily relying on Chinese workers in projects completed with Soviet assistance, their presence was mostly invisible in the official discourse. The Soviet and Mongolian press continually praised multinational collaboration as a characteristic of socialist internationalism but barely mentioned any involvement of Chinese workers in Soviet assistance projects. For example, the Soviet press praised the miners at the Nalaikh mine, who ‘declared’ a shock work month in commemoration of the Anniversary of the Revolution.<sup>97</sup> Mentioning that the mine was constructed with Soviet technical assistance, the press silently passed over the fact that most of the miners were from China. With the onset of the Sino-Soviet split, the presence of Chinese workers in the country was completely glossed over by the Soviet press.

The lack of proper accommodation and lower pay for the Chinese soon raised tensions within the Sino-Soviet collaboration. Chinese workers started expressing their discontent about their position in Mongolia. In 1957, ‘large groups of Chinese workers stopped coming to work, due to the poor conditions of their life’.<sup>98</sup> During a meeting with the Mongolian Minister of Construction in 1962, the representatives of Chinese specialists asked resentfully:

Why do you put the Russians above us? Where is the equality of fraternal peoples, about which you talk and write so much? Why do the Russians enjoy various kinds of privileges? The Russians live in good, spacious apartments, sometimes a small family would receive a 3-room apartment. A separate store is open for them, and Chinese specialists get less, up to 10 or 20 people in a single room, and have to eat somehow. Why are you putting us in an unacceptable position?<sup>99</sup>

The Sino-Soviet split exacerbated the tensions among Soviet and Chinese cadres. Instances of protests of Chinese workers and even fights became more frequent.<sup>100</sup> Some Chinese workers were accused of organising protests and prosecuted.<sup>101</sup> However, the growing political tension did not immediately bring Chinese assistance

<sup>94</sup>See the contributions of Mikulaš Pešta and Bogdan Iacob’s in Roth-Ey, *Second-Third World Spaces*.

<sup>95</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 355, l. 227-28, RGANI.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., l. 226.

<sup>97</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 455, l. 108, RGANI.

<sup>98</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 354, l. 162, RGANI; on Sinophobia in Mongolia, see: Franck Billé, *Sinophobia: Anxiety, Violence, and the Making of Mongolian Identity* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015).

<sup>99</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 648, l. 27, RGANI.

<sup>100</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 455, l. 133, RGANI.

<sup>101</sup>Jikun Gu, ‘The Intertwining of High-Level Interactions and Low-Level Exchanges: Chinese Workers in Mongolia, 1950-1964’, *China Review* 19:3 (2019), 114-15; Sergey Radchenko, *The Soviets’ Best Friend in Asia: The Mongolian Dimension of the Sino-Soviet Split. Working Paper No. 42* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2003).

to Mongolia to a halt. In 1963, a Chinese construction company continued operating in Mongolia with at least 3,000 workers. It carried out the construction of a complex of residential buildings in the capital, as well as the above-mentioned complementary infrastructure for the Soviet-constructed Nalaikh mine – a connecting asphalt road, and other smaller projects.<sup>102</sup> In the same year, a Soviet construction company was staffed with Mongolian and Chinese workers, as well as a ‘group of Soviet specialists’.<sup>103</sup>

Tensions were exacerbated in 1963, when China started putting their construction obligations on hold.<sup>104</sup> With such delays, the extent to which Soviet-supported projects were dependent on Chinese labour immediately became apparent. A group of Soviet economists arriving in Mongolia to inspect the implementation of the third Five-Year Plan (1961–65), labelled the Chinese companies as the major problem, threatening its execution. The most sensitive was the refusal of the Chinese to complete their obligations to provide over 230 thousand square meters of housing in the capital, planned at part of the five-year plan. Their report stated that China threaten the whole plan.<sup>105</sup> This five-year plan was developed with the extensive assistance of the Soviet State Planning Committee of the USSR.<sup>106</sup> The fact that it was dependent on China speaks to the fact of fundamental interdependency of the assistance of two countries.

