Hémecht

Jg. 72
2020
Heft 3

Revue d'Histoire luxembourgeoise
transnationale, locale, interdisciplinaire
Zeitschrift für Luxemburger Geschichte
transnational, lokal, interdisziplinär

Claude Ewert, The Gaze to the East (Establishing EEC–USSR Relations 1958–1972). Master's Dissertation in Contemporary European History, University of Luxembourg 2019; supervised by Dr Spero Paravantis.

The popular perception of the Cold War is that of a never-escalating conflict in a dichotomous world. It pays little attention to the various times when the Cold War turned into a 'hot war' (Korea, Vietnam, Angola and Afghanistan, to name only a few); nor does it allow us to go beyond binary oppositions. New historiography on the Cold War, spearheaded by Odd Arne Westad, aims to provide a global perspective on the events from 1947 to 1991. That is where the history of the European Economic Community (EEC) and its relations with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) fits in: how did the EEC conduct its relations with the USSR during a period when a robust ideological divide ought to have split the European continent?

The research questions ask what changed Moscow's stance from the total neglect of the EEC in 1958 to Leonid Brezhnev's formal recognition of the EEC at the 25th Congress of Soviet Trade Unions in 1972. What does this perception of economic realities mean for the European narrative, which solely credits the Common Market for the 'economic miracle'? Furthermore, what does the examination of EEC–USSR relations reveal about East–West relations in general, and *détente* specifically? This dissertation was driven by the following research aims: to generate a historical account of EEC–USSR relations from 1958 to 1972; to identify the nature of those relations; to place them in the contexts of both political history and economic history; and to contribute to the history of European integration during the Cold War. The dissertation is divided into three main chapters, each being a case study of an EEC member: France, Italy and West Germany. These countries represented the EEC's largest economies. To include the Benelux countries (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg) would have resulted in too vast a scope for a master's dissertation, as the history of how the Benelux became a entity that was recognized by the USSR might deserve a dissertation of its own.

The methodology consisted of a close reading of archive files and a comparison between those and the existing body of literature. The archives of the European Union are housed in Brussels and its Historical Archives in Florence. However, many of the archives have been digitized and are freely accessible online. For the dissertation, only files from the Council of Ministers were used, except for one file from the European Commission (also accessible online). The Council of Ministers was the EEC's most important body in dealing with foreign policy, but in 1974 it was reformed as the European Council, whose meetings were held behind closed doors. The archives from the Council of Ministers thus give the reader an explicit insight into the decision-making of the EEC. The archived files can be divided into four categories: minutes of meetings; letters and material from ambassadors from EEC member states; statistics; and *aides-mémoires*. The minutes show the complexity of trade negotiations and any other dealings with the USSR, whereas the notes from ambassadors focus on the Soviet press and

how European integration is depicted in it. The *aides-mémoires* are essential for the coherence of the archive files, where one folder can contain up to 500 pages. The impressive page count is partly due to the multilingual nature of the EEC. Not all of the documents have been translated, though; most are written in French and German. These archives made it possible to identify not only a European agenda pursued by France, Italy and Germany, but also how the EEC managed to find a common stance towards the USSR.

The case study of France is dominated by the figure of Charles de Gaulle. The political strongman reached out to Moscow to push through his vision of a Europe that would be dominated by France and, eventually, the USSR. He did so by putting the entire European integration project at risk at times: either by leaving NATO's integral command or by deliberately angering the West German government by refraining from taking a more pressing tone on German reunification. His gambling did pay off in the end, but he was never to witness it. The trade relations between Paris and Moscow were good, but not great. Negotiations took a long time; punitive tariffs were applied on French goods (with almost no impact, however); and the West German delegates attacked France in the EEC for being too generous with export credits for the Eastern bloc, especially East Germany. Charles de Gaulle's successor, Georges Pompidou, continued de Gaulle's foreign policy in relation to the USSR, albeit also furthering European integration. By 1972, France and the USSR had a more substantial relationship than they had had in 1958, which was primarily due to de Gaulle's active stance towards bettering East–West relations. However, Pompidou's sobriety was needed for the relationship to become steadfast.

