
https://hdiplo.org/to/AR1212
Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Lori Maguire | Production Editor: Christopher Ball

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The history of Soviet-Iranian relations since the 1970s has received renewed attention in recent years. As new documents emerged at the State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI) and the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) in Moscow, an increasing number of memoirs and eyewitness accounts were published in Russia, and more scholars conducted interviews with former members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) who were involved with foreign policy, a new historiography that focused on Soviet attitudes and policies toward Iran developed. Scholars such as Jeremy Friedman, Timothy Nunan, and Artemy Kalinovsky pioneered that historical re-assessment.¹ Dmitry Asinovskiy’s earlier article was also part of that trend.² Likewise, my book has dealt with that issue in the context of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.³

This new historiography has grappled with a seemingly intractable puzzle: to which extent could the Soviet Union and the Islamic Republic of Iran have found common ground in the late 1970s and 1980s? The two authoritarian regimes professed radical and antagonistic ideologies—Communism and Islamism—that weighed heavily on how decisionmakers in Moscow and Teheran saw the world. Everything seemed to oppose the USSR and Iran. However, in many ways, their opposition remained subdued in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution of 1978–1979. Policymakers in Moscow thus especially tried to build good relations with Teheran. While this strategy failed, leading to a cooling in relations after 1983, the two countries still managed to find points of convergences by the late 1980s. Moscow and Teheran then even struck an agreement on Afghanistan. The USSR had intervened there in 1979 to support its allies of the People’s


Democratic Party of Afghanistan, the Afghan Communists, and fight the Mujahideen, the Islamic anti-Communist insurgency (half-heartedly) supported by Iran.4

Asinovskiy’s new article in Cold War History adds to this growing historiography, providing insights into how policymakers in Moscow conceptualized the Iranian Islamic Revolution. Focusing on the thinking and writings of Rostislav Ulianovskii, deputy head of the CPSU International Department and an influential policymaker in the 1970s and early 1980s, Asinovskiy shows that the Soviet Union’s early support for the Islamic Revolution was not solely pragmatic anti-Americanism in the context of the Cold War but rather fit into a complex ideological conception. Only after the Iranian Islamists led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini got rid of the various leftist groups in Iran, including the Tudeh Party (an Iranian Communist Party that was allied to Moscow) in 1983, did Ulianovskii accept that the Iranian revolution would not be going the “correct way” i.e., that there would not be a rapprochement with the USSR (62-63).

As Asinovskiy convincingly shows, Ulianovskii’s support to the Iranian Revolution was grounded in his conception of Communist development and his belief in the capacity of Third World countries to bypass capitalism on their way to Communism. Islamist Iran was seen as being indeed “anti-imperialist” and therefore having entered the “non-capitalist path of development” (52). To many experts in the International Department, these were not empty ideological incantations: Ulianovskii and others were seriously re-conceptualizing the paths to Communism at a time when Soviet leaders believed that the “world was going their way” from Latin America to the Horn of Africa to Afghanistan.5 In this regard, the necessity to adjust the traditional Communist playbook for the International Department was also rooted in a wish to take advantage of the ongoing decolonization and sympathy for the USSR in much of the Third World.

Asinovskiy follows other scholars who have stressed the importance of ideology in understanding the Kremlin’s decisionmaking in foreign policy.6 It appears indeed clear that in many instances the Soviet Politburo was driven not only by geostrategic calculations, but also a sincere belief in the final victory of Communism. As has been emphasized by numerous former Soviet policymakers, ideology was the always present background against which foreign-policy decisions were taken.7 As the story of the “non-capitalist path of development” shows, Marxist-Leninist ideology had, however, undergone significant distortion by the 1980s. The International Department had thus to make extensive efforts to reconcile the Marxist-Leninist dogma with the realities of the international system. Some Soviet dissidents already noted that issue in the 1980s. In his famous book, Nomenklatura, Mikhail Voslensky made fun of the idea of the “non-capitalist path of development,” quipping that any country that even remotely aligned with the USSR in terms of its foreign policy suddenly was re-categorized as being a proto-socialist society.8

Be that as it may, the historical debate about the competition between ideology and pragmatism in Soviet decisionmaking remains today as acute as ever and Asinovskiy’s article offers a useful new perspective.9

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4 Friedman, Ripe for Revolution, 211-62; Klimentov, A Slow Reckoning, 156-64.
7 Klimentov, Slow Reckoning, 42-43.
8 Mikhail Voslensky, Nomenklatura (Moscow: Zakharov, 2016 (1990)): 481.
Finally, it is also worth mentioning that this debate is not purely historical, as it ties to the debates about decisionmaking in present-day Russia. President Vladimir Putin’s actions, including the invasion of Ukraine, are also driven by and justified with both realist and ideological arguments.10

Another interesting point Asinovskiy’s article raises has to do with the relations between the superpowers and their clients during the Cold War, a topic that has also gained increased attention in the past fifteen years.11 As we now know, various local proxies and clients had significant agency during the Cold War, and both superpowers struggled in keeping them in line. Despite depending for economic and military support on the USSR and the United States, these local actors regularly acted at cross-purposes to their patrons’ interests. In his article, Asinovskiy similarly shows that the relation between Moscow and the Tudeh was not one of one-sided control. As he writes, “relations between the Tudeh and the International Department were mutually influential, and both parties reinforced the other’s ideological convictions” (64). In fact, Ulianovskii’s assessment of the revolution was shaped by his interactions with the Tudeh, especially with Nureddin Kianuri, who ascended to lead it with Moscow’s support.

Overall, Asinovskiy’s article is a great contribution to the scholarship on Soviet-Iranian relations. It is to be especially commended for relying on numerous recently declassified Politburo and International Department documents from RGANI. To my knowledge, this is one of the first works (if not the first one) to do so, highlighting its importance for the field.

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