

EMPIRE OF FRIENDS

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*Soviet Power and Socialist Internationalism
in Cold War Czechoslovakia*

RACHEL APPLEBAUM

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For Joshua

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ABBREVIATIONS

ČSM	Československý svaz mládeže Czechoslovak Union of Youth (1949–1968)
ČSR	Československá republika Czechoslovak Republic (1945–1960)
ČSSR	Československá socialistická republika Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (1960–1990)
KPSS	Kommunisticheskaia partiia Sovetskogo Soiuza Communist Party of the Soviet Union
KSČ	Komunistická strana Československa Communist Party of Czechoslovakia
LKR	Lidové kursy ruštiny People's Russian Courses
MGU	Moskovskii gosudarstvennyi universitet Moscow State University
MPEA	Motion Picture Export Association

OSChD	Obshchestvo sovetsko-chekhoslovatskoi družby Society for Soviet-Czechoslovak Friendship
ROH	Revoluční odborové hnutí Revolutionary Trade Union Movement
RSFSR	Rossiiskaia Sovetskaia Federativnaia Sotsialisticheskaia Respublika Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (1922–1991)
SČSP	Svaz československo-sovětského přátelství Union of Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship
SSOD	Soiuz sovetskikh obshchestv družby i kul'turnoi sviazi s zarubezhnymi stranami Union of Soviet Friendship Societies
TsK	Tsentral'nyi komitet Central Committee [of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union]
ÚV	Ústřední výbor Central Committee [of the Czechoslovak Communist Party]
VKP/b	Vsesoiuznaia kommunisticheskaia partiia (bol'shevikov) All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (1925–1952)
VOKS	Vsesoiuznoe obshchestvo kul'turnoi sviazi s zagranitse All-Union Society for Foreign Cultural Ties

NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Czech and Russian are my own. I have used the Library of Congress guidelines for transliterating Russian words, with the exception of well-known names (for example, I use Maxim Gorky instead of Maksim Gor'kii, and Maya Plisetskaya instead of Maia Plisetskaia).

EMPIRE OF FRIENDS

INTRODUCTION

A Tank in Prague

On July 29, 1945, Czechoslovak and Soviet dignitaries gathered on Štefánik Square in central Prague to celebrate the unveiling of a monument to the Red Army. The monument was a Soviet tank—allegedly the first to have entered Prague during the Soviet Army’s liberation of the city from German occupation two and a half months earlier. The tank stood on top of a massive granite pedestal. A bronze plaque proclaimed “eternal glory” to its deceased drivers, “eight Red Army soldiers, who sacrificed their lives for Prague’s freedom.”¹

Berlin in 1953, Budapest in 1956, Prague in 1968: a tank on the streets of a Central European city is the paradigmatic symbol of Soviet oppression in the Eastern bloc during the Cold War. A Soviet tank in Prague on a summer’s day remains an especially indelible image of the USSR’s violent efforts to maintain control over its socialist empire in Europe. In this familiar narrative of the superpower’s use of force against its satellite states, the 1945 Monument to the Soviet Tank Crews in Prague would appear to be the foundation of Soviet hegemony in Czechoslovakia and the rest of the Eastern bloc. Yet long



Figure 1. Prime minister of Czechoslovakia Zdeněk Fierlinger speaks at the unveiling of the Monument to the Soviet Tank Crews on Štefánik Square in Prague, July 29, 1945.

Credit: Česká tisková kancelář.

before the monument became a quintessential symbol of Soviet hard power, it was part of an audacious but far less well-known experiment in power of a different kind: the attempt to use transnational friendship to create a cohesive socialist world. This experiment, which involved cultural diplomacy, interpersonal contacts, and the trade of consumer goods across national borders behind the Iron Curtain, linked citizens of the superpower and its satellites in an empire of friends that lasted until the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The Red Army's liberation of Central and Eastern Europe at the end of World War II marked the beginning of this wide-ranging friendship project, which would transform the lives of people from Berlin to Vladivostok.



Figure 2. Portraits of Klement Gottwald, leader of the KSČ, and Joseph Stalin at the unveiling of the Monument to the Soviet Tank Crews on Štefánik Square in Prague, July 29, 1945. The banner says, “With the Red Army for Eternity.”

Credit: Národní archiv, Fotodokumentace 1897–1981, inv. č. 1229.

