

Editorial

Can developmental aid and humanitarian action be separated from economic interests and political goals? Are acts of aid in asymmetric worldwide power relations and acts of trade in unequal global economic interactions two sides of the same coin or different coins altogether? There are no easy answers to those questions. There are arguments for differentiating motifs and resulting practices as well as arguments for the entanglement of trade relations and aid-led interactions. In this special issue, the editors and authors explore that multi-layered theme through profound empirical analyses of economic interactions during the Cold War between actors from state-socialist countries and actors from the so-called Global South. Their point of entry is the time of political change under Nikita Khrushchev, which also led to new and intensified trading relations between the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc with newly decolonized countries in Africa and Asia. From there, they investigate different groups of actors, including economists who theorize from the perspective of decolonization, architects who contribute to liberation movements, politicians and planners, managers and technicians in industry. They connect East Germany with South Africa, for example, and North Korea and Tanzania while exploring concrete sites of interactions such as hydropower plants. Comparative perspectives – Hungarian and Yugoslav relations with Algeria, for instance – are as much explored as processes of technological transfer, including the construction of a tractor factory in Luoyang, China, based on a Soviet model.

What all those investigations reveal, on the one hand, is that concepts and practices in trade at the time were deeply enmeshed with issues surrounding aid for development. On the other, they show that those two sets of activities were separated and played out against each other. Contemporaries from the mid-1950s onward established a dichotomy between trade and aid in their political reasoning, yet, in practice sought to profit from the merits of both. We see how that seemingly contradictory constellation unfolded in concrete historical situations of transregional interactions in the second half of the twentieth century under the influence of both decolonization and growing global integration. Understanding past politics of attributing “pure economic interests” to the

political opposite and claiming “entirely humanitarian concerns” for their own trade relations helps to grasp how economy, ideology, and politics played out together as driving forces in and of increasing economic encounters between the state-socialist world and the decolonizing world.

That perspective is instructive for the historiography on the Global Cold War. Similarly revealing are the contributions of this special issue to the study of globalization. Against notions of globalization as a rather automated, directed, and inescapable process, the editors substantiate a different understanding: globalization as growing global interdependence and as mutual entanglements driven by multiple, often competing, visions and projects and that thus create an open, everchanging constellation. This special issue is also worth reading because it departs from common homogenizing notions of “East”, “South”, and “West” by reconstructing local transfer, national politics, and, above all, the actors shaping economic interactions. That departure opens up thrilling lines of further investigation into the question of alternative projects of globalization and exports of state-socialist development models.

This special issue of *Comparativ* offers historical investigations that are not only relevant for historiography but also contribute to the journal’s interest in understanding the present in the light of the past. After all, the multiple entanglements between trade and aid play out today as much as in earlier times. Examples exist in abundance. At the time of this editorial, aid is being mobilized for the earthquake south of Marrakesh, Morocco, and flooding in Darna, Libya, both of which are emergency situations. Even there, we see issues arising about who can help whom and where and for what ends such aid is used by recipients as well as by donors. Global politics, international bodies, different state structures and local dynamics, and legacies of transnational and transregional connections are deeply interwoven. In this special issue, we see as if under a burning glass the complexities of aid, politics, development, and trade.

Katja Castryck-Naumann