

Mongolia and the Cold War

An international workshop on “Mongolia and the Cold War” met in Ulaanbaatar on March 19-20, 2004. Organized by the George Washington University Cold War Group and the Cold War International History Project, with Sergei Radchenko of the London School of Economics as their main person on the spot, the workshop was hosted by the Mongolian Foundation for Open Society in cooperation with the Pax Mongolica group. (See program and list of participants on the PHP website)

The Mongolian Cold War Study Group, a member of the PHP network since 2002, is linked closely with Pax Mongolica, a group of researchers focused on their country’s international role in a historical perspective. The workshop helped establish personal contact with members of the group, which the PHP had earlier supported with a small grant to initiate research in Mongolian archives. The workshop’s organizers subsequently took further initiative to encourage such research and present its preliminary results to an international audience, together with a substantial number of documents from Western and East European archives. The PHP contributed to this effort by providing additional documents from Eastern European archives on its website.

The workshop was preceded by a roundtable on “Secrecy and Freedom of Information” at the Mongolian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on March 18 (See program). The gathering revealed a striking contrast between the current Mongolian Law on State Secrets, which all but prevents access to archival documents of any significance from the Cold War era, and the remarkably liberal draft of a new law on freedom of information that promises to open them up. Although for the moment only a small number of such documents have been declassified the growing pressures for openness augur well for the future, in which support from abroad may be of crucial significance.

The papers presented at the workshop by both Mongolian and foreign scholars highlighted the country’s extraordinary dependence on Moscow throughout the Cold War. With Mongolia’s very sovereignty a recurrent subject for discussion, the theme of its incorporation into the Soviet Union came up time and again during the period. Symptomatic of the unequal “special relationship” was the pervasive interference in Mongolian politics of the domineering Russian wife of the country’s long-serving top leader, Yumjaagiyn Tsendenbal.

Mongolia’s strategic position was determined by the changing Soviet-Chinese relationship. Its pivotal role emerged after the end of the Soviet-Chinese honeymoon, during which Mongolia had gone so far as reducing its armed forces to a few thousand troops and even abolishing its ministry of defense. That situation changed after 1959, leading to extensive militarization of the country. Landmarks in this process were Mongolia’s abortive application for membership in the Warsaw Pact in 1963, seemingly a signal directed at China but possibly also a bid for modernization of the Mongolian armed forces, and the conclusion in 1966 of a treaty that resulted in massive Soviet military presence on Mongolian territory. Conversely, improvement in Soviet-Chinese relations during the 1980s proved a catalyst in the Soviet-engineered ouster of Tsendenbal

in 1984, whose excessive identification with the anti-Chinese line and personal failings had made him a liability.

The most dramatic episode of the preceding period, examined several conference papers, was the still mysterious attempt by Mao Zedong's former heir apparent Lin Biao to flee to the Soviet Union in 1971, resulting in his aircraft's fatal crash in Mongolia. The remnants of the machine could be seen on display near the "big ger" at Chingisiin Khuree that was the workshop's colorful site in the snowy steppe outside of the capital. Other topics on the agenda, explored particularly by members of the GWCW group using new Western and Eastern European sources, included Mongolia's controversial admission to the United Nations and the difficult normalization of its relations with the United States.

The concluding roundtable discussion explored the prospects of international cooperation to follow-up the workshop's pioneering accomplishments. The GWCW and CWIHP intend to take the lead in organizing further conferences with Mongolian scholars. The PHP can best contribute to these efforts by responding to initiatives it has invited from Pax Mongolica.

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