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Review by Andrei Kozovoi, University of Lille

Robert Hornsby’s article is based on original research and deals with the foreign policy of the Komsomol during the post-Stalin Cold War. Established shortly after the Bolshevik revolution, the Soviet youth league was a handmaiden to the Communist Party, particularly preoccupied with turning the next generation into ‘New Men,’ the builders of Communism. The Komsomol’s primarily functions were domestic or ‘defensive,’ which can be summarized as follows: to mobilize youth for the ‘building of Communism,’ such as the ‘Virgin Lands’ campaign during Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s tenure; to educate youth in all things Communist, making them aware of the ‘world class struggle’; to protect them from ‘bourgeois’ influences (including Western ‘Trojan horses’ such as films – the most famous example being the campaign against the western *The Magnificent Seven* in 1962); but also to uncover and help bring to justice young ‘deviants,’ like delinquents (*khuligany*) and ‘social parasites’ (*tuneyadtsy*), including prostitutes, beggars, religious men, and even poets without a respectable occupation, as was the case with Joseph Brodsky.

As Hornsby demonstrates, the Komsomol also had an important ‘offensive’ function beyond Soviet borders, especially after Premier Secretary Joseph Stalin’s death. The author argues that it made “a substantial and distinct contribution to the Soviet Union’s expanding its influence abroad,” by helping to formulate and sustain the country’s international relations, while competing with the West for the ‘hearts and minds’ of youngsters around the globe (85). The Komsomol fulfilled foreign goals with the help of organizations such as the USSR Committee of Youth organizations (KMO) and Sputnik, an agency which specialized in youth tourism, founded in 1956 and 1958 respectively. During their first two years of existence, KMO and Sputnik contributed to several domestic propaganda campaigns teaching youth the virtues of ‘internationalism.’ The KMO took part in the media crusade against the French, British, and Israeli attempt to win back the Suez Canal in 1956, and helped organizing the Moscow Festival of Youth and Students in 1957, an unprecedented event for the sheer number of foreign youths coming from across the Iron Curtain.

The core of the article deals with Komsomol operations in the Third World, which became an arena of confrontation and superpower rivalry in the context of de-colonization. Hornsby states that “aid and expertise
certainly did help to build bridges and consolidate relationships already in progress” and offers many examples to substantiate his claim (89). Via such front organizations as the ‘World Federation of Democratic Youth,’ the Komsomol sent delegations of young Communists all over the world to help rebuild countries after civil wars and offer medical support in the wake of natural disasters. The Komsomol also helped teach literacy to the local population, developed agriculture and industry, built bridges and railways, provided rudimentary journalism training, and even contributed to the development of sports and cinema. All this was done with a political agenda in mind: to demonstrate the benefits of Soviet-style socialism. The Komsomol conducted its foreign operations while hosting students from abroad in a large network of schools. The investment was worth it, as those pupils were soon to become important political players in their native countries. According to Hornsby, this was particularly crucial for the Marxist parties operating in underground or semi-legal conditions, as in Uruguay or in Salvador, which were in dire need not only of financial assistance, but also courses on “partisan struggle and propaganda work among the masses” (93).

The Komsomol’s efforts to ‘build bridges’ with Third-World countries was far from a success story, however. Ties were built and nurtured in Afghanistan at the end of the 1970s to some varying degree of success, but that did not stop the latter from turning its back on the USSR, an act which ended with the invasion in 1979. Around the same time, the Komsomol found itself powerless when the ‘Third World pupils of 1917’ began spreading messianic doctrines of their own – Cuba in Latin America, as well as China in South-East Asia and also in South Africa.

Hornsby’s article is an important contribution to the history of the Cold War from the Soviet perspective. There is much information on the modus operandi of the Soviet youth league’s network in the Third World, which was engaged in selling its model to the developing countries in the context of an increased superpower confrontation. This said, I would like to point out several shortcomings that could be addressed in future publications. My first concern is with the paper’s argument: to show that “competition for youth was more than just a sideshow in the Cold War” (88) is an important task, but the demonstration lacks a deeper analysis of the sources, and requires a more thought-through structure. As it is, the article’s framework, which is indicated by the two subtitles -- (a) ‘spread the word to the developing world’ and b) ‘at the sharp end of the Cold War’ – does not reflect the basic elements of the argument, while the narrative is too descriptive, cataloguing examples of operations abroad, and has a tendency to paraphrase Komsomol reports, or worse, to take them at face value for the sake of the argument. This could have been avoided had the author addressed the crucial question of the sources, but he only mentions this issue en passant in the conclusion.

Another problem with the plan chosen by the author is that it renders it difficult to see how the Komsomol adapted to the evolving context of the superpower confrontation and tried to improve upon its weaknesses, including learning through collaboration with Western organizations. I have briefly addressed these issues in two articles on Sputnik, which are unfortunately not mentioned in the article’s footnotes. A sharpened argument would have necessitated the substitution of the lengthy description of the youth mobilization campaign during the Vietnam war, which brings nothing to the main argument, with a deeper analysis of a specific Komsomol operation conducted abroad, including its local impact. As it is, the paper ends with the unsubstantiated statement that “international issues… resonated deeply with lots of young people and won the Soviet regime some genuine credibility in places” (100). Finally, one wonders how things ended during

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Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s time, and how the protagonists’ personal agendas (i.e., the Komsomol officials Alexander Semichastny, Sergey Pavlov, Yevgeni Tyazhelnikov) could have influenced the international policy of the organization. At the very least, the author could have addressed the possibility that there was some Kremlin infighting involved, and presented Komsomol in a more ambivalent light, not just as a ‘machine’ serving blindly the Party. Despite these reservations, this paper fills an important gap in the historiography.

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