Mongolian officials entered into negotiations with China, trying to find a solution to the crisis.<sup>107</sup> An attempt to break the impasse with Chinese workers was made at the highest political level, by Tsendenbal during his meeting with the Premier of China, Zhou Enlai in Beijing in 1963. Agreeing that Mongolia could not manage without Chinese workers, Tsendenbal suggested restricting the presence of Chinese workers in Mongolia to separate worker settlements and ‘designated sites’, thus limiting their contact with the rest of the population and the Mongolian authorities.<sup>108</sup> Archival documents confirm that similar policies were actually implemented. While the Chinese construction companies continued operating in the country, they did so largely in isolation, with little to no contact with the local workers.<sup>109</sup> Soviet reports indicated that the Chinese rarely left their settlements and did not travel around the country.<sup>110</sup> This is how Soviet observers described the construction of housing in Ulaanbaatar in 1966:

In one night, the planned site for the construction of the residential area is fenced and a security guard installed at the gate. Only then does construction begin. Buildings are not put into operation as they become ready, but rather mothballed until the entire district is completely ready, including the landscaping, greenery, and outdoor amenities. Then, in one night, the fence is removed and the whole residential area, all cleaned and freshly painted, is solemnly transferred to the Mongolian side. The requests of city authorities for the delivery of buildings as they become ready are not accepted.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>102</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 648, l. 30, RGANI.

<sup>103</sup>ibid., l. 29, RGANI.

<sup>104</sup>f. 5, op. 49, 646, l. 42, RGANI.

<sup>105</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 648, l. 44, RGANI.

<sup>106</sup>f. 5, op. 67, d. 585, l. 20, RGANI.

<sup>107</sup>Measures to protect the safety of Chinese workers, and custom privileges for them were discussed. See: f. 5, op. 49, d. 648, l. 45, RGANI.

<sup>108</sup>f. 100, op. 56, p. 495, d. 7, l. 1–19, AVP RF, see also: f. 5, op. 49, d. 646, l. 42, RGANI.

<sup>109</sup>f. 5, op. 1, d. 522, l. 56, RGANI.

<sup>110</sup>f. 5, op. 64, d. 433, l. 169, RGANI.

<sup>111</sup>Tsentralnyi nauchno-issledovatel'skii institute zhilishcha, f. P-149, o. 1-1, d. 3238, l. 22, Russian State Archive, Samara (RGAS).

After the Sino-Soviet split, the Chinese construction projects rather resembled military operations, aggressive not only towards the Soviets, but even towards the Mongolians. No contact during development was permitted, as all labour was carried out by foreign workers. After the direct involvement of Chinese labour in Soviet and Eastern European projects discontinued, Chinese companies continued operating in the country independently.

The Soviets kept a close eye on the activities of the Chinese. Reporting on the activities of the Chinese construction company, operating with at least 4,000 workers in 1965, they often used it as a reference point to discuss their own efforts.<sup>112</sup> Such comparisons became especially sensitive during the Sino-Soviet split. Yet, despite all the odds, Soviet experts had to admit that Chinese construction companies were in some respects more advanced than their own. While Soviet housing delivery in Mongolia suffered from delays and poor quality, the Chinese companies achieved significant progress in the country, assembling six large panel houses and one tall hotel building in Ulaanbaatar over the summer of 1965. They seemed to be more technologically advanced: the Chinese were constructing nine-story residential towers, while the Soviets didn't have such a capacity.<sup>113</sup> Chinese aid also offered more favourable economic terms. A Soviet diplomat reported that 'the Chinese are trying to convince the Mongols that China's economic assistance is more profitable, that Chinese workers build faster, better and cheaper, and receive wages on a par with the Mongols', while adding that such actions should be regarded as 'Chinese propaganda'.<sup>114</sup> Indeed, Chinese assistance was provided with 1% interest rates, as compared to 2% for Soviet assistance.<sup>115</sup> It was difficult for the Soviets to offer similar conditions. A particular problem emerged from the higher prices of Soviet workers. Using Chinese assistance as a reference point to look at their own assistance, Soviet diplomat remarked, for example, 'that the Mongolian side should not bear additional costs compared to the Chinese workers'.<sup>116</sup>

As the split became established, the involvement of the Chinese in the development of Mongolia started diminishing. In 1973, the Chinese construction company was closed, and most workers left the country, with unfinished work transferred to the Mongolian side.<sup>117</sup> It did not put an end to the Chinese presence in the country; in later years, the Chinese community in Ulaanbaatar was at least 6,000 people strong.<sup>118</sup> However, Soviet officials had to find alternatives to Chinese labour.<sup>119</sup> It was not easy to find contractors to carry out the construction of unfinished Chinese projects. The Nalaikh mine was left without sufficient personnel after the departure of the Chinese workers.<sup>120</sup> In 1963, Soviet officials asked the Mongolian Minister of Construction O. Tleikhan to help source labour for the reconstruction

<sup>112</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 843, l. 123; d. 355, l. 232, RGANI.

