HOKKAIDO UNIVERSITY

Title	Samuel J. Hirst, Against the Liberal Order : The Soviet Union, Turkey, and Statist Internationalism, 1919-1939 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 256 pp.
Author(s)	Denis, Vovchenko
Description	Book Reviews
Citation	Acta Slavica Iaponica, 47(1), 209-211
Issue Date	2026
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/100401
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	17_Acta47-1_Book Reviews.pdf

Hokkaido University Collection of Scholarly and Academic Papers : HUSCAP

Samuel J. Hirst, *Against the Liberal Order: The Soviet Union, Turkey, and Statist Internationalism, 1919–1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 256 pp.

Tantalized by his earlier articles,[1] the readers have long anticipated the publication of Samuel Hirst's dissertation. It is a welcome addition to the burgeoning field of Soviet–Turkish studies recently enriched by a seminal intellectual biography and an exploration of debates about Kemalism inside the Communist party leadership and academia.[2] The book under review makes a significant contribution by focusing on the economic interconnectedness across the Black Sea made possible not by free trade but by state-to-state arrangements. This story should be of interest not just to historians but also to political analysts trying to make sense of the complicated Putin–Erdogan relationship today.

Against the Liberal Order situates the origin of those interwar economic ties in the political rapprochement between the Bolsheviks and the Turkish nationalist movement equally threatened by the victorious Entente powers. That is why the first two chapters detail the development of their diplomatic relations before and after the Lausanne Conference (1922–1923). It was more than a turning point (p. 41)—for a few tense weeks, it seemed to signal a breaking point. Shocked by Ankara's concessions to the Entente on the Straits regime, the Soviet foreign minister and his deputy urged Moscow to shift its support to the Arab world generally and to the Hashemite Hejaz specifically, thereby putting pressure on both the Turks and the Western imperialists.[3] Eventually, mutual moderation and patience prevailed, leading to the signing of a new Soviet–Turkish treaty in Paris in 1925. It emphasized bilateral ties outside multilateral West-controlled institutions and served as a model for later Soviet neutrality pacts with Afghanistan, Iran, Sweden, and Germany (p. 44).

The author maintains a focus on the Eurasian context in the subsequent four economy-centered chapters. Hirst also takes Soviet ideology seriously to trace where and when it had more or less impact on the ground. Eager to distance themselves from the hated imperial past, the Bolsheviks renounced Tsarist-era extraterritorial concessions in China and Iran. Soon enough, they began demanding their restoration under a different guise, most importantly regarding the use of the Chinese Eastern Railway. In the early 1920s, the Soviets heralded the advent of a new non-exploitative dispensation in their trade with the semi-colonial "Eastern" countries. Tired of running trade deficits and hard currency outflows, they introduced the net balance principle in 1926—any sale at the fairs in Baku and Nizhnii Novgorod needed to be offset by the

1 Samuel J. Hirst and Onur Işçi, "Smokestacks and Pipelines: Russian–Turkish Relations and the Persistence of Economic Development," *Diplomatic History* 44, no. 5 (2020), pp. 834–859; Samuel J. Hirst, "Anti-Westernism on the European Periphery: The Meaning of Soviet–Turkish Convergence in the 1930s," *Slavic Review* 72, no. 1 (2013), pp. 32–53; idem, "Transnational Anti-Imperialism and the National Forces: Soviet Diplomacy and Turkey, 1920–1923," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 33, no. 2 (2013), pp. 214–226.

2 James H. Meyer, *The Red Star over the Black Sea: Nazim Hikmet and His Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); Vahram Ter-Matevosyan, *Turkey, Kemalism, and the Soviet Union: Problems of Modernization, Ideology, and Interpretation* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

3 Denis Vovchenko, "In Search of a Common Enemy: Russo–Turkish Cooperation and Its Discontents (1908–1923)," *Middle Eastern Studies* 59, no. 6 (2023), p. 895.

purchase of Soviet goods. Iranian merchants appear to have been hit hardest, whereas Turkey was less adversely affected because of its geopolitical importance (p. 99).