The goal of this project was to unify the diverse countries in the region into a transnational, socialist community led by the Soviet Union. The Soviets and their Eastern bloc allies commonly referred to this project as “socialist internationalism” or “proletarian internationalism.” These terms originated in the mid-nineteenth century in Karl Marx’s call for “working men of all countries” to “unite” across national borders to overthrow international capitalism.² After the October Revolution in 1917, the concept of socialist internationalism became synonymous with “world revolution”—the Bolshevik conviction that the new Soviet state’s success was dependent on a wave of revolutions breaking out across Europe and in its colonies.³ Following World War II and the creation of Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe, socialist internationalism changed from an aspirational concept to a pragmatic challenge: stabilizing the new transnational socialist system in the realm of everyday life. The development of socialist internationalism in the Eastern bloc also drew on the rhetoric and practices of the Soviet campaign of “friendship of the peoples” from the 1930s, which attempted to create an overarching multicultural identity in the USSR by highlighting the achievements of individual Soviet nationalities and the love and affection among them.⁴

Empire of Friends tells the story of the rise and fall of this friendship project between the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia—a story that provides the boldest illustration of the project's paradoxes. At the end of World War II, out of all the countries of the future Eastern bloc, Czechoslovakia offered the best chance for a successful friendship with the USSR. The Czech lands had a history of peaceful relations with their Slavic neighbor to the east; unlike Poland, which was partially annexed by the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century and fought a war with the Soviet Union in 1920; and unlike Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, which were German allies for periods of World War II.⁵ In 1945, after six years of German occupation, Czechoslovak politicians from across the political spectrum, and a majority of the public, supported a close alliance with the USSR.⁶ Despite these favorable indicators, the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia made strange friends: the USSR touted itself as a model for Czechoslovakia's development, yet the soon-to-be satellite state was in fact wealthier and more industrialized than the nascent superpower. In addition, Czechoslovakia had a history of close ties with the West.⁷ This book examines the evolution of the unlikely friendship between the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia during the Cold War, in tandem with the dramatic shifts in their alliance: from Stalinism to de-Stalinization and from the Prague Spring to Soviet occupation.

The Soviet-Czechoslovak friendship project was multifaceted, encompassing everything from the coproduction of films, to collaboration between factories, to scientific exchanges. *Empire of Friends* focuses on the project's influence on everyday life: the export and reception of Soviet films, music, and fine art in Czechoslovakia; the postwar construction of the mythology of the Soviet liberation of Czechoslovakia; interpersonal contacts between the two countries' citizens, including student exchanges, tourism, friendship societies, pen-pal correspondences, and veterans' relations; and the exchange of consumer goods. These transnational connections reveal that the friendship project was central to the construction, the maintenance—and ultimately—the collapse of the European socialist world.

A Friendship Forged in War

From the fall of 1944, when the Red Army liberated Romania, to the spring of 1945, when the Red Army engaged in the Berlin and Prague offensives,

rank-and-file Soviet troops, accompanied by secret police and propaganda units, helped lay the foundation for an eventual takeover by local Communist parties in the region.⁸ The liberation provided the Soviets with the logistical and moral basis for the construction of a new empire in the region—the empire of friends.

The context of the Red Army's liberation of Czechoslovakia underscored the country's singular position within this new empire. In much of the rest of Central and Eastern Europe, the Soviet liberation in fact meant occupation. Soviet wartime propaganda portrayed German civilians as enemies.⁹ When Soviet troops entered German territory in the winter of 1945, Red Army posters proclaimed the country "The Lair of the Fascist Beast."¹⁰ Soviet commanders openly instructed their troops in both Germany and its erstwhile ally, Hungary, to avenge the terrible violence that Hitler's forces had committed on Soviet soil. Red Army soldiers responded by committing war crimes of their own, including, most notoriously, the rape of hundreds of thousands of German and Hungarian women.¹¹

By contrast, the six years the Czechs spent annexed to the Reich made them, from the Soviet perspective, unequivocal victims of German aggression. The situation in Slovakia was more ambiguous. For three and a half years Slovakia functioned as a German puppet state under the leadership of the Catholic priest Jozef Tiso. In August 1944, Slovak partisans initiated an uprising against Tiso that was brutally crushed by the German government. As a result, Slovakia, too, fell under German occupation. Following this geopolitical reversal of fortune, the Soviet government portrayed Slovaks as their natural allies.¹² This background elucidates the instructions the Soviet command issued to the soldiers of the First and Fourth Ukrainian Front as they began the liberation of Slovakia in the fall of 1944: "Explain to all the soldiers that Czechoslovakia is our ally, that the forces of the Red Army must behave in a friendly manner toward the inhabitants." The soldiers were also warned not to confiscate property from locals and were threatened with punishment if they violated this order.¹³

