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Review by **Chi-kwan Mark**, Royal Holloway College, University of London

The Cold War in the second half of the twentieth century was a global conflict in which the two superpowers competed for power and influence not only in Europe but also within the newly independent states of the Third World. In East Asia, the Cold War took shape in 1950 with the conclusion of the Sino-Soviet alliance and later the outbreak of the Korean War. As in other parts of the Third World, the extension of the Cold War to Asia confronted the United States, Britain and their European allies with a foreign policy dilemma: whether the Chinese Communists and other Asian communists were Soviet puppets in a global superpower competition or genuine nationalists pursuing their own socialist path to modernity. In 1950, whereas the U.S. administration held the view that it was facing an international communist monolith, the British government believed that Maoist China would turn out to be more Chinese than communist in the long-term.

More than twenty years earlier, Britain faced a similar communist threat in Asia. In his innovative, insightful and carefully written article, Antony Best examines how the British were "virtually at war with Russia" (in the words of the Permanent Under-Secretary at the British Foreign Office, Sir William Tyrrell) in China, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia from 1923 to 1940 (210). Arguing that a "Cold War" of sorts characterized pre-1945 Anglo-Soviet interactions, Best challenges the conventional periodization of the "orthodox Cold War" (218) by highlighting similarities and continuities, as well as major differences, in East Asian international relations across the divide of 1945. As a specialist in inter-war international history, Best also calls for scholars to devote more attention to the relatively neglected sub-period of the 1920s and early 1930s, and to under-studied topics such as Anglo-Soviet relations rather than focusing on the rise of Germany and Italy culminating in the Second World War (or the "all roads lead to 1939" approach) (207).

Anglo-Russian strategic rivalry in Asia had a long history. During the nineteenth century, British explorers and their official patrons were involved in the 'Great Game' with the

Russians in Central Asia; by the turn of the century, Britain responded to Russia's expansionist designs in Manchuria by forming an alliance with Japan. The coming to power of the Bolsheviks and the formation of the Comintern in the 1920s brought Britain's fear of its traditional rival to a new level. As Akira Iriye argued more than four decades ago, between 1922 and 1927, the Soviet Union was the most active agent of change in the Far East, striving to create a new international order that replaced the "diplomacy of imperialism."¹ In China, the Comintern assisted in the formation of a united front between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with the aim of overthrowing the treaty-port system dominated by the British imperialists. The first major challenge to British trading and colonial interests came on 30 May 1925, when British police in the International Settlement in Shanghai fired on and killed a number of Chinese demonstrators. The incident sparked further demonstrations and strikes as well as a protracted boycott of British goods in southern China, which seriously disrupted the economy of Hong Kong. British intelligence suggested that the boycott and strikes were directed and manipulated by Soviet diplomats and the Comintern. The perceived Soviet threat to British interests was not confined to China, but was also manifested in Southeast Asia and Central Asia. In British Malaya, for example, the local branch of the KMT, presumably backed by the Soviets, was suspected of disseminating communist propaganda, and was forcibly closed down by the authorities. The Soviet Union, moreover, was found to be meddling in British domestic politics: during the 1926 General Strike, it openly provided funds to the National Union of Mineworkers.

Of the two major British political parties, the Conservatives took a more alarmed view of the Soviet menace in Asia, since anti-communism was for them "an essential part of party identity" (207).² In Parliament, 'die-hard' Conservative MPs frequently talked of severing diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Yet in 1926, the Conservative government under Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin was divided over the recent events in China. Whereas the First Lord of the Admiralty, the Secretary of State for India, and the War Office held that the Comintern was behind the anti-British activities in order to facilitate the 'sovietization' of China, the Foreign Office was inclined to believe that the KMT under Chiang Kai-shek, once it unified the country, would throw off the yoke of Bolshevik control. The Labour Party, too, was sympathetic to the force of Chinese nationalism, while criticizing the right-wing Tories for exaggerating the Soviet threat. The deterioration of the situation in China in early 1927, however, hardened the attitude of Conservative ministers (notwithstanding the Foreign Office's 1926 'Christmas memorandum' that called for future negotiation with a unified China about treaty revision). The KMT's recovery of Hankow in January and the consequent threat to Shanghai propelled the Cabinet to send an expeditionary force to defend the International Settlement of the city. Outside China, Britain was irritated by Moscow's infringements of the terms of the Anglo-Soviet Trade

¹ Akira Iriye, *After Imperialism: The Search for a New Order in the Far East 1921-1931* (Cambridge: Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 3-4.

