Science Diplomacy and Soviet-American Academic and Technical Exchanges

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Summary

The 1958 Lacy-Zarubin agreement on cultural, educational and scientific exchanges marked decades of people-to-people exchanges between the United States and the Soviet Union. Despite the Cold War tensions and mutually propagated adversarial images, the exchanges had never been interrupted and remained unbroken until the Soviet Union dissolved. This essay argues that due to the 1958 general agreement and a number of co-operative agreements that had the status of treaties and international acts issued under the authority of the US State Department and the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the exchanges could not proceed without diplomatic supervision. This peculiarity puts academic and technical exchanges specifically into the framework of *science diplomacy*, which is considered a diplomatic tool for implementing a nation state's foreign policy goals determined by political power.

Keywords

science diplomacy – diplomacy – foreign policy – academic and technical exchanges – Cold War – Soviet-American relations

1 Introduction: Science Diplomacy and the Exchange Channel¹

The originality of science diplomacy is not new but the discussion has exponentially grown in the past decade.² Bringing historical examples into scholarly and practitioner discourse allows the analysis and deeper understanding of the phenomenon of science diplomacy as well as its purpose, meaning, implementations and lasting effects.

This essay explores historical examples of a large number of activities that could be explicitly associated with science diplomacy practice: the Cold War Soviet-American academic and technical exchanges. Putting *diplomacy* into the lead and viewing *science* as a sophisticated tool to be utilised for diplomatic purposes to implement foreign policy goals, the United States and the Soviet Union, in fact, used science diplomacy for such a justification extensively.

In this essay, the Cold War foreign policy objectives as perceived by the competing powers are assessed as to how they kept bilateral relations stable through their effective patterns of communication and arms control negotiations.³ The efficiency in achieving foreign policy goals can be evaluated through a number of implemented cultural agreements, including those on academic and technical exchanges and arms control treaties and agreements,⁴ as well as various joint science and technology projects.

A Sputnik moment of 1957 was defining in terms of systemic competition which gave a boost to the dominance of the US intelligence perspective on US-Soviet relations. It was also the International Geophysical Year of 1957-1958 that symbolised the desire for transparency and co-operation in the transnational science community. The need for co-operation and rapprochement between the two superpowers was acknowledged by Nikita Khrushchev and Dwight D. Eisenhower, then carried out by John F. Kennedy. As a result, Georgy Zarubin, Soviet Ambassador to the United States, and William Lacy, Special Assistant to the Secretary of State for East-West Exchanges, negotiated an agreement. On 27 January 1958, 'The Soviet-American Executive Agreement on Cultural, Educational and Scientific Exchanges' came into force, allowing for exchanges between the two countries. The exchanges remained uninterrupted until the end of the Cold War, while the initial agreement was supplemented with a number of additional treaties that deepened and specified fields for

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2 Krasnyak and Ruffini 2020.

3 Dobrynin 1995; Matlock 2005.

4 Krasnyak 2019.

co-operation. The range of agreements significantly expanded the spheres of joint work in various fields of science and technology, including environmental protection, transportation, medical science and public health, the use of outer space, housing.⁵

The long-time experience of maintaining and stabilising Soviet-American relations is exclusive because there was co-operation between countries with adversarial intentions. From the view of the security dilemma between competing powers, the agreements also aimed to typically reduce power,⁶ minimising the security dilemma, and were exercised through diplomacy in which scientific expertise and academic discourse were extensively used.

Regular exchanges became a way to build *trust* through interpersonal relationships at the top levels of diplomacy as well as between scientists and professionals of one country with their foreign colleagues. This improved the prospects for peace considering an increased level of Soviet trust in US trustworthiness.⁷

Reflecting both states' foreign policy objectives during the Cold War, it is critical to further acknowledge another peculiarity of the exchanges. Because the competing superpowers were officially declared international rivals, even small examples of co-operation between Soviet and American scientists would not have been possible during such a tense situation on the international stage. Science diplomacy enabled the exchanges but the intelligence agencies' constant interference into the exchanges led many sceptics to perceive the exchanges as a threat to national security.