The Soviet liberation of Czechoslovakia was the most important factor in shaping the postwar friendship project. It was a singular event for people in both countries. For the Red Army, the liberation of Czechoslovakia was distinguished by the high number of casualties sustained—an estimated 140,000 soldiers were killed—and because it was the final theater of battle after four exhausting years of war.¹⁴ But the friendliness of the Czechoslovak

population—in stark contrast to the hostile and fearful reactions from Germans and Hungarians—also made a strong impression. “The people were throwing flowers into the vehicles, shouting ‘*Ura!*’ [“Hooray” in Russian] and ‘*Na zdar!*’ [“Hello” in Czech] and offering us food and other refreshments,” a Soviet veteran recalled of his regiment’s arrival in the Czech lands via a pass in the Sudeten mountains. He continued, “In one town . . . the column became stuck amidst a dense crowd. Shliakhov, who was standing on the hood of a Dodge truck, tried to reason with the people in Russian to bring them back to their senses so they would part and make way for our column. However, the crowd mistook his exclamations and gestures as a salutatory speech and replied with yells of ‘*Na zdar!*’ and ‘*Zet zhie!*’ [Hello! Long live!].”¹⁵ Another Soviet veteran remembered, “In no other country that we came to be in during the war, were we, Soviet soldiers, greeted so warmly as in Czechoslovakia. The entire population, but especially the elderly, women, children, [and] young ladies threw themselves at us in tears and kissed us, as if we were their closest relatives. Such an encounter can never be forgotten.”¹⁶

Many Czechs, too, portrayed their encounters with the Soviet soldiers as extraordinary, almost magical experiences. A few days after the liberation of Prague, a Czech journalist depicted a drive he took with a Soviet officer through the capital as if it were a love scene in a Hollywood film. As cheering crowds lined the streets offering food, water, and bouquets of lilacs to the Soviet troops, the Soviet officer whispered, “Magnificent people . . . you Czechs are a magnificent people.” The journalist added, “He clasped my hand. I was so moved that only my heart echoed his words.”¹⁷ Czech photographs from the liberation highlight this theme of genuine friendship. They show Red Army soldiers playing the accordion and guitar to entertain Czech women, sitting down to drinks at the home of a Czech family, and tenderly holding a succession of Czech babies and young children.¹⁸ In the postwar period, the memory of these spontaneous expressions of friendship would lay the groundwork for the official, more scripted friendship project between the two countries.

These heartfelt testimonies and images of warm encounters between the Red Army and Czech and Slovak civilians help account for the friendship project’s relative success over the four and a half decades following May 1945. Yet the liberation also had a darker side, which foreshadowed the interplay between friendship and violence that would equally characterize Soviet-

Czechoslovak relations for the duration of the Cold War. "The Russians received an enthusiastic welcome when they entered Czechoslovakia, but this brotherly Slavic love and friendship did not last," alleged a fall 1945 report by the U.S. Army, which had liberated parts of Western Bohemia.¹⁹ Even though Red Army troops in Czechoslovakia were instructed by their commanders to "behave in a friendly manner," civilians filed numerous reports complaining of criminal behavior. They accused Soviet soldiers of plundering their homes, stealing food and livestock as well as personal possessions, including jewelry, linens, and clothes.²⁰ Even more damaging to the nascent friendship between the two countries was a rash of violent crimes perpetrated by Soviet soldiers, including rapes and murders.²¹ These crimes confounded the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ), which emerged from the war in a position of unprecedented popularity and political strength. In September 1945, a provincial branch of the party's friendship society with the Soviet Union, the Union of Friends of the USSR, protested that the Soviet soldiers' actions were undermining their campaign to enroll new members, "Complaints about their behavior are coming in from many sides. We have tried to make excuses for this behavior at [our] meetings. But how can we explain the foul play that occurred on the night of September 22, 1945, in the village of Gerštorf to the Čech family, when three of its members were fatally wounded? . . . How do we explain to the inhabitants that a Russian lieutenant shot Josef Roubíček, the chairman of the National Committee in Donín, on September 20, 1945?"²² In the Brno region, the district secretary of the KSČ reported, "Every day and night incidents occur from the side of Russian soldiers, who steal, pillage, rape Czech women (not to even mention German women)." He highlighted one horrific crime: in the village of Popice, four Soviet soldiers had broken into the postmaster's house and held him at gunpoint while they raped his wife. These kinds of incidents, the district secretary complained, were tarnishing not only the Soviet Union's reputation, but also that of its staunchest ally in Czechoslovakia, the KSČ. "Many of our comrades are being poisoned by these kinds of things and have deviated from work for the party, or else they go about it lacking in spirit and sufficient taste."²³ Even Joseph Stalin was forced to concede to Czechoslovak leaders that his soldiers were "no angels."²⁴ Ultimately this tense situation was only resolved by the departure of the Soviet troops, who returned home at the end of November 1945, at the same time as their counterparts from the U.S. Army. By the end of 1945, Czechoslovakia