<sup>113</sup>f. 5, op. 1, d. 522, l. 56, RGANI.

<sup>114</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 843, l. 122, RGANI.

<sup>115</sup>f. 45, op. 280, d. 18, l. 113-14, RGANI.

<sup>116</sup>f. 46, op. 283, d. 17, l. 8, AVP RF

<sup>117</sup>Housing in the capital remained unfinished until it was transferred to Mongolia in 1973. f. 5, op. 66, d. 691, l. 8-9, RGANI.

<sup>118</sup>f. 5, op. 67, d. 587, l. 62-63, RGANI.

<sup>119</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 841, l. 44, RGANI. On unfinished Chinese facilities, see: f. 5, op. 66, d. 691, l. 7, RGANI. Unfinished Chinese plants were transferred to Mongolia in 1973. See: f. 5, op. 66, d. 694, l. 19, RGANI; f. 5, op. 66, d. 691, l. 9, RGANI. See also: Balazs Szalontai, 'From the Demolition of Monasteries to the Installation of Neon Lights: The Politics of Urban Construction in the Mongolian People's Republic', in Wasana Wongsurawat, ed., *Sites of Modernity: Asian Cities in the Transitory Moments of Trade, Colonialism, and Nationalism* (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2016), 169-70.

<sup>120</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 753, l. 162, RGANI.

of the Soviet embassy in Ulaanbaatar, without the need to resort to help from the Chinese. As an alternative workforce, Tleikhan suggested allocating Mongolian workers, admitting that their qualifications were lower than of Chinese brigades of the same company.

In 1964, Mongolian and Soviet officials discussed specific steps to find replacements for Chinese labour. The issue was to find suitable replacements so that 'the Mongolian side bear no additional costs compared to the Chinese workers'.<sup>121</sup> The Soviet Council of Ministers adopted a resolution to post 5,500 workers for housing construction, and, additionally, 'a military construction brigade' numbering 5,422 soldiers. In order to keep the prices of labour low, the Soviet Union allocated a RUB 5.2 million loan to cover the costs of the workers. In that way, a replacement was found: Soviet soldiers would replace Chinese workers. As the Soviet Union stationed more than 120,000 soldiers in Mongolia to counter the Chinese threat, they started being involved in construction. They received training in the professions of bricklaying, plastering, plumbing, welding, and others. Military construction brigades were assisted by a limited number of construction specialists, so the construction involved the training of military cadres in construction trades.<sup>122</sup> They were capable of delivering housing districts with the required infrastructure and communications, including foundations, plumbing, finishing, and the provision of urban amenities.<sup>123</sup> Among other facilities, their labour was integral in the construction of the Polish silicate brick factory and other Eastern European facilities in Darkhan.

The division of labour between the Soviet Union and China revealed hierarchical power structures between these two countries. The patronising attitudes of Soviet officials stood in sharp contrast with the reports of Soviet engineers discussing Chinese construction projects, who had to admit the higher technical level of Chinese projects. The privileged status of Soviet cadres compared to the Chinese are confirmed in other Soviet-Chinese encounters.<sup>124</sup> After the Sino-Soviet split, China pictured the Soviet Union as another of the imperial powers, eager to subjugate non-Western societies.<sup>125</sup> The patterns of the division of labour in Mongolia suggest that Chinese rhetoric was not groundless.

