

## The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict in the Middle of the XX Century

Elena Chernysheva<sup>1</sup>; Vera Budykina<sup>2</sup>; Ekaterina Shadrina<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Chelyabinsk State University, Chelyabinsk, Russia.

<sup>2</sup>Chelyabinsk State University, Chelyabinsk, Russia.

<sup>3</sup>Chelyabinsk State University, Chelyabinsk, Russia.

### Abstract

*The article is devoted to the analysis of the peculiarities of relations between the USSR and the PRC in the middle of the XX century. In a short historical period, two countries with a similar ideology and political system shifted from relations of friendship and mutual assistance to military-political confrontation, which culminated in the armed conflict on Zhenbao (Damansky) Island in March 1969. A special interest of the Chinese side in good-neighbourly relations with the Soviet Union at the initial stage of the existence of the PRC (1949-1955) is described. The authors analyze the circumstances of the deterioration of relations between the two countries since Nikita Khrushchev assumed leadership of the USSR and the condemnation of the cult of personality of Joseph Stalin. Special attention is paid to the border issue in the relationship between the two countries. It presents the different views of the PRC and the Soviet Union on the tsarist treaties with China concluded in the second half of the XIX century. Moreover, the problem of ideological confrontation between the Soviet and Chinese leadership is considered; the publications of Soviet historians which assess the actions of the PRC leadership against the Soviet Union are analyzed. The nature of "cartographic aggression" and "great power chauvinism" is revealed. Besides, typological rhetoric, common and specific features in mutual accusations of the Soviet and Chinese sides are shown. The illegality of the territorial claims of the PRC, the betrayal of socialist ideals by its leadership, attempts to discredit the Soviet Union in the international arena, and the desire to undermine the world communist movement used to be the main theses in the research of the Soviet historians of the 1960s-1980s. It is concluded that the interpretation of Sino-Soviet relations in Soviet historiography was primarily propagandistic and closely related to the state interests of the Soviet Union.*

**Key-words:** Sino-Soviet Relations, Border Issue, Soviet Historiography, Tsarist Treaties with China, Conflict on Zhenbao Island.

## **1. Introduction**

The Sino-Soviet border is one of the longest borders between Russia and other countries, and the history of official relations with China last for more than 300 years. Due to this, territorial disputes between the two states are quite natural. However, the process of settling the border issue between Russia and China is complicated by the fact that Chinese official science does not recognize substantially all the agreements signed before 1949 (except for the Treaty of Nerchinsk of 1689 and the Treaty of Kyakhta of 1727), namely the Treaty of Aigun of 1858, the Treaty of Tientsin of 1858, and the Beijing Treaty of 1860, labelling them as unequal. According to Chinese historiography, these agreements, were imposed by tsarist Russia on Qing China through diplomatic blackmail, military force, and other means which forced China to sign them. Such unequal treaties violated and infringed the rights and interests of the Middle Kingdom.

The history of modern China dates back to 1949 when the Communist Party led by Mao Zedong came to power in the country. It seemed that all the accumulated territorial contradictions between the countries would be solved only because of ideological proximity, and through the significant contribution of the USSR to the victory of the left. China, which has chosen the socialist model of development, was vitally interested in partnership and good-neighbourly relations with its northern neighbour. Moreover, the Soviet Union played a key role in international relations and its viewpoint on the significant problems of that time was always taken into account. Thus, the problems of demarcation were not that important in the relations between the two powers.

## **2. Relations with the Soviet Union at the Initial Stage of the PRC's Existence (1949–1955)**

By the time of the establishment of the PRC on October 1, 1949, the issue of the borderline between the two countries was not raised at the official level. The USSR became the first state in the world to recognize and establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. The next step which is a common practice in international diplomacy, was to establish contractual relations between the two states. The main point here was the Soviet-Chinese Treaty of Friendship, Union, and Mutual Assistance, signed on February 14, 1950, during the visit to Moscow by the Chinese government delegation led by Mao Zedong. The recitals of the agreement stated that the parties were based on the determination of the two nations "...by strengthening friendship and co-operation between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the People's Republic of China, to jointly prevent the revival of Japanese imperialism and the repetition of aggression on the part of Japan or of

any other state that might in any way unite with Japan in acts of aggression” [9, pp. 223-224]. Furthermore, it was also highlighted that this agreement will contribute to the consolidation of peace and security in the Far East and around the world and the friendship of the two nations. The Sino-Soviet border was declared the border of good neighbourliness. According to the Moscow agreement, mutually beneficial trade and cultural relations had to be maintained between the people of the border areas.

