

**Jan C. Behrends.** *Die erfundene Freundschaft: Propaganda für die Sowjetunion in Polen und in der DDR (1944-1957).* Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2005. 450 S. EUR 49.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-412-23005-0.



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## Soviet Friendship Propaganda in Poland and the GDR

Aside from the many studies on the GDR, not many monographs on communist regimes in individual eastern European countries have been published, but there is every reason to be optimistic. Research on these regimes has come far in the relatively short period since 1989. Greater access to archival sources in Russia and eastern Europe has enabled scholars to move beyond the ideological assumptions of the Cold War and to expand our understanding of the Soviet Bloc by means of cultural and sociolinguistic studies of communist discourse.

Jan Behrends's book is a welcome addition to the assorted works that examine postwar relationships between the Soviet Union and eastern Europe. *Die erfundene Freundschaft* is a "transnational propaganda history" (p. 11) that focuses on Soviet propaganda in Poland and the Soviet Occupation Zone/German Democratic Republic from 1944-56. It pays particular attention to the role of friendship societies in attempting to enforce loyalty to communist regimes in Poland and East Germany.

The book is a revised edition of Behrends's 2004 dissertation; although it cites several works published afterwards, the book still follows the traditional structure of a

dissertation. The organization of the book is chronological and it uses a traditional comparative approach; the stories of Soviet-Polish and Soviet-East German friendship relations are told separately but similarities and differences between the two national contexts are highlighted in separate sections.

The first chapter provides background information on propaganda during the Second World War and chapter 2 offers a whirlwind tour of the myths and methods of Soviet agitators' efforts to appeal to foreigners. In elaborating a discourse about a utopian Soviet Union, Behrends emphasizes the importance of 1930s intellectual travelogues and socialist realist literature, without delving deeply into either subject. Chapter 2 then moves on to the immediate postwar period, when many inhabitants of both countries saw the Red Army as an occupier rather than a liberator. Reluctant to acknowledge this perception, Soviet authorities dealt with it by increasing the intensity of anti-fascist sentiment in their propaganda. The Soviet Union continued to receive international delegations that were expected to note its remarkable recovery from wartime devastation and the contin-

ued social development in the GDR and Poland. National Socialist Germany, of course, shouldered the blame for any shortcomings.

The following three chapters deal with Soviet-Polish and Soviet-German propaganda relations and dissect the problems, strategies, and processes of Soviet propaganda in the two countries. Chapter 3 focuses on Soviet mobilization of like-minded people in Poland and the Soviet Occupation Zone in 1944-49. In order to reach the masses, the Soviet Union had to alter its propaganda strategy by relying increasingly on mass activities. While Nazi Germany was the perfect scapegoat when trying to win the support of Poles and Germans, it soon became clear that the appeal of the other great postwar superpower, the United States, was going to be a problem. In response, Soviet authorities started an anti-American propaganda campaign, one that became more intense in the Soviet Occupation Zone than in Poland.

High Stalinism and the accompanying cult of the leader are covered in chapter 4, which focuses on the years 1949-55. The staging of celebrations, festivals, and campaigns, as well as the organization of "friendship months" and the work of friendship societies succeeded in broadcasting a rather monotone picture of the Soviet Bloc, but the processes of sharing this information were quite different in the two countries. The Sovietization of Poland started earlier and was further-reaching, for example, in the introduction of the Russian language in schools and politics, than in the German Democratic Republic. Overall, this period was marked by efforts to shape a collective memory and create new social values by the means of reproducing and imitating Soviet mass celebrations and rituals. With the exception of marking problems in transmitting these values to women and youth, official sources are rather silent about popular reception of the propaganda during this time.