## Asymmetries between the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries in the 1970s

The silicate brick factory in Darkhan became operational in 1965. It was capable of delivering enough material for 6,000 apartments per year. As part of their assistance, the Poles took on responsibility to train the personnel of the factory. Cadres of the managerial personnel, including top managers – total of 70 prospective employees – were sent to Poland for training. By the time the factory was completed it was full of trained specialists and a Mongolian directorate of the factory was established.<sup>126</sup> During the first years after opening, the factory operated under the supervision of Polish specialists, who trained

<sup>121</sup>f. 46, op. 283, d. 17, l. 8, AVP RF.

<sup>122</sup>One typical construction brigade working in Darkhan consisted of 28 specialists and 480 military personnel. See: f. 339, op. 3, d. 2100, l. 149, RGAE.

<sup>123</sup>f. 339, op. 3, d. 2302, l. 37, RGAE.

<sup>124</sup>Jersild, 'Socialist Advisers', 433.

<sup>125</sup>Friedman, *Shadow Cold War*, 195.

<sup>126</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 753, l. 125, RGANI; See also: B. Aleksandrovskii, 'Sainbainu, Mongolia! Putevoi Ocherk', *Dal'nii Vostok* 3 (1968), 151. Other Eastern European countries were similarly involved training of all prospective employees. On Czechoslovakia, see: f. 5, op. 49-753, l. 125, RGANI. On the GDR, see: f. 41, op. 261, d. 22, l. 44-45, AVP RF.

new employees at the factory. Nurzhav Tsedenpil was one of the Mongolian workers training at the factory. After graduating from high school, she joined *Revsomol* (the Mongolian communist youth organisation) and found employment at the silicate brick factory. Under the guidance of Polish specialists, she completed a three-month course and received her professional qualification. Journalists reported that during her employment at the factory, Tsedenpil proposed more than 30 efficiency ideas, and most of them were aimed to facilitate other people's jobs.<sup>127</sup> However, few workers found the subjectivity of an urban industrial worker appealing. The re-training of former nomads rarely went smoothly, as they expressed their lack of confidence in the state-led projects and often showed non-compliance, leaving their jobs after training.<sup>128</sup> Lacking a labour force, the operation of the factory was not going smoothly, as the plant was only capable of operating at 25-30% of its design capacity and was highly unprofitable.

However, this factory was something of an exception to the general practice of Polish assistance. The development of the construction industry was an essential part of the Soviet model of development, yet this facility offered few economic benefits in return for the Poles. During the next decade, the facility required multiple additional investments, and only by 1975 did it reach its planned output.<sup>129</sup> In the following decades, Eastern European countries shifting towards more pragmatic, exacerbating asymmetries in the assistance to Mongolia. According to the theory of the socialist division of labour, Soviet officials attempted to present investments in Mongolia as mutually beneficial to Eastern European countries to convince both sides to invest for future gains. Talking to Tsedenbal in 1971, the Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin urged him to convince Eastern European countries to collaborate on a mutually beneficial basis:

CMEA member-countries should not think they ought to invest in Mongolia compulsively. Such views need to be dispelled. You should think about how to raise their interest in investing in your country. For example, Koreans work for us [...] with great activity and zeal. Bulgarians are also working in the northern part of our country. Obviously, there is a benefit to them.<sup>130</sup>

Kosygin's advice was consistent with the vision of the 'mutually-beneficial' principles of socialist collaboration, promoted by CMEA organs since 1971. While initially Moscow did not object to the pursuit of 'economic rationale' by smaller CMEA countries, soon, their excessive focus on their 'own benefit' started raising the concern of Soviet diplomats. In negotiating assistance projects with the Mongolians, they were interested in investing in the exploration of the natural resources of Mongolia and investing in plants capable of providing export products, such as leather and meat products. While negotiating assistance to Mongolia in 1971, officials of Bulgaria, Hungary, the GDR, and Romania all offered their help in the exploration of precious metals and the extraction of tin, molybdenum and gold – potentially the most lucrative sphere of investment.<sup>131</sup> Another profitable sphere of investments was the meat canning industry, due to its potential to

<sup>127</sup>A. Baranov, 'Darkhan - Kuznitsa Schast'ia', *Azija i Afrika segodnia* 7 (1979), 26-7.

<sup>128</sup>Elizabeth Endicott, *A History of Land Use in Mongolia: The Thirteenth Century to the Present* (New York, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 82-83.