On the day of the conclusion of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance, several more Sino-Soviet agreements were signed [15, 18]. They specified the areas of cooperation between the two countries. Thus, after signing a peace treaty with Japan, the USSR was obliged to gratuitously transfer the right to manage the Chinese Changchun Railway to the PRC, and also to impose a deadline for the withdrawal of its troops from the naval base at Port Arthur and the transfer of all the property to PRC, which the USSR used in the port Dalian (Dalniy). An "Agreement on the procedure of navigation on the frontier rivers of Amur, Ussuri, Argun, Sungach, and Lake Khanka and the establishment of navigating situations on these water routes", an agreement on forestry and a joint fight against forest fires in the border areas were also signed [7, p. 42–44]. Under these agreements, the passage of the borderline between the two powers was not questioned.

In the early 1950s the USSR transfer topographic maps showing the entire line of the frontier to the People's Republic of China. There were no comments from the Chinese side regarding the borderline. Thus, it can be stated that in the years when Sino-Soviet relations were on the rise, and the economic formation and security of the young People's Republic of China depended to a large extent on the USSR, border disputes were not raised at the official level. But from the second part of the 1950s, sticking points began to appear in the relations between the two countries which actualized the border dispute.

### **3. Deteriorating Relations between the USSR and the PRC (Mid-1950s - 1970s)**

In December 1956, the 20th Convention of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which in December 1956 condemned a cult of Stalin and marked the beginning of new a political line of the Soviet Union both within the country and across its borders. Serious ideological transformations within the PRC were a response to the beginning of the de-Stalinization of the Soviet society. Mao Zedong accused the Soviet leadership of revisionism and the attempt to restore capitalist relations, thereby calling into question the correctness of Khrushchev's chosen policy framework. China's “Great Helmsman” took a particularly negative view of the condemnation of the ideological legacies

of Stalin in the USSR. The negative tendencies in the relations between the two countries resulted in the Maoist campaign under the title “let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend” (Baihua Yundong). It was launched in the PRC in 1957 to increase publicity and criticism in the Chinese society [13, 14]. During this campaign, dissatisfaction with the Soviet policy towards the Celestial Empire was expressed, and territorial claims were also put forward for several sections of the Sino-Soviet border that were part of the Soviet Union.

An important indication of the emerging divergences in the border issue was the so-called "cartographic aggression" that unfolded in the PRC since the mid-1950s [17]. Maps, textbooks, and atlases included territories under the actual jurisdiction of the USSR and other countries. Thus, in “The People's Republic of China by province Atlas” (Beijing, 1953), some territories in the Pamirs and some areas on the eastern section of the Soviet-Chinese border including two Islands near Khabarovsk were designated as Chinese [3]. This confrontation (1956-1959) was followed by the increase in violations of the Soviet border by Chinese citizens. However, at that time, issues of border violations were resolved at the level of local authorities, and the general tone of bilateral relations between the Powers continued to be outwardly benevolent.

In the late 1950s - early 1960s the number of factors leading to a further deterioration in relations between the USSR and the PRC emerged. Thus, unilateral military and political acts of China, which were carried out without consulting the leadership of the USSR, put the Soviet Union, as an ally of the PRC, in a difficult and ambiguous position in the international arena. These acts included the conflict between China and India in Tibet (1959) and the Taiwan Strait Crisis (1958), when an armed confrontation unfolded between the PRC on the one hand, and Taiwan and the United States on the other [16]. In the same period, the CCP's desire to take a leading position in the international communist and workers' movements intensified, having gotten rid of the tutelage of the CPSU.

After the deterioration of relations between the parties and the leaders of the two socialist states, the parties mounted propaganda against each other. In the PRC, the ideological confrontation between the states since the late 1950s has been called "The Great War of Ideas between China and the USSR". Mao Zedong initiated the campaign that had far-reaching strategic goals. First of all, the leader of the PRC sought to strengthen power within his country, and also hoped to force the people in the Soviet Union to recognize the ideological superiority of China in the process of socialism building. It is obvious that Mao Zedong's actions also intended to convince the world community, primarily the United States and its allies, that China was waging an ideological war against the USSR, and to show humanity that there are new ideas in China that must be taken into account, and

this is not the same Marxism-Leninism as in the USSR. China, as the "younger brother" of the Soviet Union, suddenly became anti-Soviet, and its leadership was imbued with the idea of world domination under the auspices of the Celestial Empire, i.e. global expansion around the world with the establishment of Chinese hegemony [1, p. 6]. At that time, in China, the propaganda of the idea that it was the Soviet Union that was fighting for world leadership and continued the colonial policy of tsarist Russia grossly infringing on the interests of the PRC became more active [1, p. 7-8]. A sign of dissatisfaction with the policy of Mao Zedong on the part of the USSR was the recall of all Soviet specialists who worked in the PRC under the international cooperation program. Russian historian Yuri Galenovich believed that "the blame for the departure of our specialists from the PRC lies entirely with Mao Zedong" [2, p. 201].