was the only future Soviet satellite state that was not occupied by the Red Army.

The Evolution of Friendship

Throughout the Cold War, Soviet and Eastern bloc officials used the term “friendship” to describe the relationships among their countries. Friendship was supposed to emphasize the singularity of international relations in the socialist world: to connote alliances based on shared ideology and goodwill, rather than on hard power or *realpolitik*. In this book, I use the term “friendship project” to describe the strategies Soviet and Eastern bloc officials developed to extend this concept of friendship from the sphere of high politics to the realm of everyday life. These strategies included cultural diplomacy, a variety of transnational, interpersonal contacts, and the trade of consumer goods. In the case of the Soviet-Czechoslovak alliance, the nature of friendship between the two countries as well as the terms of the friendship project evolved significantly over the course of the Cold War. This evolution was shaped by important shifts in the countries’ domestic politics and by broader political, social, and cultural changes on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

During the short-lived Third Republic in Czechoslovakia (1945–1948), officials from the Soviet Union and the KSČ began to develop the friendship project. The first phase of this project centered on Soviet cultural exports to Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovak government was a National Front, consisting of four Czech and two Slovak political parties. The KSČ wielded the greatest power in this coalition: its members headed the Ministries of the Interior, Defense, Information, Education, and Agriculture.²⁵ In June 1945, the Ministry of Information signed a landmark agreement with the Soviet All-Union State Office for Film Export and Import (*Soiuzintorgkino*), giving Soviet films the right to occupy 60 percent of screen time in Czechoslovakia’s movie theaters.²⁶ That fall, the Ministry of Education mandated the teaching of Russian as a foreign language in Czechoslovak schools.²⁷ Soviet exports of music, art, and literature further introduced Czechoslovak citizens to their new “friend.”

The Soviet government and the KSČ hoped that these cultural imports would convince the Czechoslovak public of the need to build socialism. As

the Cold War began, the Soviet government and the KSČ also looked to Soviet cultural imports to combat Western influence in Czechoslovakia, particularly from Hollywood films. Instead of promoting socialist internationalism, however, Soviet culture inadvertently bolstered Czechoslovak nationalism. Czechoslovak cultural critics, ordinary moviegoers, and exhibition viewers—even, in private, some leaders of the KSČ—employed Soviet films and paintings, in particular, as foils to define their country as more Western and culturally sophisticated than the USSR. Czechoslovaks thus concluded that their country needed to pursue its own, unique, path to Communism. During the Third Republic, the majority of Czechoslovaks considered the need for friendship with the USSR axiomatic, but they unexpectedly attempted to use Soviet culture as a proxy to set the terms of this friendship to their own advantage.

Over the course of the Third Republic, the KSČ, supported by Moscow, maneuvered for greater control over the National Front. In May 1946, the party won a plurality in free parliamentary elections, with 38 percent of the vote. The KSČ hoped to win a majority in the next set of elections, which were scheduled for the spring of 1948. When it became clear that this was not likely to happen, the party employed extralegal means to augment its control, including stacking the security services with its supporters, and intimidating members of the other parties. In February 1948, the KSČ took power in a coup.²⁸ The stakes of the friendship project immediately intensified. Soviet and Czechoslovak officials now relied on Soviet culture to cement the country's new position as a member of the socialist world.