2 Science Diplomacy Antagonism: Scientific Internationalism and Intelligence Agencies

During the Cold War, the nature and universality of science and scientific internationalism were making academic and technical exchanges relatively open, while a free flow of ideas and persons helped aim for a better world.⁸ In the practical dimension, this means that communication regarding the content and research topics for academics and for professional exchanges were discussed and approved beforehand by multiple agencies from their respective countries (e.g., national academies of sciences, research institutions,

5 'Exchanges with the USSR' 1979.

6 Herz 1950, 173.

7 Wheeler 2018, 112.

8 'Status of US-USSR Exchange Programs' 1979.

universities, corporations), and co-ordinated and supervised by Soviet and US embassies. Archival records show how such procedures were organised and how responsibilities were shared to allow agreements to provide, for instance, scientists with opportunities to work in the other country, conduct joint research with their foreign colleagues and exchange views at international conferences.⁹

If the intentions of scientists and diplomats were relatively clear and were going at the forefront of foreign policy goals, then the intentions of the intelligence agencies were quite different. The intelligence, including scientific intelligence, looked at the academic and technical exchanges as potential threats to national security. Since the bilateral relations were between countries with contrasting political systems and adversarial images, the intrusion of intelligence agencies was inevitable. The sense of suspicion and fear of espionage worsened the exchanges even though the compatibility for scientific and technological development in some fields of co-operation was fully acknowledged by both sides, as joining scientific forces was mutually beneficial for each country and for the advancement of the sciences.

The impact of intelligence agencies on the exchanges was rather troubling. Intelligence covering and intelligence gathering went against the notion of academic freedom and the open exchange of information. Nonetheless, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Soviet state security police (KGB) tried to keep all scientific contact, as well as each and every scientist coming for exchange, under intelligence control.¹⁰

Soviet and American academics were approached by intelligence agents from the other side, if not for potential recruitment then certainly with ideological means. Soviet diplomats reported on multiple occasions that, while in the United States, Soviet exchange academics and interns had conversations with some Americans who intended to sow doubt and confusion regarding the Soviet ideological system and suggested that they not to return to the Soviet Union and stay on American soil.¹¹ Similarly, Soviet diplomats strongly advised the authorities in the Soviet Union (presumably KGB authorities) to communicate with American delegates on the advancement of the communist system and help make visiting Americans 'pro-Soviet'.¹²

9 For this essay, a small percentage of the numerous archival documents was used. In particular, those were the documents of the Soviet Embassy in Washington, DC, stored at the Russian Foreign Ministry's archive in Moscow, and of the US Embassy in Moscow that belong to the Matlock Archive stored at Duke University, Durham, NC.

10 Wolfe 2018, 24.

11 'Questions on Scientific Cooperation' 1968-69.

12 'About Implementing the Agreements between the USSR and the USA on Exchanges in the Field of Science, Technology, Education and Culture' 1960.

In other words, the idea of people-to-people exchanges was a matter of suspicion and of deep concern for the CIA and the KGB. This explains why intelligence agents kept an eye on Soviet and American academics and specialists during their stays in the other country.

Apart from propaganda, the intelligence agencies were deeply suspicious about the exchanges because scientists could unveil sensitive information or practice scientific espionage that could pose a threat to national security. Such suspicions were not groundless. Soviet archival records indicate that Soviet participants were advised to develop personal contacts with their American counterparts preferably at conferences or other events, to exchange views on professional matters and to gather any specialised information that could be useful for Soviet research institutions. It was also noted that close interpersonal communication was more effective than any formal participation in conference panels and sessions.¹³

Following similar patterns of behaviour, intelligence agencies had no illusions about trust building, as they were driven by national security concerns. As a former consul of the US Embassy in Moscow put it, American foreign policy objectives towards the Soviet Union were neither to harmonise and co-ordinate policies with the Soviets nor to understand Soviet communism but to determine the extent to which the United States might achieve its foreign policy goals and in what time frame.¹⁴ According to the talking points by former Ambassador to Moscow Jack Matlock, it was essential for foreign service officers to speak the Russian language, to translate materials (especially on the sciences) and to communicate with national intelligence agencies — the CIA, the National Security Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency — to be able to form a capable and solid functional expertise on Russian affairs.¹⁵

In spite of intelligence agency interference, which could put obstacles in the way of interpersonal interaction and of developing patterns of trust building, the exchanges proceeded nonetheless due to the explicit political will and the power of scientific internationalism that bridged the ideology of scientific freedom and broader national security goals.¹⁶ Apart from scientists and agents, there were also diplomats who, through regular work and communication, were implementing agreements that literally enabled the idea of scientific internationalism.

