

The Cold War Battlefield: A Comparative Analysis of International Education Strategies between the United States and the Soviet Union

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Abstract

This article provides a comparative analysis of international education strategies employed by the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. It explores how both superpowers sought to disseminate their ideologies globally, leading to direct competition. The US and Soviet Union utilized international education to cultivate friendly elites and countries aligned with their respective values. Both nations implemented educational exchange programs and aimed to establish or reform educational systems abroad. The paper evaluates the effectiveness of these strategies, shedding light on the contrasting approaches adopted by the US and the Soviet Union in their pursuit of influence through international education during this era.

Keywords: *Cold War; Battlefield; Comparative Analysis; International Education Strategies*

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The Cold War Battlefield: A Comparative Analysis of International Education Strategies between the United States and the Soviet Union

During the Cold War, the United States and Soviet Union focused on spreading their ideologies across the world and came in direct competition with one another. The confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union made it politically necessary for the competing superpowers to constantly maintain and disseminate the values of their socio-political and economic way of life and education was the most effective way to create a society focused on certain values, ideology, and lifestyle (Akli, 2012). The US and USSR actively used international education to contribute to the formation of friendly foreign elites and countries and towards the desired values of each respective superpower. The international education programs of both countries had two identical directions: educational exchange programs and creation or reform of educational systems in foreign countries (Akli, 2012). This paper compares the US and Soviet approaches to international education during the Cold War and evaluates the effectiveness of their strategies. The population for this quantitative research consists of historical documents, literature, and academic sources related to the approaches of the United States and the Soviet Union towards international education during the Cold War. Key themes, patterns, and approaches have been identified and compared.

Cold War-Era Exchange Programs and World War II Impact in American Higher Education

In the article "The Uses of the Foreign Student", the author Margaret O'Mara argued that "international exchange and teaching programs ostensibly functioned as tools of Cold War political diplomacy rather than of economic competitiveness. Access to a global talent pool seemed incidental to the real uses of the university" (O'Mara, 2012). In support of the worldwide educational and cultural exchanges, Congress passed several legislations such as the Fulbright Act of 1946 and the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 (Fulbright, 2024; Smith-Mundt, 2024). The political objectives of the Cold War significantly affected government exchange programs and the American higher education in general (Mazurova, 2000).

While examining higher education in the postwar period, John R. Thelin wrote about trends towards the isolation of students and faculty from the world and proposes to refine the existing structures by promoting diversity on campus. He argued that "the universities' effectiveness during the crisis of World War 2 ... provided the rationale for future partnerships between the federal government and universities. This accomplishment would indelibly transform the missions and funding of American higher education in the period following the end of World War 2 in 1945" (Thelin, 2011). US professors began conducting training sessions at government agencies with emphasis on culture, politics, and customs of different regions and countries. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 was a direct response to the launch of the Sputnik satellite (Thelin, 2011). The subsequent development of country study programs had opened opportunities to learn about different regions and countries, including studies of languages that were not previously taught at US universities (Thelin, 2011).

Perceptions of International Students in American Higher Education

Aside from the issue of competing ideologies, there was concern that foreign students in the United States posed a competitive threat. While talking about the unemployment at the national average of about 7.5 percent in 1976, Gerald Ford stated: "and it does raise the question whether these foreign students coming here take a job away from an American who wants a job to raise his family or to get his education" (O'Mara, 2012). However, the universities recognized the presence of foreign students as useful because "the presence of international students reflected well on institutional prestige and raised the university's global visibility and status" (O'Mara, 2012). In early 1950s, most international students were financially supported by their families or through employment (O'Mara, 2012). However, a steady increase of foreign students has soon resulted in government support beginning to increase. By 1980s, only 63 percent of foreign students were relying on personal or family funding. Several disciplines including social sciences, American studies, business, and management were the most popular in attracting foreign students (O'Mara, 2012).