In the spring of 1948, a split between Stalin and the Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito threatened to undermine Soviet hegemony in the nascent Eastern bloc. In response, the KSČ worked in tandem with Moscow to Sovietize most aspects of Czechoslovakia's political and cultural life, with the slogan, "The Soviet Union Is Our Model." During the Stalinist period in Czechoslovakia, which lasted until the mid-1950s, the party oversaw a veritable cult of the USSR: rhetoric of "friendship" now largely served as a cover for Soviet domination. Public debates over relations with the Soviet Union were prohibited. Western cultural imports were effectively banned; Czechoslovakia's movie theaters, libraries, concert halls, and galleries were inundated with Soviet socialist realist art, or Eastern bloc imitations. Even cultural exchanges between the two countries were supposed to highlight Soviet supremacy. When the Czechoslovak Army's musical ensemble toured the Soviet Union

in 1952, Soviet cultural officials criticized it for not performing enough Soviet songs.²⁹

The friendship project was further undermined during the late 1940s and early 1950s by campaigns in the USSR to cleanse the country of foreign influences. As a result, few Soviets and Czechoslovaks, aside from participants in high-level political and cultural delegations, had the opportunity to meet in person, and few Czechoslovaks were allowed to visit the Soviet Union. The one exception was several hundred Czechoslovak students, drawn from the Communist elite, who went to study at Soviet universities and institutes. Soviet xenophobia prevented these young people from fully integrating into life in the USSR; for example, the Soviet government's ban forbidding its citizens to marry foreigners thwarted transnational romances. Yet the students' sojourn in the USSR nonetheless taught them important Stalinist political tactics that proved essential for forging—and surviving—the new socialist world.

After Stalin's death in 1953, de-Stalinization in the USSR caused three significant changes to the friendship project in the Eastern bloc. First, cultural contacts among the socialist countries became more reciprocal, based on bilateral exchange agreements. Second, they became more populist, encompassing the broad participation of ordinary citizens in the USSR and its satellites. Third, they became more modern, in convergence with new practices of leisure and consumption developing across the Eastern bloc. In the broader Cold War, the structure of international relations on both sides of the Iron Curtain became yet another form of competition between the superpowers. Soviet officials seized on the allegedly benevolent international relations among the socialist countries to provide a contrast to what they viewed as Western, imperialist practices.³⁰

During Stalinism, the friendship project had been largely aimed at Czechoslovaks, who were supposed to emulate Soviet culture and politics. After 1953, Soviet citizens began to participate in the project more actively. In Czechoslovakia, two friendship societies with the Soviet Union had been founded in the interwar period, and soon after the 1948 coup they were amalgamated into the Union of Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship (SČSP), which became the second largest mass organization in the country, after the trade unions. In 1958, the Society for Soviet-Czechoslovak Friendship was founded in Moscow. In the 1950s and 1960s, Soviets and Czechoslovaks began to visit each other's countries as tourists, to correspond as pen pals, and to subscribe

to glossy magazines detailing the lives of their foreign “friends.” Friendship propaganda encouraged Soviets to buy Czechoslovak-made underwear, perfume, and shoes, and urged Czechoslovaks to purchase Soviet-made cameras, television sets, and cars. Soviet veterans of the liberation of Czechoslovakia in World War II began to renew contacts with the civilians who had sheltered and cared for them in 1944–1945. Their gratitude to these Czechoslovaks undermined the Stalinist dichotomy of Soviet superiority and Czechoslovak supplication.

These new bilateral contacts established more intimate connections between individual Soviets and Czechoslovaks, yet they also revealed political and cultural differences that undermined the larger goal of creating political cohesion in the Communist bloc. In the mid-1960s, Czechoslovakia embarked on a series of political and cultural reforms that challenged Soviet authority—and by extension, the friendship project. Soviet tourists who traveled to Czechoslovakia were shocked to encounter abstract art, pornography, and hippies, not to mention outspoken guides who praised the United States and Western Europe and denounced the Soviet Union. Back in the USSR, readers of the Czechoslovak-produced, Russian-language magazine *Sotsialističeskaja Čechoslovakiia* (Socialist Czechoslovakia) were exposed to a far more sophisticated consumer culture than was available in the Soviet Union, and to reviews of films and excerpts from Czechoslovak novels that were considered too unorthodox for release in the Soviet Union.

The expansion of interpersonal contacts between Soviet and Czechoslovak citizens also revealed new tensions between friendship as a form of state politics, and friendship as a mode of intimate relations between individuals. In their propaganda, the Soviet and Czechoslovak governments claimed that personal friendships between their citizens would help bolster their countries’ alliance. “Friendship between nations is also based on personal friendships between people,” declared Oldřich Pavlovský, Czechoslovakia’s ambassador to the Soviet Union.³¹ Yet when it came to managing tourism, pen-pal correspondences, and veterans’ relations, Soviet and Czechoslovak officials betrayed fears that such friendships might threaten the stability of the transnational socialist system.