13 'About Implementing the Agreements between the USSR and the USA on Exchanges in the Field of Science, Technology, Education and Culture' 1960, 3.

14 'In Letter by John A. McVickar to Jack F. Matlock' 1984.

15 'Diplomat-in-Residence Log of Activities' 1978-1979.

16 Wolfe 2018, 18.

3 Academic and Technical Exchanges in the Context of Daily Diplomatic Work

Soviet-American cultural exchanges have been widely discussed. For instance, multiple extensive publications by former US foreign service officers Yale Richmond and Glenn E. Schweitzer are invaluable.¹⁷ However, the underlining processes and mechanisms that allowed the exchanges to continue are given less attention in academic discourse and scholarly literature. It is the day-to-day work conducted by members of the diplomatic corps, the assessment of how they experienced the world on a daily basis and their institutionalising effects¹⁸ that are the key to understanding the complexity of interstate relations. The number of signed bilateral agreements and people-to-people exchanges are often listed as *fait accompli*, not really discussing the underlying work conducted by diplomats. Digging deeper into the archival records allows us to see the bigger picture of how bilateral relations developed through routine diplomatic interactions.

Regarding academic and technical exchanges more specifically, there are several interesting examples. The Soviet side regularly asked its embassy to conduct background checks and security clearances on, for instance, the views of invited American academics on the Soviet communist system. The embassy was also regularly consulted on the choice of certain American scientists and engineers to be considered for the exchange programs. The embassy did checks and clearances on the requested persons when it was possible, and normally expressed no objection to inviting American academics and professionals.

The embassy also helped to organise trips for American researchers and educators around the Soviet Union. For example, Sergey Mardashev, vice-president of the Academy of Medical Sciences of the USSR, required the assistance of Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin to invite American geneticists Victor McKusick of Johns Hopkins University and James Neel of the University of Michigan to lecture in the USSR for ten days in 1969.¹⁹ That meant that the invitations for American professors were sent directly through the Soviet Embassy. The same was happening on the other side. In 1979, the US Embassy mediated, for instance, to invite Soviet writer and novelist Yuri Nagibin to a number of American universities.²⁰

17 See, for instance, Lubrano 1981; Richmond 1986, 2003; Mikkonen and Suutari 2016; Schweitzer 1989.

18 Holmes 2018, 11.

19 'Questions on Scientific Cooperation' 1968-69, 31, 45-57, 71.

20 'Visit by Yuri Nagibin to Vanderbilt' 1979.

The Soviet Embassy was also regularly asked for opinions about sending some Soviet scientists to the United States, as well as about financial assistance and arranging accommodations for the participants. In 1969, the Soviet Academy of Sciences consulted with the embassy about sending a group of eleven Soviet scientists working on a wide range of topics in physics, chemistry and biology to participate in the 8th International Crystallographical Congress held at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.²¹

In another example, the Soviet Academy of Sciences informed the embassy about the 19th Pugwash Conference that was taking place in Sochi, and suggested that American delegates who requested visas to enter the Soviet Union should be assisted in getting the visas with no delay.²² As archival records show, in general the Soviet position was to highly encourage people-to-people interpersonal communication and to do its best to reduce any potential problems for Americans during their exchange visits.

The number of examples is overwhelming, and it indicates the extensive work and various duties carried out by the embassies. Authorising official communication with various representatives in policy-making, academia and industry; mitigating contacts between Soviet and American specialists involved in the exchanges; issuing visas; helping visiting delegations acclimate to the lifestyle and culture of the hosting country; supervising and monitoring academics and specialists who were on a longer stay in the other country are but a few of the responsibilities that constituted the core daily diplomatic work and created a structure of diplomacy.

