At a meeting of the Political Consultative Committee of the Warsaw Pact (WP) in Bucharest in 1966, the personal secretary of Andrei Gromyko, the USSR’s minister of foreign affairs, commented on the interaction in this socialist international organization: “It used to be very easy […] the SU proposed something, and the other socialist countries adopted it without discussions. Now it is no longer that simple. Every [country] has its own opinions.” He added that “this is very good, […] but we lose too much time” (p.191). His remarks epitomize the themes and aim of Laurien Crump’s history of the WP from the mid-1950s to the end of the 1960s. The volume tells the story of how this institution of the Soviet bloc gradually turned into an arena for the affirmation of its members’ national interests, how it morphed from being supposedly an instrument of Moscow’s hegemony into a multilateral socialist forum. Crump goes even further and deals with two additional topics: the relationship between WP and détente (the Conference for European Security and Cooperation) and WP’s attitude toward the Global South.

Crump offers a fresh narrative about the WP starting from an original premise. Rather than telling a story based on a “hegemon” vs. its “satellites,” her central point of reference is the issue of sovereignty. The book documents the massive shift in terms of intra-bloc dynamics when Nikita Khrushchev replaced the Cominform with the WP in 1955, which signaled the transition from an inter-party organization to an intergovernmental one: “a window of opportunity [had opened] to make their voices heard in a multilateral platform” (p.24). The new framework was obvious during subsequent crises of what was called the international communist movement: the Hungarian Revolution and the subsequent Soviet intervention, the Albanian-Soviet and the Chinese-Soviet splits, and the second Berlin Crisis. Khrushchev became reluctant to deal unilaterally with intra-bloc problems. In the case of Hungary, he consulted in October 1956 with party leaders from Czechoslovakia, the GDR, and Bulgaria. The decision about the second invasion in Hungary was taken only once Imre Nagy accepted the end of single-party rule. Crump emphasizes that Khrushchev could not use the WP to support Soviet intervention in Hungary. Therefore the crisis “highlighted what the WP was not” (p.37).
Crump connects the analysis of the various splits and rebellions within the WP. Albanian separation from Moscow precipitated the Sino-Soviet divorce (p.65), which in its turn was a defining lesson for Romania’s counter-hegemonic stand within the organization (p.74). The latter also triggered a clarification of individual stands among other WP members. This argument is enriched by reminders of the non-European side of the story. The role of China and other Asian socialist countries (Vietnam, Mongolia, North Korea) in influencing dynamics within the WP is consistently highlighted. Crump argues that the deepening of the Sino-Soviet split, to the extent that the two communist giants came very close to full-scale war in the border clashes of March 1969, “drove the WP in the arms of Western Europe” (p.292).

During 1960s, the WP appeared to be in continuous crisis, since its members disagreed on the goals and scope of the alliance. Crump shows how the disagreements were not mainly between the USSR and the rest. The central triggers of dissent were the relationship between Romania and the GDR or Poland, tensions between Poland and the GDR, and, last but not least, Czechoslovakia’s search for autonomy and “socialism with a human face.”

Unsurprisingly, Crump allocates significant space to the Prague Spring and the Soviet bloc’s attitude toward it, and she develops a novel take on a well-trodden topic. In contrast to the existing secondary literature, she draws a distinction “between multilateral decision-making by several WP countries and Warsaw Pact decision-making” (p.216). From this standpoint, Czechoslovakia’s invasion was not under WP command. It was, to use Crump’s pun, “a coalition of the willing” (p.235).

Crump is careful to draw further important distinctions here. She points out that “at the heart of the disagreements between Romania and the other WP members lay a different interpretation of the concept of ‘flexibility’” (p.161). The former wanted liberty of action inside the alliance, while the latter sought a clearly structured alliance that would give the WP more discretion in dealing with the outside world. She also shows how all European Soviet allies attempted to encroach on the WP agenda by pushing their priorities to the forefront. This was the engine of the organization’s multilateralization and professionalization (e.g., the gatherings of deputy ministers of foreign affairs or military reform).

The volume’s most innovative insight, however, lies in its emphasis on the relationship between the WP and the Helsinki process, which defined the timeframe that followed the end point of Crump’s volume. From Adam Rapacki’s initiative at the UN in 1964, the Bucharest declaration in 1966, or the
Budapest appeal in 1969, WP dynamics were essential to the consolidation of European security and cooperation and to “the multilateralisation of détente” (p.296). She sets herself apart from previous authors by insisting that “it was not the Helsinki Process that served to emancipate the WP members from the Soviet grip … instead, the multilateralisation of the WP had facilitated the WP members’ autonomous stance within the Helsinki Process” (p.290).

There is one connection that Crump does not sufficiently highlight: the search for cohesion-cum-sovereignty within the WP was catalyzed not only by Western European integration, but also by the rise of the Global South in the 1960s. As János Kádár remarked in 1964, around the same time that the group of 77 at the United Nations was taking shape, “the foreign ministers of the NATO countries get together and consult; so do the foreign ministers of the Arab, African, and Latin American countries. We are the only ones who cannot get together. Why? What is happening at this session is a crying shame” (p.139). By the end of the 1960s, the WP acquired enough *modus operandi* to strengthen its members’ position within pan-European cooperation. This captivating volume would have benefited indeed from a stronger focus on how the Global South was one of the avenues along which state socialisms found their way into what Mikhail Gorbachev later called “the common European home”.

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