<sup>129</sup>f. 5, op. 63, d. 471, l. 62; op. 67, d. 585, l. 41, RGANI..

<sup>130</sup>f. 5, op. 63, d. 469, l. 26, RGANI.

<sup>131</sup>f. 5, op. 63, d. 467, l. 270-72, RGANI.

provide export products.<sup>132</sup> As a result, Mongolia ended up with the excessive number of three meat-processing plants, constructed with the assistance of Bulgaria, the GDR and Hungary, while there was not enough supply for all three.<sup>133</sup>

More serious concerns were due to the continuing unwillingness of Eastern European countries to invest in the infrastructure of Mongolia. Being primarily responsible for the provision of infrastructure, Moscow bore the costliest expenditure. In the mid-1960s, 67% of all Soviet loans were invested in Darkhan, which mostly involved the construction of infrastructure for plants from other countries.<sup>134</sup> Soviet officials tried to push Eastern European countries towards taking responsibility for the development of infrastructure as well, at least for their own assistance projects. They tried to involve the GDR in housing construction and Czechoslovakia in the construction of roads and bridges but seemed to be largely unsuccessful.<sup>135</sup> Similarly, pressure was put on Hungary to participate in water supply infrastructure; this was also rejected by officials stating that such projects are ‘not in the interests of Hungary’.<sup>136</sup> The ‘pragmatic interests’ of Eastern European countries undermined the Soviet vision of a multilateral assistance to Mongolia. The development of consumer goods and food industry facilities with short payback periods increased asymmetries:

In contrast to the USSR, other CMEA countries devote special efforts to the construction of consumer goods and food industry facilities with short payback periods and produce, as a rule, export products. Moreover, their assistance stipulates a pre-emptive right of the country that provides economic assistance in the procurement of products manufactured by these facilities [...] which, to a certain extent, harms our interests.<sup>137</sup>

‘Pre-emptive’ right implies the hierarchical relationship which Soviet leaders claimed to want to avoid. The lack of the involvement in infrastructural development exacerbated imbalances in their cooperation further, as the report continued:

[CMEA countries] also take little part in the creation of a raw material base for enterprises built with their assistance, which is mainly developed with the help of the USSR. [...] Unlike the USSR, these countries generally do not provide housing or cultural institutions during the construction period.<sup>138</sup>

Asymmetries in the investment in infrastructure led to visible imbalances, as Soviet officials reported that the loans from Eastern European countries amounted for only 6% of the total loans of socialist countries. Despite this modest investment, production manufactured by Eastern European enterprises accounted for an ample share of 30-45% of total Mongolian exports.<sup>139</sup>

The reluctance of the Eastern European countries to participate in the development of Mongolia is consistent with the major trend where they became less motivated in participating in grand CMEA projects in the 1970s.<sup>140</sup> The myth of socialist modernity as a variant of industrial modernity had collapsed, and, as some countries faced economic

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<sup>132</sup>For Hungary, see: f. 5, op. 49, d. 842, l. 1, RGANI; for the GDR, see: f. 5, op. 63, d. 471, l. 6, RGANI; for Bulgaria, see: f. 5, op. 64, d. 433, l. 37, RGANI.

<sup>133</sup>f. 5, op. 67, d. 585, l. 21, RGANI.

<sup>134</sup>f. 5, op. 49, d. 648, l. 88, RGANI.

<sup>135</sup>ibid., l. 182, RGANI.

<sup>136</sup>f. 41, op. 261, d. 22, l. 15, 42-43, AVP RF.

<sup>137</sup>f. 5, op. 67, d. 585, l. 17, RGANI.

<sup>138</sup>ibid.

<sup>139</sup>ibid, l, 14-15.

<sup>140</sup>Mark and Betts, *Socialism Goes Global*, 96-99.



recession in the 1970s, the ‘solidarity fatigue’ also kicked in.<sup>141</sup> Despite its leadership position, Moscow was hardly in any position to command them.