² On this point, Best draws on G. C. Webber, *The Ideology of the British Right, 1918-1939* (London: Croom Helm, 1986).

Agreement of 1921, which prohibited Bolshevik propaganda against the British Empire. Concerned about Soviet subversive activities at home, British ministers ordered the London police to raid the All-Russian Co-operative Society's premises, and in its aftermath announced the breaking off of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union on 26 May.

In fact, the Conservatives saw the Soviet threat to British trading and colonial interests as well as domestic stability "in apocalyptic terms" (213), a view that was not shared by other countries such as Japan and America. In mid-April, Chiang proved himself to be a committed nationalist rather than a stooge of Moscow by turning against the CCP and eventually expelling the Comintern's representatives from China. As Best shrewdly observes, the British perception of a serious Soviet menace in the mid-1920s might be attributed to "the lack of alternative enemies" in a relatively stable international system and the Tories' "natural oversensitivity regarding the challenge from the left" in the United Kingdom (213).

During the 1930s, the Soviet Union continued to be a subject of concern for Britain and particularly the intelligence services: the Comintern remained active in Southeast Asia, while the CCP established a number of rural soviets in south and central China. Nonetheless, suspicion of the Soviets now took place in a different international context as a result of the rise of Germany, Italy and Japan, which eclipsed Russia as revisionist powers in Europe and Asia. Together with the assessment that the Red Army could not project its power across Russia's borders on a massive scale, the British regarded the Soviet Union as "a potential threat," but not "the priority" in foreign policy (215). To Britain, Japan's seizure of Manchuria in 1931 and its growing conflicts with Russia over the latter's maritime provinces, Inner Mongolia, and Sinkiang were not altogether unfavourable developments. The National government and particularly the Conservatives which dominated it after 1935 perceived that Japan's rise would provide a bulwark against any Soviet encroachments in Asia, while allowing Britain to concentrate on the German threat in Europe. After the Japanese started their full-scale war against China in July 1937, the Soviets responded by providing arms and advisers to Chiang's government. In Europe, Anglo-Soviet relations deteriorated rapidly following the conclusion of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in August 1939 and Germany's invasion of Poland shortly afterwards that marked the onset of the Second World War. Only after Germany invaded France and the Low Countries in May 1940 and Russia in June 1941 did Britain and the Soviet Union gradually forge a 'Grand Alliance' together with the United States.

By integrating intelligence and domestic politics into his analysis of foreign policy and diplomatic relations, Best has written an interesting and important article about the British perceptions, concerns and dilemmas regarding Soviet activities in Asia, which bear a striking resemblance to the encounters between Western powers and Third World countries during the 'orthodox Cold War' of the post-1945 period. In this context, he notes the development of "a Cold War mind-frame" on the part of those British figures whose government services covered both the inter-war and post-war periods such as Sir William Strang and Frank Roberts (219). But there were also significant discontinuities, as Best reminds us. The most important change after 1945 was the transformation of the Soviet Union into one of the two superpowers capable of projecting its power worldwide (albeit

to a lesser extent than the United States). There were other major differences between the two 'Cold Wars', which Best might have developed further. First, the Soviet Union was no longer the most active agent of revolutionary change in Asia (at least until Moscow adopted a more pro-active Third World policy in the mid-1950s or even later in the mid-1960s): Communist China was. In 1949 the Chinese and Soviet leaders agreed on a 'division of labour' in the promotion of world proletarian revolution, with China focusing on the East and Russia on the West. If the Soviet Union was not in the driver's seat in the Asian Cold War, neither was Britain the most significant player of the capitalist camp. After 1945 and particularly since the Korean War, the United States assumed the burden of confronting Third World revolutions, many of which were seen as Beijing- or Moscow-inspired struggles rather than genuine nationalist movements. Unlike the inter-war Anglo-Soviet strategic and ideological rivalry, the American-Chinese confrontation in post-war Asia would have more disastrous and far-reaching consequences.

Chi-kwan Mark (D.Phil., Oxford) is Lecturer in International History at Royal Holloway College, University of London. He is the author of *Hong Kong and the Cold War: Anglo-American Relations 1949-1957* (Oxford University Press, 2004) and *China and the World since 1945: An International History* (Routledge, 2012). His research interests cover British-American-Chinese relations during the Cold War and Hong Kong's colonial and international history. He is currently completing a monograph on the 'everyday Cold War' between Britain and China, combining international, national and local perspectives.

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