Educational Exchange Programs and Cold War Politics

In the article "Educational Exchange and Cultural Diplomacy in the Cold War", Liping Bu wrote about the military alliance, a student/scholar exchange, and technical and economic assistance programs which were designed to serve the goals of national security in the Cold War against the communist world (Bu, 1999). Thousands of technical and industrial trainees, traditional foreign students and scholars, short-term visitors, and military personnel came to the US from Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa (Bu, 1999). They were encouraged to learn about American values and ideals during their stay in the US. American specialists and professors traveled abroad to assist countries and propagate American values and ways of life (Bu, 1999). Exchange programs after the World War 2 raised the importance of understanding other cultures to bring American values to other societies worldwide. When the newly independent countries emphasized education as one of their primary aspirations, both the US and the Soviet Union promoted their educational resources and political ideologies. One notable example from the 1950s is when, Albert Sims, the vice president of the Institute of International Education (IIE), traveled to Southeast Asia, which subsequently resulted in IIE offering 7000 students' scholarships for secondary and higher education student exchanges (Bu, 1999). More programs were set up in Taiwan and Hong Kong to strengthen US influence in the Far East. Fulbright Program brought thousands of students and professors from all over the world to the United States, and thousands of Americans also traveled abroad to pursue cultural immersion opportunities. Other active promoters of the American academic programs were the State Department, the Department of Educational Exchanges, the Ford Foundation, and the now defunct Information Agency (Bu, 1999).

The expansion of the Cold War in the aftermath of the Korean War had significant ripple effects that reverberated globally and impacted educational policies of both the US and USSR. The "Campaign of Truth", which was created in the 1950s, had called for increasing the numbers of

foreign students in the United States, and demanded that "the international propagation of the democratic creed be made an instrument of supreme national policy" (Bu, 1999). However, Bu

highlighted that there was a negative reaction among American educators who were against politicization of education and cultural exchanges when the government emphasized political propaganda against the aggression of communism (Bu, 1999). They stressed that the main goal of exchanges should be learning, not propaganda. Some congressmen similarly argued that student and teacher exchanges should open American universities to communists and agitators (Bu, 1999).

Academic Freedom, McCarthyism, and Contrasting Approaches in Higher Education During the Cold War

However, there were additional challenges that rose after the World War 2. According to Thelin, the "golden period" of higher education in the US between 1945-1970 witnessed an increase in the enrollment rates and the expansion of campus buildings driven by a huge influx of federal and private funding (Thelin, 2011). Nevertheless, McCarthyism targeted university professors who were purportedly sympathetic to the communist cause. "Many campus presidents took the initiative to subject their faculties to loyalty oaths and codes of conduct exceeding anything that vigilant congressional or state officials might have required" (Thelin, 2011). Two professors, Robert Maynard Hutchins of the University of Chicago and Nathan Pusey of Harvard University, stood-up to the pressure from congressional investigations to support academic freedom (Thelin, 2011).

Both McCarthy and Fulbright fought communism, but their approaches were quite different. McCarthy's strategy was to isolate suspected communists whereas Fulbright who has embraced internationalism, was pushing to increase the role of educational programs in the international power struggle with the Soviet Union (Ambrose, 1997). After World War 2, the Soviet Union also began to allocate huge funds to support countries in the socialist camp as a part of its efforts to spread its values in the Third World (Starkova, 2014). The Soviet Union has established its presence in the education systems of countries in the Asia-Pacific and Southeast Asia regions, including China, Mongolia, Laos, Nepal, Burma, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam. It has pursued similar efforts in the Middle East and Africa, including countries like Afghanistan, Lebanon, Jordan, Yemen, Morocco, Guinea, and many others. (Starkova, 2014). The Soviet government provided those countries with technical assistance, trained teachers, and university administrators, thereby influencing academic curricula, shaping their learning disciplines, and teaching methods and structure of higher educational institutions (Starkova, 2014). To strengthen its position, Moscow had also established dedicated educational programs for foreign exchange students. Although the ideological component of communist continued to prevail in these programs, the main objective in teaching foreigners was no longer a world revolution, but rather training of highly professional personnel who would support Soviet influence in countries that were newly liberated from colonial oppression (O'Mara, 2012). This also became a major concern for the US when "Kennedy made pointed efforts to target program resources to students and

scholars from the nations and continents emerging from colonial rule and perceived to be at most risk of Soviet influence" (O'Mara, 2012).