## Conclusion

Once the silicate brick factory in Darkhan was completed, it became known as the ‘Polish factory’, as one reporter stated: ‘Let’s pop to the Poles – and we find ourselves at a silicate brick factory.’<sup>142</sup> In fact, the completion of a silicate brick factory in Darkhan required the collaboration of at least three different countries supplying infrastructure, construction materials, workers and specialists. It was a multilateral project, based upon a highly asymmetric assistance from the Soviet Union, China and Eastern European countries. Asymmetries in the assistance revealed the unequal positions between the North and South. The higher salaries of Russian and European specialists, and the unwillingness of smaller CMEA countries to invest more comprehensively in the country exacerbated these conflicts further. Despite the rhetoric of anti-imperialism and ‘mutually beneficial cooperation’, socialist development in Mongolia established a hierarchical system of the division of labour, in which responsibilities for the provision of technologies, infrastructure and labour were unequally distributed among various providers. Despite the fact that socialists largely failed to distinguish themselves from their capitalist rivals, socialist globalisation was in some aspects a distinction from the West. While recent literature has had a strong focus on the disconnection between ideology and everyday practice, the specifics of socialist economy and ‘socialist internationalism’ campaigns shaping relations between specialists should not be completely abandoned. The policies of ‘national specialisation’ put pressure on Eastern European countries to develop specific export sectors. Distinct motives within the socialist economy, such as the motivation to utilise the capacities of their industrial plants and to industrialise their export portfolio, influenced cooperation as well.

The international exchanges of socialist Mongolia weren’t limited to the countries discussed in this article. Apart from the major donors, the Soviet Union and China, there were exchanges with North Korea, and the fitting of their factories with British and Swiss equipment. Despite being the smallest economy in CMEA, landlocked socialist Mongolia was highly global, involved in multiple international exchange networks. Mongolian actors were involved in exchanges with all socialist countries. Mongolia provided its own aid to Vietnam and to Cuba.<sup>143</sup> After Mongolia joined the United Nations in 1961, and later other international organisations, these exchanges expanded to countries beyond the Socialist Bloc. Not limited to exchanges with specific socialist allies, exchanges in Mongolia involved expertise and technologies from various countries around the globe, both socialist and capitalist.

Multilateral complementary involvement was not unique to Mongolia, nor to socialist assistance. Construction sites are increasingly international, dependent on equipment, and specialists from various countries. Outsourcing labour to overseas workers has become a widespread tendency in global development. Moreover, multilaterally orchestrated construction and infrastructure projects have become

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<sup>141</sup>Schwenkel, *Building Socialism*, 91; Sara Lorenzini, ‘Comecon and the South in the Years of Détente: A Study on East–South Economic Relations’, *European Review of History* 21:2 (2014): 183–199.

<sup>142</sup>N. Khokhlov, ‘Darkhan’, *Izvestia* 136 (1976), 3.

<sup>143</sup>f. 5, op. 66, d. 691, l. 55, RGANI.

a significant trend of global urbanisation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>144</sup> Competing strategies to interconnect territories with the development of transport, energy infrastructures, and technical standards have emerged as a core element of international politics in today's multipolar world – from the European Union's Global Gateway to China's 'Belt and Road' initiative devised under Xi Jinping, which aims to connect 60 countries through infrastructure projects.<sup>145</sup> These projects rely highly on foreign technologies and specialist labourers. Scholars have demonstrated that these initiatives also engage in highly unequal international exchanges, in which the labour is conducted by migrant workers, creating inequality, and help entrenching a highly asymmetrical power dynamic and reinforcing dependency between the North and the South.<sup>146</sup>

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### Notes on contributor

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<sup>144</sup>Johannes Plagemann, Sreeradha Datta, and Sinan Chu, 'The Paradox of Competing Connectivity Strategies in Asia', *Third World Quarterly* 42:10 (2021).

<sup>145</sup>Todd H. Hall and Alanna Krolikowski, 'Making Sense of China's Belt and Road Initiative: A Review Essay', *International Studies Review* 24:3 (2022); Min Ye, *The Belt Road and Beyond: State-Mobilized Globalization in China 1998-2018* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Tim Winter, 'Silk Road Diplomacy: Geopolitics and Histories of Connectivity', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 26: 7 (2020).

<sup>146</sup>Elia Apostolopoulou, 'Tracing the Links between Infrastructure-Led Development, Urban Transformation, and Inequality in China's Belt and Road Initiative', *Antipode* 53:3 (2021).