That was the main reason why the Soviet foreign trade monopoly (*Vneshtorg*) kept buying unwanted Anatolian dried and fresh fruits. Diplomacy aside, Moscow accepted the nationalist developmentalist logic of Iranian and Turkish protective tariffs (p. 108). Overdue Ottoman debt repayment deadlines at the onset of the Great Depression made the early 1930s the most propitious time for the Kemalist leadership to adopt, in part, Soviet-style 5-year plans and to request Soviet aid and expertise to develop an import-substitution textile industry during Prime Minister Ismet Inonu's 1932 visit to the USSR. The author spends a lot of ink to highlight the contingency of Soviet industrial assistance. After all, Stalin had earlier weighed in on the side of younger Comintern-affiliated critics of alliances with anti-Western nationalists following the decimation of the Chinese Communist Party by the Guomindang in 1927 (pp. 170–179).

Soviet investment in and construction of the garment factories in Kayseri and Nazilli constitute the high point of *Against the Liberal Order* and of the challenge posed in the 1930s by the agrarian periphery of Europe to the West-centric economic hierarchy intent to uphold the privileged position of the early industrialized countries. That moment did not last long despite the obvious ideological priorities and economic interests of both Ankara and Moscow. Geopolitics seemingly triumphed again. In Hirst's analysis, the 1936 Montreux Convention turned Soviet–Turkish friendship into enmity (p. 168). The author cited Onur Işçi's article but did not engage with his counterargument—that Soviet–Turkish economic and diplomatic cooperation was harmed not by the Montreux revisions to the Straits regime but by the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact three years later.[4]

The book is based on the impressive data in many languages. Most archival sources are from the depositories in Moscow (GARF, RGAE, RGASPI, etc.). There are some minor issues that in no way detract from the monograph's value. A few citations are confusing—note 25 on p. 7 mentions nothing about the Russoturk joint venture, whereas most of the paragraph discusses it. The same problem occurs with note 56 on p. 15, in the introduction as well. Note 42 on p. 202 mixes up two different archives (RGALI and RGANI). There is no citation on page 28 for the important point about the rivalry between Kemal and Enver to attract the Kremlin's support for their claims to lead the Turkish nationalist movement.

Nevertheless, *Against the Liberal Order* is a solid new signpost in Soviet–Turkish studies. Where do we go from here? Hirst's account centers on the official Moscow–Ankara axis. It includes a brief glimpse into the social implications of state-to-state relations such as the gendered composition of the labor force in Soviet-designed textile factories in Kayseri and Nazilli. Pursuing further comparative research of this kind appears particularly promising, especially focusing on Soviet Central Asia and Azerbaijan, as done by Adeeb Khalid.[5] After all, the switch from Arabic to Latin script and the campaign to encourage the removal of women's headscarves occurred earlier in the Soviet Union and likely served as an inspiration for Turkey.

4 Onur Işçi, "Yardstick of Friendship: Soviet–Turkish and the Montreux Convention of 1936," *Kritika* 21, no. 4 (2020), pp. 736, 761.

5 For example, see Adeeb Khalid, "Backwardness and the Quest for Civilization: Early Soviet Central Asia in Comparative Perspective," *Slavic Review* 65, no. 2 (2006), pp. 231–251.

Another possible shift away from the capital cities would be to focus on how growing Soviet–Turkish ties were experienced in the borderlands. A related case study worth exploring is the negotiated return of the Russian Molokans and other religious sectarians who had settled in the Kars province after its annexation by the Romanovs in 1878. Although much more fortunate than their Armenian and Greek neighbors during and in the aftermath of the First World War, they suffered enough abuse from the Ottoman and Kemalist troops to be willing to move to Russia under godless Communist rule. They were able to do so after the conclusion of the first Soviet–Turkish treaty in Moscow in March 1921 (with the remaining Ottoman POWs going the other way).[6] It may be considered a precursor to the much larger Greek–Turkish population exchange of 1923 (against the background of similar Ottoman–Greek and Ottoman–Bulgarian agreements following the Balkan Wars, which were derailed by the First World War).

Denis Vovchenko

6 I briefly discuss the episode in Vovchenko, "In Search of a Common Enemy," p. 893.