Education Policy, Foreign Students, and Ideological Resistance in the Soviet Union during the Cold War

The Soviet Department of Science and Higher Education as well as the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Soviet embassies abroad and the State Security Committee (KGB) played the main role in the formation of USSR's international education policy (Mazurova, 2000). Throughout the Cold War, the USSR founded a total of 67 universities and 425 community colleges globally and accepted foreign students from 141 countries (Mazurova, 2000). With each successive decade since the 1950s, the number of foreign students in the Soviet Union grew steadily, including a great number of students from the Middle East, Africa and Latin America who began to travel to the Soviet Union (Mazurova, 2000). By the end of the Cold War, 126500 students studied at Soviet universities, vocational/technical schools, and communist party schools. Priority in admission was usually given to students from low-income families, while the Soviet government paid for all travel, accommodation and studying expenses (Mazurova, 2000). Those initiatives led many foreign students to have unexpectedly prosperous lives in the Soviet Union: full scholarships, large stipends, high-quality clothing from premium stores, food at best cafeterias, paid flights back home during school breaks, and additional money for personal expenses. Additionally, foreign students typically only had one roommate in a dorm whereas Soviet students had to share one room with 4-5 roommates. While Soviet students had to go on field trips to complete mandatory farm labor, international students were on academic breaks - the very concept of "labor service" did not apply to foreigners. It was assumed that happy foreigners would believe that everyone in the USSR also enjoyed a very prosperous life.

Of course, communist ideology was taught to all foreign students at Soviet universities (Vershina, et al., 2016). The mandatory study of social sciences was the basis of the entire education system. Soviet officials and top communist party leaders gave lectures about the national liberation movements (Vershina, et al., 2016). They hired international students as TASS (Russian News Agency) employees for radio broadcasts in foreign languages and encouraged students to participate in political coups in their home countries (Arguments and Facts, 1988). For those students who were not fluent in Russian, the Soviets offered courses on Marxism-Leninism in Arabic, Japanese, English, French, and Spanish (Mazurova, 2000). In theory, such strides from the Soviets should have led to success, but there were certain countries that resisted ideological pressure as they sent students to the USSR primarily to acquire technical skills rather than ideological indoctrination (Vershina, et al., 2016). As a result, many foreign countries refused Soviet scholarships and terminated their participation in academic exchanges with the Soviet universities (Mazurova, 2000). For instance, Indonesia, Iran, Syria, and China repeatedly demanded that courses on communism not be taught to their students (Mazurova, 2000).

Foreign Student Challenges and Soviet Influence in Cold War Higher Education

One of the selection criteria for foreign students who wished to study in the USSR was their membership in communist parties or participation in the national liberation movements (Reyder, 2015). From 1967 to 1990, almost 1000 people were studying in the Soviet Union through the Israeli communist party, 25 of whom were Jewish Israelis, and the rest were Arabs (Reyder, 2015). Furthermore, teaching Marxism-Leninism has occasionally created problems for Moscow when international students organized protests against their own governments, while studying in the Soviet Union (Levent, 2021). In these instances, home countries of foreign students threatened to sever political or economic ties with the Soviet Union if Moscow did not agree to send students back to their homelands. There were cases when the Soviets complied with the request. For instance, the Soviets expelled Guinean students who demanded democratization in Guinea in the 1960s (Levent, 2021). In 1964, 50 Moroccan students broke into the Moroccan embassy in Moscow and organized a sit-in hunger strike to protest death sentences of 11 people for an alleged attempt to kill the Moroccan king. The ambassador asked Soviet authorities to quickly deport the protesters. (Levent, 2021).

The Soviet social scientists traveled to the countries of the Eastern Bloc and the Third World (Mazurova, 2000). Every year, hundreds of Soviet professors traveled to East Germany, Poland, China, North Korea, Mongolia, African countries, and other countries to reform university curricula, including the ones designed and financed by the Soviet Union's state budget, as was the case in Burma, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Cambodia, North Vietnam, and Guinea (Mazurova, 2000). Soviet professors carried out large-scale projects to reform universities in alignment with the education system in the country. At any given time, a single country could employ as many as 300 - 500 pro-Soviet professors as was the case in China or Afghanistan (Mazurova, 2000). They taught history of the Communist Party, history of the USSR, and the Marxist political economy. They also authored new textbooks on history and ideology (Mazurova, 2000). The Soviets were aware that international students had little chance of taking steady leadership positions in their countries upon the completion of their studies in the Soviet Union. Assimilation of foreign students in the USSR was also challenging and soon became a political problem for the Kremlin. Foreign students were particularly resentful toward studying political economy, communist party history, political economy, and scientific communism (Mazurova, 2000). Nevertheless, those subjects were a mandatory part of the university curricula, including both STEM and humanities.