Tensions between the Soviet Union and its satellite state came to a head during the 1968 Prague Spring experiment in reform Communism. As the KSČ took the dramatic steps of rehabilitating Stalinist political prisoners,

opening the country's borders, and lifting censorship, Czechoslovakia became the darling of leftists around the world. In response, the Soviet Union ordered a massive invasion. On the night of August 20–21, Soviet troops entered Czechoslovakia for the second time in twenty-three years.

The invasion might logically appear to have crushed the friendship project, along with the Prague Spring. Yet even as Soviet troops occupied Czechoslovakia for the next two decades, the friendship project endured. This happened for two reasons. First, Czechoslovak citizens drew on the rhetoric and practices of the friendship project to protest the invasion, and in the process, inadvertently helped the project to survive. Second, Soviet leaders and the government of Gustáv Husák (the first secretary of the KSČ) actively worked to restore the friendship project in order to “normalize” relations between their countries. The two governments’ efforts further blurred the distinction between violence and amity; and hard and soft power that had defined the friendship project since 1945. The Soviet government sent tourists to Czechoslovakia to renew friendly ties, while the SČSP instructed its members to treat the Soviet troops occupying their country as tourists. The Czechoslovak government rewarded supporters of normalization by sending them on “friendship trains” to the USSR. The Soviet government even instructed its troops in Czechoslovakia to participate in the friendship project by playing chess matches and soccer games with local youth.

The friendship project became a key component of normalization in Czechoslovakia, and remained an integral part of everyday life up until the Velvet Revolution in 1989. “Czechoslovak-Soviet friendship was a routine thing for me because I grew up with it. It seemed completely normal to me,” a middle-aged Czech recalled of the 1970s and 1980s in a 2009 television documentary.³²

Empire of Friends

The friendship project presents a new way to understand Soviet-Czechoslovak relations, which have remained almost entirely unexplored beyond the realm of high politics.³³ It also offers a new way to conceptualize the Eastern bloc as a whole. During the early Cold War, Western scholars understood Soviet relations with Eastern Europe as Sovietization, which they defined as the USSR’s attempt to transform politics and state institutions throughout the

region in its own image. With this framework of totalizing Soviet control, they dismissed the role of “internationalism” as a cover for “nationalism on behalf of the Soviet Union.”³⁴ Following the events of 1956 in Hungary and Poland, which demonstrated the limits of Soviet power in the region, Zbigniew Brzezinski argued for a new approach. He cited “new and more complex interrelationships between the [Eastern bloc] states,” such as the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance and the Warsaw Treaty Organization, as evidence that a supranational system of power had developed in the region.³⁵

Since the collapse of Communism, scholarship on Soviet relations with the Eastern bloc has begun to extend beyond high politics, and in the process has further challenged the utility of the Sovietization approach. John Connelly’s comparative study of higher education in the Stalinist period in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Poland has revealed a degree of Soviet indifference toward their new satellite states. He has shown, for example, how Soviet officials often chose to outsource the restructuring of education in the satellite states to local Communists.³⁶ V. Pechatnov and A. S. Stykalin have further undermined the image of the USSR’s hegemonic power abroad by revealing how Soviet propaganda efforts in early postwar Eastern Europe and the West were stymied by organizational problems, a lack of resources, and state-led xenophobic campaigns.³⁷ Norman Naimark and Peter Kenez have explored Soviet efforts to use culture, including literature, education, and film as a means of augmenting authority in the Soviet occupation zone of Germany and in Hungary, respectively.³⁸ Jan Behrends and Alan Nothnagle have, respectively, examined Polish and East German Communists’ attempts to use propaganda promoting friendship with the USSR to consolidate their power in the late 1940s and early 1950s.³⁹ Patryk Babiracki has argued that Soviet and Polish midlevel officials sought to use soft power, in the form of cultural relations between their countries, “as a means to gain influence and establish unity.”⁴⁰

