

**Centre for the Social History of Health and Healthcare
(CSHHH)
Seminar Series**



**The making of an alternative international health: North Korea and
the socialist world**

Dr Dora Vargha

University of Exeter

Tuesday, 14 January 2020

5.00 pm LH228

Lord Hope Building

All welcome!

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<https://www.strath.ac.uk/humanities/schoolofhumanities/history/centreforthesocialhistoryofhealthhealthcare/>

The making of an alternative international health: North Korea and the socialist world

In the early 1950s a number of Eastern European hospitals appeared in North Korea, helping the war effort and the post-war reconstruction of the new country. While countries of the Soviet Bloc themselves were struggling with acute shortages in health experts and materials, the Korean War was the first instance in the unfolding Cold War when newly minted Eastern European governments could visibly and forcefully engage with international politics, and participate in co-creating the so-called socialist world. In fact, this was the first – and only – instance of a grand, quite coordinated, socialist internationalist venture of ‘fraternal’ solidarity that united the Soviet Union, most of Eastern Europe, China and Mongolia in a single effort of wartime aid and reconstruction. I argue that the late 1940s and early 1950s marked an era when the world not only divided along political ideologies, but also along the way obligations, practices and networks in the emerging world health system were imagined. These imaginaries, partially mapping onto political ideas, partially aligning with professional priorities, and sometimes contradicting geopolitical agendas, shaped health interventions, scientific knowledge production and international networks in the early Cold War era and ultimately shaped international health structures for decades to come.

By centering the analysis on state socialist countries and their global relations, this research aims to change our fundamental understanding on the history of the emergence of global health in the post-Cold War order. Socialist networks of international solidarity and collectivity shaped health care systems, pharmaceutical manufacturing, and knowledge networks in ways that have been rendered invisible in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rise of neoliberal frameworks, and the HIV epidemic, which animated the rise of global health initiatives driven by “the West”.

Polio Across the Iron Curtain: Hungary’s Cold War with an Epidemic (Cambridge University Press, 2018) out [now in Open Access](#)

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