Challenges in Cold War Educational Exchange Programs: Arab Resistance and Political Tensions

The US also faced resistance from some countries amid its attempts to reform foreign educational systems. In the 1950s, Middle Eastern countries became the most intractable of all relevant countries (Anderson, 2014; Shannon, 2017). At the advent of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the attitude of Arab populations towards American educational programs had drastically declined. Within the Arab world, anti-American sentiment was especially strong in Syria and

Damascus, and even withdrew its students from the American University of Beirut in the early 1950s (Anderson, 2014). Syrian students also disrupted classes and put up anti-American fliers to protest the US policies. The 1967 war between Arab countries and Israel dealt an even greater blow to US efforts of promulgating its educational programs in the region. Countries like Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Egypt refused to participate in the American education programs for several years (Anderson, 2014).

As this paper has demonstrated, the educational exchange at the US and Soviet universities expanded significantly during the Cold War (Bu, 1999). Both countries relied on university resources to facilitate academic and cultural exchanges. Given fundamental differences in the ideological essence of these two superpowers, their methods of influencing foreign students shared many conceptual similarities but differed in content. The Soviet Union deliberately emphasized courses like dialectical materialism, scientific communism, foundations of economic socialism. Those efforts were implemented at educational institutions of countries that the Soviet Union considered to be within its sphere of influence (Mazurova, 2000).

Contrasting approaches: US and Soviet educational programs for foreign students and their effectiveness.

The US and the Soviet Union had different approaches in creating and reforming the educational institutions in foreign countries. The Soviet Union built and opened new universities and technical/vocational schools in the friendly countries, and special emphasis was placed on the creation of polytechnic institutes with courses such as scientific communism and dialectical materialism (Vershina, et al., 2016). Through its many initiatives directed at foreign students, the Soviet Union sought to create new social class that could proselytize Soviet ideology and way of life in their countries and prevented local elites with divergent views from strengthening their power (Laqueur, 1983). This was especially true in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, where the Soviets invested resources to promote economic development (Arguments and Facts, 1983). The United States sought to modify curricula in existing universities abroad as well (Bu, 1999). Overall, the comparison between the US and the Soviet education programs delineated in this paper suggests that the US strategy was more effective (Laqueur, 1983). In the late 1980s, 343,780 international students studied in the US (NCES, 2015) in contrast with only 125,000 foreign students in the Soviet Union during the same period (Arguments and Facts, 1988). The US managed to recruit more foreign students and establish more links with political elites abroad than the Soviet Union (Mazurova, 2000). However, numerical indicators are not necessarily the main measure of effectiveness. The diversity of programs, the selections of students, and methods of influence provide a much more comprehensive barometer for evaluating effectiveness of their policies. International education programs of the two superpowers were effective in achieving their political goals by influencing foreign nationals, given that the programs supported ideological orientations of either the US or Soviet Union (Mazurova, 2000; Bu, 1999). However, the criteria of selecting prospective students diverged (social origin vs. professional status) and resulted in different outcomes that influenced the effectiveness of their educational policies (Shannon, 2017). In most cases, the enrollment of foreign students from the lower social strata did not significantly

improve their future career prospects due to the lack of economic opportunities and weak political ties with the local elites of their respective countries (Mazurova, 2000). From this standpoint, the Soviet international educational policies ended up being less effective. The main shortcoming of the Soviet strategy was the difficulty for graduates of Soviet universities to take leading positions in their home countries (Arguments and Facts, 1988).

Divergent Approaches in US and Soviet Educational Programs

In contrast, the United States focused on those segments of the population that already occupied positions of power in their societies, had strong political ties to ruling elites and supported social development along the lines of the American model (Sayah, 1988). Many of those powerful individuals were first exposed to these ideas while studying in the US. Notable examples included Iranian and Arab students from wealthy oil producing countries, most of whom belonged to the upper class (Sayah, 1988). As a result, the two powers practiced two completely different approaches to the selection of foreign pupils, hoping to form loyal social groups that would be oriented towards the desirable ideologies. The Soviet sought to create a new and robust society of technocrats, while the United States sought to support existing local elites (Levent, 2021). The United States believed that social status and political prominence of prospective students would have a positive impact on reorienting these countries away from communism and toward the US values (Shannon, 2017). In contrast, the Soviet Union believed that students of lower social stature, who were largely excluded from the political decision making in their societies, would be able to become a new elite that is more amenable to Soviet priorities (Mazurova, 2000). By focusing on different groups that occupy different position within the social hierarchy, the two superpowers developed methods of ideological influence that were propagated through educational programs.