This scholarship reveals that the USSR’s relations with its satellites in Eastern Europe were more complex than Cold War arguments about “captive nations” suggest. At the same time, the vast majority of the scholarship concludes that Soviet efforts to use art, education, and friendship to unify the socialist bloc were a failure. For example, in his work on the League for Polish-Soviet Friendship during the late 1940s and early 1950s, Behrends argues that in the Eastern bloc after Stalin’s death in 1953, Soviet power entered into “prolonged decline,” as the Eastern European Communist parties began to

substitute nationalist rhetoric and policies for Sovietization, in an attempt to foster political legitimacy at home.⁴¹ Similarly, Zbigniew Wojnowski contends that in the post-Stalinist period, cultural contacts between Soviet Ukraine and Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland backfired, undermining socialist internationalism and augmenting Soviet patriotism.⁴²

Empire of Friends challenges this story of failure in three ways. First, I highlight the friendship project's longevity and geographic breadth. Most of the literature on Soviet cultural relations with Eastern Europe focuses on the Stalinist period, or, in the case of Wojnowski's work, concerns the decades after Nikita Khrushchev's Thaw in the mid-1950s. By detailing the evolution of Soviet relations with Czechoslovakia over the *longue durée* of the socialist experiment, I show that the friendship project proved surprisingly durable and flexible—able to survive the dramatic shifts from Stalinism to de-Stalinization and from the Prague Spring to normalization. The project's success can also be measured geographically: from 1949 to the 1970s, Soviet officials used it as a blueprint to expand the empire of friends to China, Vietnam, and Cuba, and to try to attract the newly independent countries in Africa and Asia to the socialist camp.⁴³

Second, I argue that while the Soviet friendship project with Czechoslovakia and the other Eastern bloc countries failed to achieve a stable, transnational socialist community led by the USSR in high politics, it succeeded in creating a cohesive socialist world in the sphere of everyday life. This seemingly paradoxical contention builds on recent scholarship that examines the history of the transnational socialist system in relation to its influence on material culture, social practices, and collective memory.⁴⁴ As Elidor Mëhilli argues, socialism “engendered a shared material and mental culture across national borders without ensuring political unity.”⁴⁵ In *Empire of Friends*, I reveal how the friendship project influenced the most intimate aspects of the everyday lives of Soviet and Eastern European citizens, including what they wore, where they traveled—even who they married. As ordinary citizens participated in cultural, interpersonal, and commercial exchanges, they helped shape the friendship project—and with it—the socialist world.

Third, I contend that the friendship project succeeded *through* its political failure. In the case of Soviet-Czechoslovak relations, the very cultural, interpersonal, and commercial contacts that were supposed to augment the

countries' alliance were so successful that they actually undermined it. During the Prague Spring, for instance, Soviet citizens were able to learn about the reform movement in Czechoslovakia by travel on official tour groups to the country. The friendship project thus provides a new approach to understanding the eventual failure of the socialist world. This was a world that collapsed not only because the Soviet Union and its socialist allies abroad took increasingly divergent political paths after Stalin's death but also because their cultural and interpersonal spheres became so intertwined.

By examining Soviet power in Eastern Europe through the lens of everyday life, *Empire of Friends* contributes to a rich literature about the symbiotic relationship in socialist regimes between state politics and the quotidian sphere (particularly in the post-Stalinist period). Studies examining sexuality, familial relations, housing, and consumption during socialism show how party leaders tried to satisfy their citizens' social welfare needs and consumerist desires, and how in return, ordinary people supported the state with a range of behaviors, including participating in propaganda, serving in social organizations, and acting as secret police informers.⁴⁶ This complex relationship between authoritarian regimes and their citizens challenges the binaries traditionally used to characterize life in Communist countries, such as the state versus society and collaboration versus resistance.

In her history of East Germany, Mary Fulbrook argues that it is often difficult to distinguish between "the East German state" and "East German society" because the two were so entwined. She thus dubs East Germany, "a participatory dictatorship."⁴⁷ *Empire of Friends* reveals a similar paradox in the relationship between the Soviet Union and its satellite states in Eastern Europe. This relationship was of course explicitly hierarchical, and it relied extensively on hard power, as Soviet military interventions in 1953, 1956, and 1968 so clearly demonstrate. At the same time, however, Soviet power in the Eastern bloc did not rely exclusively on force and coercion. Soviet and Eastern European citizens helped construct the Eastern bloc by participating in such everyday activities as going to the movies, studying, and shopping.

The story of the friendship project between the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia also contributes to recent work on the relationship between hard and soft power in international relations, and on illiberal forms of