It should be noticed that both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China used identical arguments to justify their position and accused each other of almost the same things. This was understandable since the Chinese and Soviet nations were imbued with the ideas of socialism and inspired by identical slogans and similar dreams of a beautiful and equitable life, and a prosperous society. The socialist ideology of both States also formed common antipodes, that is, something that needs to be fought and eradicated. Therefore, when the countries parted on opposing sides to enlist the support of the world community and the broad masses of the people, they began to accuse each other of everything that contradicted socialist ideals and values.

Undoubtedly, there were disagreements within the framework of a socialist ideology. After all, the works of the classics of Marxism-Leninism as any complex multifaceted creation can be interpreted in different ways. You can build your state, party, organization differently, but the form of contradictions, which might be chosen by chance or not, reached its highest peak and led to a split between the PRC and the USSR. The events in the area of the Zhenbao Island on the Ussuri River which happened in March 1969 became the apogee of the conflict escalation was.

In translation from Chinese, Zhenbao means "precious island". The Far East is, indeed, a pleasant region not only for China but also for other countries. It was especially desirable by the Celestial Empire, as there was a low population density, mineral availability, a rich resource environment, and proximity to China itself. Soviet historians have repeatedly tried to clarify the motives of the activities of the leadership of the Celestial Empire, which led to the outbreak of an armed conflict and manifested itself in repeated provocations at the border. In Soviet historiography, it was the Chinese side that was claimed to be guilty for what happened. Thus, the political leadership of the PRC was considered a traitor who forgot how the Soviet Union supported it in difficult times and became the inspirer of the national liberation movement in China.

A Soviet historian and diplomat Michael Kapitsa described how Chinese people were inspired by the fact that the Soviet Union recognized the PRC in 1949. That was a triumph of Sino-Soviet friendship. Moreover, the author considered that “the existence of the great Soviet Union next to China prevented the infiltration of foreign imperialists in China” [4, p. 341, 352]. It should be noted that this position of Soviet historians, which was supported by the country's leadership, was actively promoted in the scientific and popular literature of that time. All the efforts of the authors were aimed at making the Soviet people believe in the illegality of the territorial claims of the PRC and the betrayal of socialist ideals by its eastern neighbour.

If we consider the issue from a legal viewpoint and rely on the norms and principles of the international law, we will note that the border on rivers, according to the decision of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, should be drawn along the main fairway of a navigable river and the middle of a non-navigable river. However, it was unfavorable for Soviet publicists and historians to refer to this circumstance since Zhenbao Island is located closer to the Chinese bank and even joins it when the river is shallow [10, p.83-85]. Understandably, no article or monograph published in the late 1960s-70s put this position forward because, according to the Beijing Treaty of 1860 and the map of the border attached to it, Zhenbao Island belongs to Russia, and the border of China lies along the left bank of the Ussuri river [8, p.160-171].

If we get back to the estimation of the March 1969 conflict itself, Soviet historians were unanimous in determining on the causes of what happened. Thus, Michael Sladkovsky in the work "The Modern History of China, 1917-1970" claimed that "anti-Soviet action of the Maoists has reached unprecedented forms and intensity in early 1969s". The author called the events on Zhenbao Island an "armed provocation" on the Sino-Soviet border, which had to "demonstrate effective Beijing's anti-Sovietism to the unfaithful in the West and the USA".

A detailed analysis of the relations between the USSR and the PRC is presented in the monograph "Soviet-Chinese relations, 1945-1980" by Oleg Borisov and Boris Koloskov. The Chapter called “An Armed Provocations of the Chinese Authorities on the Soviet-Chinese Border in March 1969” devoted to the events on Zhenbao, has an articulate and self-explanatory title. The main viewpoints of the authors on this issue could be expressed as follows: the Chinese side is responsible for the deterioration of relations between the two neighbouring states, because "negative trends began to appear not through the fault of the Soviet Union". The events that preceded the conflict on Zhenbao are regarded by the authors as "constructive steps by the Soviet side" in contrast to "provoking the Beijing leaders to further aggravate Soviet-Chinese relations". Historians give a detailed description of the armed conflict itself with the factual information about the number of

military personnel and the number of weapons each country owned. While describing the events O. Borisov and B. Koloskov used various artistic and expressive means of the language such as "unbridled anti-Soviet company", "atmosphere of chauvinist frenzy and military psychosis", "unprincipled political flirtation of Beijing with imperialist States" [10]. The appearance of the Chinese military on the territory of the Soviet Union was called "a brazen armed invasion of the Soviet territory", and further actions of the Chinese side are considered as another "step towards consolidating their dominance" [11].

