

Call for Sessions - WEHC 2015 [S20136]

Proposed title of the session

Revisiting the role of foreign trade in socialist economies

Abstract

The present panel joins the efforts of a number of scholars, who – from different perspectives – have chosen to conduct an archive-based study of the role of foreign trade in command economies. The ultimate aim shared by the panelists is to kick-start a fruitful discussion about the place of the Communist countries in the world economy, particularly as it pertains to the Cold War and the beginning of globalization.

The decades of Communist rule have generally been regarded as characterized by an abiding autarky, whereby overall contacts with the non-Bloc world were forcefully limited. This in turn has allowed for analyses that explained the political and economic decisions of the different leaderships as driven purely by ideological considerations and usually contrasting with the more “rational” decision-making prevailing in the “free world”. For a number of years, the limited access to original materials has made further enquiries rather difficult, allowing for very little progress. The new century, however, has witnessed some attempt to shed light on East-West trade during the Cold War – especially on the role of embargo promoted most assiduously by the United States, as well as on governmental attitudes – in general, revealing that the barriers between Socialist economies and the Free World were more porous than expected (Dobson; Cain; Segreto). From a business history perspective, there have been a few substantial contributions (Autio-Sarasmo and Miklossy; Eloranta and Ojala; Jensen-Eriksen), although great part of the issues remains uncovered. This leaves margin to proceed with new research.

Was there an ideologically motivated drive toward autarky among these countries? In fact we may even ask, does autarky reflect the nature of the foreign trade of these economies? Did the concept of foreign trade ever challenge any of the ideological assumption of the Socialist ‘creed’? As a matter of fact, statistic data show that East-West trade never stopped, and often followed the trends in international trade. The panel will seek to challenge the prevailing wisdom on what we know about the economic relations of the Communist world suggesting that – however strong it could be – ideology did not prevent countries with different economic systems to engage in intensive trade connections. Following the archive-based orientation chosen by the scholars joining this panel, this session will focus on the micro level economic analysis. The aim of the panel discussion is to trace a coherent narrative out of the study of the activities of individuals involved in everyday trade practices in Soviet Russia, Yugoslavia and Mao’s China, while at the same time highlighting the practices and the individual actions carried out by their capitalist counterparts.

Studying foreign trade during the Cold War years can help to explain why accessing the capitalist system has not meant a “heal-all” for each of these transitional economies. In facts some have succeeded, whereas others have failed. Secondly, understanding the pioneering role played by businessmen will add to the debate on the beginning of globalization, integrating different social sciences from economics to history and political science.

I. Corresponding Session Organiser

Dr. Valeria Zanier (London School of Economics [United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland])

II. Co-Organiser(s)

1. Corresponding Organiser.

III. Expected Participant(s)

1. same as correspondent.
2. Valentina Fava (Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki [Finland])
3. Elena Kochetkova (National Research University Higher School of Economics, Saint-Petersburg [Russian Federation])
4. Christopher Leighton (Massachusetts Institute of Technology [United States of America])
5. Roberto Peruzzi (Ca' Foscari University, Venice [Italy])
6. Oscar Sanchez-Sibony (University of Macau [China])
7. Vladimir Unkovski-Korica (National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow [Russian Federation])
8. Jari Eloranta (Appalachian State University [United States of America])
9. Pui Tak Lee (The University of Hong Kong [China])