The traditional perceptions of diplomacy place it in the shadows but this should come as no surprise since traditionalism and secrecy have always been central to diplomacy.²³ Moreover, the bulk of diplomatic correspondence that unveils the day-to-day diplomatic work is not in free circulation, and a great deal of the diplomatic correspondence and reports from the Cold War period were classified for decades. Some of the documents of the Soviet Embassy have never been used by scholars, even though the secret documents have been declassified since the 1990s following the 30-year rule under which public documents are disclosed.²⁴

The assessment of hundreds of archival documents allows qualitative research on the front-line diplomatic work of the US and Soviet embassies. That fact leads to conclusions about the diplomatic work in conjunction with

21 'Questions on Scientific Cooperation' 1968-69, 109.

22 'Questions on Scientific Cooperation' 1968-69, 112.

23 Fletcher 2016, 105.

24 Fletcher 2016, 109.

politics, high-stakes diplomacy and the advancement of the sciences. On one hand, the exchanges depended on the political will expressed by state leaders. On the other, academic and technical exchanges were not possible without the compatibility of sciences and technologies of both countries.

The efficiency of exchanges and their role in interstate relations depended on diplomatic mitigations and mediations making the dimensions of *science diplomacy* visible and accessible. The work of diplomats was also important because diplomatic direct intervention was pivotal and in many cases was the only way to avoid direct confrontation between the two nations, although diplomatic triumphs are almost always at the margins.²⁵

4 Conclusion: Science Diplomacy Contributions to Interstate Trust Building

Soviet-American scientific collaboration might not have resulted in spectacular gains for either side.²⁶ During the decades of exchanges, different people had different objectives for promoting and pursuing them, and varying expectations of success or failure.²⁷ Yet the exchanges and co-operative programs provided opportunities to connect individual scientists from both countries. The purpose of the exchanges was to contribute to developing and deepening bilateral relations given the tensions of the Cold War, paving the way for co-operation rather than hostilities.

Foreign policy making, diplomatic negotiations, the secrecy of intelligence operations and the advancement of the sciences whimsically intertwined in the exchanges that made interpersonal encounters truly matter and allowed them to become a trusted and reliable channel between the two countries. The criss-crossing interpersonal communication between scientists, diplomats and policy-makers produced outcomes that impacted not only bilateral relations but international relations. The outcomes helped ease tensions on the international stage, assisted in preparing and maintaining international treaties and led to the joining of scientific forces when possible.

From a science diplomacy point of view, lifting the lid on academic and technical exchanges as some salient moments of Cold War diplomatic history helps us to understand great-power relations and behaviours in the context of power maximisation and co-operation. Both competition and co-operation

25 Burns 2019, 37.

26 'Status of US-USSR Exchange Programs' 1979.

27 'A Balance Sheet of Soviet-American Exchanges by Alexandr Dallin' 1979.

can be the products of the same basic set of calculations,²⁸ allowing the United States and the Soviet Union to eventually increase their power and influence on the international stage while keeping the bipolar world order relatively stable. Moreover, a science diplomacy perspective allows us to support the argument of the competition–co-operation nexus that was achieved through the exchanges. The exchanges had a surprisingly positive impact on bilateral relations, even though they could be vulnerable at times of political crises.

Acknowledging the fact that diplomacy and diplomatic negotiations are effective when the parties involved want and are able to compromise, it should be clear that the negotiating parties pragmatically put aside their ideological principles or any other proclaimed notions that might exacerbate negotiations to achieve positive practical results. The United States and the Soviet Union, two ideological rivalries with comparable levels of scientific development, were able to compromise and co-operate.

As archival records show, during the decades of Soviet-American academic and technical exchanges, the work of diplomats as key mediators and organisers was critical, bearing in mind that a wide range of actors were continuously involved in the process. The work of diplomats also reflects the issues of American and Soviet statecraft.

The exchanges illustrate a historical case of science diplomacy that deserves to be brought up in contemporary discussions between academics and practitioners during global crises. The exchanges show a positive example of effective co-operation with long-lasting effects between nation states with proclaimed adversarial intensions. The exchanges became a trusted and reliable channel between the two countries to move their governments towards solutions that eventually led to a peaceful end of the Cold War.

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²⁸ Shiffrinson 2018.

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