Italo–Soviet relations were vastly different. These did not rely on hefty exchanges of words between political strongmen, but on trade alone. The Christian Democrats aimed to rebalance the north–south divide in Italy and were keen on doing so by means of the 'economic miracle'. To facilitate this miracle, the country relied on natural resources, such as gas and oil, which made up 60% of all its energy consumption. Gas was found in Lombardy; however, oil could not be located on Italian soil. The government had created a body for the procurement of energy resources: the ENI. This body resorted to buying crude oil from the supplier who offered the cheapest price: the Soviet Union. This was labelled the 'Soviet Oil Offensive' by the USA and resulted in barter agreements: the USSR provided cheap crude oil, while in return Italy traded refined products and exchanges of technology. Italo–Soviet trade negotiations, in stark contrast to Franco–Soviet ones, could be concluded in a matter of months. The EEC was often kept in the dark during these negotiations but concluded that Italy had operated within the legal margin. This continually active agenda, showing great willingness to get things done quickly, is also reflected in the actions of the Italian delegates of the Council of Ministers. They instructed their counterparts on how to handle tricky negotiations with the USSR and how to come to quick resolutions; they drafted papers and letters addressed to the USSR, which emphasized the importance of the EEC and the non-negotiable nature of European integration. It was this continually active agency on behalf of the Italian government that balanced East–West trade with European integration.

This forms a stark contrast to West Germany's agency within the EEC, or rather their passivity and inaction throughout most of the meetings. Their approach to the Soviet Union was reluctant. Chancellor Konrad Adenauer had hoped for political concessions concerning the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in return for trade. German–Russian trade had been significant throughout the previous centuries, and even Nazi–Soviet trade had been worth millions of Reichsmarks; but in 1950, trade between the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the USSR trade stood at a mere 100,000 Deutschmarks. When the USA announced an embargo on the sale of large-diameter steel pipes (to impede the construction of the Druzhba oil pipeline), the FRG was the only country to adhere to it. This created a vacuum in East–West trade, which was swiftly filled by other European nations, in particular France and Great Britain. Adenauer's reluctant foreign policy towards the USSR was continued by his successors. It was in 1965 that stagnancy was replaced by agency in the Council of Ministers. The FRG delegates accused their partners of cooperating too much with the Soviet Union and the GDR. They wanted the export credits to be cut and produced ample evidence. The other EEC member states did indeed grant generous export credits to all the Soviet satellite states, including the GDR. The Council was then presented with documents showing that they lagged behind Britain and Japan in terms of granting export credits; the EEC had to stay competitive, or so the argument went. A consensus was reached by limiting export credits to the GDR to five years. The reluctant stance towards the Communist bloc changed when Willy Brandt became chancellor in 1969. His *Ostpolitik* greatly improved East–West trade; his friendship with Brezhnev contributed to *détente*; and he concluded a twenty-year barter agreement with the USSR on the exchange of steel pipes for gas. The FRG went on to become the USSR's biggest trade partner in the West.

To conclude, and to answer the research questions: the Soviet acceptance of the EEC relied on the perception that it was no mere American proxy and was due to de Gaulle trying to achieve his 'third way'; the long-term trade deals with Italy helped to conclude long-term trade deals with other EEC member states; and the FRG proved its goodwill to the USSR. Brezhnev accepted the EEC as an economic reality and was pushed by other Comecon members to improve relations.[1] East–West trade also contributed to the 'economic miracle', as 7% of all EEC trade was done with the Communist bloc. The dissertation also shows that East–West relations were not as fraught as has been argued by the Cold War master narrative; rather, Western Europe took very different approaches towards the USSR, and these were hardly on par with American foreign policy. Presenting *détente* as the immediate result of the Conference on Cooperation and Security in Europe (CSCE, better known as the Helsinki Accords) does not do justice to the early efforts of the EEC member states, and the EEC itself, to foster more amicable relations with the Soviet Union. The period covered by the aforementioned research objectives has now been extended to 1991, and will be analysed in the course of a PhD at the University of Cambridge to allow for a full historical account of relations between the European Community and the Soviet Union from 1958 to 1991.

[1] As shown by Kansikas, Suvi, *Socialist Countries Face the European Community: Soviet-bloc Controversies over East-West Trade*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014.