A final chapter deals with three big crises in the invented, or rather enforced, Soviet-Polish and Soviet-German friendships: Stalin's death March 3, 1953, the national uprising in the GDR on June 17, 1953, and the year 1956, which witnessed both Nikita Khrushchev's Secret Speech and substantial unrest in Poland. Staged mourning for Stalin temporarily strengthened the ruling parties in Poland and the GDR, demonstrating to Moscow that they were able to mobilize the public and control it at the same time. The author concludes, however, that the uprisings in the GDR and in Poland both showed that despite Soviet propaganda and efforts to stifle national traditions and mentalities, people organized themselves

based on behavior familiar to them from earlier contexts, such as the labor movement in Germany and the tradition of resistance to foreign occupiers in Poland. In Poland, the anti-Soviet charisma of Wladyslaw Gomulka helped the Polish United Workers' Party regain strength in the fall of 1956. In East-Germany, however, the SED's strong dependence on Moscow in addition to Soviet agitators' immediate intervention with strengthened friendship and propaganda programs helped restore the SED's power. The fact that the regimes both stabilized afterwards derived in large part from the fact that both governing parties regained their strength after the crises.

Behrends's overall analysis is guided by three main categories: structures of power, dominant discourses, and public reception of Soviet propaganda in Poland and East Germany. The final category has been seen as the most problematic when studying communist regimes, since public opinion was monitored and suppressed. Behrends is aware of all the problems inherent in sources produced by the authorities and his analysis of reports on the popular mood (*svodki*) sent to central authorities and the rumors reported in them is balanced, as is his overall command of primary and secondary sources. Having also studied Soviet friendship societies, I have wondered about their viability for analyzing popular opinion, but I have come to the conclusion, and Behrends's study strengthens my belief, that cultural studies of communist front organizations can, in connection with other sources, help cast light on the popular mood of those who participated in their activities. Still, circumspection must be encouraged in drawing conclusions about public opinion in the Soviet Bloc and Behrends's work is exemplary in this regard.

Besides the friendship societies, several other types of front organizations, such as youth and women's organizations, merit further study. One cannot expect all of them to be included in a single study, but given Behrends's emphasis on mass celebrations and festivals, one cannot but help wonder why he omitted a discussion of the 1955 World Festival of Youth. Also, in his final evaluation of the role of the friendship societies, Behrends misdates the reorganization of the Soviet All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) to September 1957 instead of February 1958. Behrends is probably correct about the increased autonomy of the national branches of the friendship societies following this reorganization, the purpose of which was to put more weight on domestic work and to counter perceptions of the friendship societies as powerless puppets of the Kremlin catering only to foreign fellow travelers.

But while the reorganization of cultural institutions in the Soviet Union certainly changed the way Soviet propaganda was organized, the organization replacing VOKS (the Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, SSOD) continued to have contact with and monitor friendship societies in foreign countries.

Despite the author's insistence that the transnational perspective adds a new level of analysis, it is difficult to see how the study is transnational rather than comparative. The book is quite successful in showing how the Soviet authorities struggled with different national contexts; applying the same analytical categories to the historical and national circumstances facing postwar Poland and the GDR effectively draws out the differences between each country. Still, the author's sometimes unstable use of the terms "history of relations," "transnational," "comparative perspective," and—the term that attempts to combine them all—"entangled histories" (p. 373), manages to dilute rather than strengthen his claim to transnationalism. But these are more observations than criti-

cism: the comparison is certainly worthwhile and highly enlightening.

The memory of war and the fear of a revived German state played a large role in the implementation of communist regimes in both Poland and East Germany; Soviet policy and international postwar politics complicated the communist takeover in eastern Europe. Behrends succeeds in telling us a part of the story not told in detail before, namely the strategies and effects of Soviet propaganda in these two countries. As a general rule, it seems that there was no Soviet master plan on how to build popular democracies in the East Bloc, and Behrends's study both confirms and complicates this maxim. *Die erfundene Freundschaft* will not only be read by those interested in twentieth-century German or Polish history, but also by those interested in Soviet history—especially the study of Soviet propaganda. It is a fine book that adds to our understanding of Soviet propaganda strategies, communist rule in eastern Europe, and the conflicts within both Poland and the GDR as the Soviet Union forced its friendship upon these two states.

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