In addition to "fawning over Western countries", the authors also consider the goals of these actions of the Chinese leadership to be "discrediting our country in the international arena", "consolidating the anti-Soviet, great-power course as the general line of China's foreign policy" as well as "strengthening the Maoists' subversive activities against the socialist commonwealth and the world Communist movement" [12].

The position of China's unjustified arbitrary territorial claims to all its neighbours, including the Soviet Union, dominated Soviet historiography until 1991. To expose the improper position of the supporters of the "Great Helmsman" in the issue of passing the state border, Soviet historians turned to the events of the XVI-XVII centuries to remind that it was the Russian explorers who first entered the far Eastern lands and never left them again.

In our opinion, it is difficult to believe that Mao Zedong and his associates decided to retake these territories, since the level of preparedness, the number, and nature of the Chinese actions on the Soviet territory could only speak of the sabotage attempt. The historian Nikolai Marr considered that the events on Zhenbao are nothing more than a simple provocation played out by the Chinese side in the person of "provocateurs", "bandits", to whom Mao Zedong gave a "mean order" to attack the sacred and inviolable borders of the Soviet Union [5, p.6].

#### **4. Conclusion**

If we consider the Soviet historiography of the 1960s and 80s, we have to mark its anti-Chinese rhetoric which extolled the Marxist-Leninist values and guidelines in relations with the Eastern neighbor. However, the latter turned away from the planned course and encroaches on the lands of its loyal friend and all or a former ally in socialism to be more exact because of its great-power chauvinism, nationalism, and the thirst for expanding its territory. It should be noted that many of the published works of Soviet authors on this topic had a low scientific level, and the works had a propaganda orientation, as well as the fact that the authors of the publications were not

professional historians but they were Soviet publicists, militaries, and diplomats. This circumstance highlights once again the ideological background of many researches of that time. It's no wonder then that the interpretation of the Soviet-Chinese relations in the Soviet historiography was propagandistic in nature and was closely linked to the state interests of the Soviet Union. Thus, the cross-border cooperation between the PRC and the USSR in the 1960s was characterized by complexity and instability, both in terms of cultural interactions and economic terms which were caused by "numerous delays and difficulties created by the Chinese side" [6, p.341].

## References

- Buturlinov V.F., Plotnikov G.K., Chubarov V.V. *About the Soviet-Chinese border*. True and Peking fiction. Moscow: Military Publishing, 1982, 18.
- Galenovich Yu.M. Russia in the "Chinese Mirror": *The Chinese Interpretation at the Beginning of the 21st Century of the History of Russia and Russian-Chinese Relations*, M: Vostochnaya book, 2011, 412.
- Jungo dithutse, Beijing, 1953, 34.
- Kapitsa, M.S. Soviet-Chinese relations, M: Gospolitizdat, 1958, 424.
- Mar N.I. Damansky Island. March, 1969, M: Knowledge, 1969, 61.
- Prokhorov A. On the issue of the Soviet-Chinese border, M: International relations, 1975, 287.
- Collection of existing treaties, agreements and conventions concluded by the USSR with foreign states. - Issue. XIV, M: Gospolitizdat, 1957.
- Collection of treaties between Russia and China in 1689-1881. Published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. - SPb: printing house of the Imperial Academy of Sciences, 1889, 271.
- Soviet-Chinese relations. 1917-1957. Collection of documents, M: Publishing house of oriental literature, 1959, 467.
- Timofeev O.A. Systemic Factors of the Formation of the Russian-Chinese Border in Modern Times: To the 155<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Signing of the Aigun Treaty - Blagoveshchensk: *Bulletin of the AmSU*, 62, 2013.
- Usov V.N. Tragedy on the Ussuri. *Problems of the Far East*, 1994, 3, 83–93.
- Huang Ji Lian, Z red pigment Guangxi Petrochemical. *History of the Soviet-Chinese relations*. Beijing, 2011, 171.
- Zhang Hou Shi Jie Li Shi Chang Bian. *"Post-war world history" cycle (1-5)*. Shanghai, 1975-1980.
- Zhongsu Waijiao Danjiao Tsemi. *Declassified documents of Soviet-Chinese diplomacy*. Beijing, 2013, S. 217.
- Peng Ming, Zhongsu yu and shi. *History of Soviet-Chinese friendship*. Beijing, 1957. - 184 p.
- Wang Te YaBian, Zhong Wai Yue Zhang Hui Bian. *Collection of China's treaties with foreign states*. - Beijing, 1962, 237.

Zhongguo Gongchandang Lishi (1949-1978). *History of the Chinese Communist Party: [1949-1978]*. - Beijing, 2011, 840.

Zhanhou Zhongsu Guanxi Fazhang (1945-1960). Development of Soviet-Chinese relations after the war [1945-1960]. Beijing, 1997. Lu Ren, Liu Qingxia. As Mao Zedong was angry with Khrushchev. *Biographical literature*, 2004, 4, 25.