The primary advantage of the Soviet schools was that colleges were free and job placements for graduates were guaranteed (Jacoby, 1971). STEM education was robust and highly valued in the USSR, whereas the humanities were less rigorous and heavily biased toward Marxism. Even highly technical disciplines were loaded with ideology (history of the communist party), dialectical materialism, and scientific communism Levent, Y. (2021). Students could only choose one major, limiting their flexibility in the everchanging world (Jacoby, 1971). As far as academic prestige, the leading Soviet universities were considered an analogue of today's Ivy League universities in the West, although those views were limited to other socialist countries. Soviet universities were not as popular globally because all courses were taught in Russian, which was less spoken than English. The best aspect of the American higher education system was the freedom for students to switch majors as they pleased. The number of available programs and quality universities in the United States was very impressive and it was no wonder that the US was the top destination for students from all over the world (Jacoby, 1971). Moreover, international students could have stayed in the US after they graduated, so that they could have attempted to pursue a desired career at some of the world's biggest companies (Agarwal & Winkler, 1985).

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research. The research relies on the availability and accessibility of historical documents, literature, and academic sources related to the approaches of the United States and the Soviet Union towards international education during the Cold War. The limitations of the selected sources and potential biases in their representation of the countries' strategies may impact the comprehensiveness of the findings. While this approach provides valuable insights, it may be limited by the potential biases, omissions, or inaccuracies present in the selected sources.

Conclusion

To summarize, the findings of this research shed light on the way in which during the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union utilized international education to spread their respective ideologies and assert influence over other nations. Despite their differing political systems and approaches, there were notable similarities in their strategies. Both countries prioritized educational exchange programs and the establishment or reform of educational systems in foreign countries. The United States implemented legislation such as the Fulbright Act and the Smith-Mundt Act to support cultural and educational exchanges. The Fulbright Program, in particular, brought numerous students and professors to the United States while sending Americans abroad for cultural immersion opportunities. Similarly, the Soviet Union allocated significant funds to support countries aligned with its socialist ideology, establishing universities and community colleges globally and accepting foreign students from various nations. Both countries faced challenges in their approaches. The Soviet Union encountered difficulties in assimilating foreign students into its society, as they often resented studying subjects like political economy and scientific communism. The United States, on the other hand, faced resistance from some countries, particularly in the Middle East, where anti-American sentiment and political conflicts hindered their educational programs. Despite the challenges, the educational exchange programs of both countries were effective in achieving their political goals and promoting their respective ideologies. Overall, international education served as a significant battleground during the Cold War, with the United States and the Soviet Union employing diverse strategies to advance their respective agendas. The impact of these strategies extended beyond academic exchanges, influencing the formation of foreign elites, and shaping the values and ideologies of nations around the world.

There were also distinct differences in the approaches of both countries to the international education strategies. The selection criteria for foreign students in the United States and the Soviet Union differed. The Soviet Union prioritized students with a membership in communist parties or participation in national liberation movements, aiming to create a new social class that could spread Soviet ideology in their home countries. The Soviet Union aimed to train highly skilled professionals who would support Soviet influence in newly independent countries. They provided extensive financial support to foreign students, offering scholarships, stipends, and other benefits to create a favorable impression of life in the USSR. In contrast, the United States focused on students who already held positions of power and influence in their societies, believing that their alignment with American values would have a positive impact on their countries. The United

States focused on attracting foreign students to its universities, both to foster cultural understanding and to address concerns about competitiveness. The expansion of federal and private funding during the post-World War II period facilitated the enrollment growth and campus expansion in American higher education. The Soviet Union's emphasis on providing free education and guaranteed job placements was advantageous, particularly in STEM fields. However, the heavy ideological bias in the curriculum limited students' flexibility and the global popularity of Soviet universities. In contrast, the United States offered a wide range of programs, prestigious universities, and the freedom for students to switch majors, making it a highly desirable destination for international students. The opportunity for international students to stay in the US after graduation also enhanced the appeal of American higher education. Despite the challenges and differing outcomes, both countries achieved varying degrees of success in their international education efforts.

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