

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Article Reviews

h-diplo.org/reviews/

No. 462

Published on 5 June 2014

Updated 8 June 2014

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

Natalia Kapitonova. "Visit of Soviet Leaders Nikita Khrushchev and Nicholas Bulganin to Britain in April 1956." *Cold War History* 14:1 (February 2014): 127-152. DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2013.783343. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2013.783343>

URL: <http://h-diplo.org/reviews/PDF/AR462.pdf>

Reviewed by **Wes Ullrich**, London School of Economics and Political Science

Natalia Kapitonova has examined a key period of transition in the Cold War. The West had laid the foundation of its perceptions of the Soviet system on its historical relationship with communism as it had developed since 1917, and then with the Stalinist dictatorship. Yet in the years after Joseph Stalin's death, the assumptions that underpinned this perception of the leadership were challenged, first by Soviet leaders Gregori Malenkov, and then by Nikita Khrushchev and Nikolai Bulganin. Thus, the public appearances of Khrushchev and Bulganin were of great importance for both the West and the USSR. For the West, they offered opportunities to examine, whether consciously or not, whether the assumptions about Soviet objectives and behaviour that had developed under Stalinism remained intact. For the Soviets the appearances presented an opportunity to challenge such assumptions and present a new image of Soviet Communism not only to the West, but also to the developing world.

1956 was a momentous year in the relationship between the West and the Soviet Union. Events such as the Suez Crisis, Polish October, and the Hungarian Uprising and the 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) have garnered the most attention. It is in regard to the last of these that the visit of Khrushchev and Bulganin to Britain perhaps has its most significance. The 20th Party Congress was initially viewed by the West as part of a larger public image campaign directed by the Kremlin to improve the image of Soviet Communism abroad. It thus fit in with the pattern of the Soviet 'new look': think of Bulganin and Khrushchev's tour of Burma, India and Afghanistan in 1955; the visit to Belgrade; or the Geneva Summit. Of course all of these events had other significant motivations, but they were lumped together in the minds of those in Whitehall and Washington as part of a larger effort to burnish the image of the Soviet system in the Cold War struggle.

H-Diplo Article Review

It was in this context that the visit took place. Given that it took place without any significant breakthroughs, the visit has been understudied. Meetings between leaders such as these can tell us as much about the relationships of governments, leaders, and nations as can crises. Kapitonova's article is a study of just such an instance.

The article contains sections covering the preparation for the visit, including the British debate over the possible cancellation of the visit due to the negative remarks of Khrushchev and Bulganin regarding British foreign policy towards Nazi Germany and colonialism. As for the meetings themselves, Kapitonova relays the discussions, as portrayed in Soviet documents, of the Middle East, Far East, European security and Germany, disarmament, and decolonisation. She also covers such "unpleasant incidents" as the row with the Labour Party (144). The article also recounts a good deal of anecdotes. Admittedly, these are amusing, as Khrushchev always had the 'gift of the gab'. But they do not highlight anything new, nor are they used in the service of any larger point or theme. They appear to be in the article simply because they were in the documents (142, 143, 149).

The article itself is based on a great deal of newly released documents. This aspect of the article is noteworthy. Indeed, the article provides a new narrative of the Khrushchev-Bulganin visit from the Soviet standpoint. In particular it does well to note the triangular relationship between the U.S., Britain, and the Soviet Union in this period, which was not always straightforward and often blurred traditional Cold War boundaries. Kapitonova explains in the introduction that the article is an examination of this particular episode of the Cold War in Soviet-British relations, and she addresses it almost exclusively from the Soviet point of view.

This is problematic because Kapitonova has a tendency throughout the article to express the positions and opinions of the Eden government and policymakers through Soviet sources. She mentions the row caused by the negative remarks made by Khrushchev and Bulganin during their tour of India, Burma, and Afghanistan in 1955 (132-33). The remarks were negative towards British colonialism and the British policy towards Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939. However, this is discussed without reference to any British documentation. This is frustrating since there is a vast amount of material available in Kew on exactly this episode. While this reviewer has not researched this episode in great detail, many of the British documents express the idea that the cancellation of the visit was never seriously considered. The concern, rather, was how to 'spin' Khrushchev's remarks to the press and British people in order to justify the visit proceeding.¹

¹ Many of these documents can be found in FO371/122810, National Archives of the United Kingdom.

H-Diplo Article Review

In another instance the article describes British Prime Minister Antony Eden's feelings towards the Soviet delegation at the 1955 Geneva Summit, but based upon the summary of the Soviet Embassy in London. No doubt what the Soviet Embassy had to say could be of importance- it certainly tells us what the Soviets may have thought Eden was thinking, but it cannot be presented as what Eden was actually thinking (128). Later, Kapitonova states that British political circles admitted that the international situation had noticeably improved as a result of the visit. They responded positively to the hope, expressed by the Soviet leaders, that Britain would promote the rapprochement between the USSR and the United States (this dispelled the suspicion that the USSR was going to drive a wedge in British-American relations) (150-151).

A more rounded and accurate description of the discussions could be presented if the Soviet sources were accompanied by British documentation.

Kapitonova addresses the subject of the Middle East, which she emphasizes as of great importance to both the British and Soviets during the visit. Yet again the story is presented as if it were from both sides, even though the documentation is solely from Soviet sources. This in particular is odd since there is such a wealth of secondary literature on British foreign policy in the Middle East in the 1950s.²

The reliance on Soviet documents also paints too rosy a picture of much of the visit. The discussion of Khrushchev's motivations for the unilateral reduction of 640,000 men from the military are simply taken at face value from the Soviet documents. Kapitonova argues that Khrushchev asserted that the reductions were real, and not simply a tactical move (140). Of course the reductions were publicly dismissed by the Eisenhower Administration as just that: tactical. For a number of reasons the British were never as quick to dismiss peaceful gestures such as these. Did Khrushchev truly believe what he was saying about the reductions, or was he simply telling his hosts what they wanted to hear? The emphasis on Anglo-American relations in many of the Soviet documents makes this very relevant.

Kapitonova raises a number of important issues which it would be good to hear more about. The Soviet delegation considered terminating the visit early in order to express its displeasure over disagreement on Middle-Eastern issues. (142). But Kapitonova concludes (without noting a source) that the atmosphere simply improved. It is intriguing if Khrushchev and Bulganin were seriously considering cutting the visit short.

The very public row with the Labour Party during the visit is also explored from the Soviet angle with a narrative of events based on new Soviet sources (145). This could

² In particular, the numerous works on British policy in this period by Nigel Ashton, Avi Shlaim, and Saki Dockrill are absent from the article.

potentially be quite illuminating if contrasted with the existing secondary literature or British sources. Yet the greater importance of the row with Labour is not carried through. It would have added a great deal to elaborate on the relationship that Moscow had with left-wing parties in Europe, and whether the row with the Labour party was representative of the feeling in the Kremlin towards European socialists in the post-Stalin period.

Furthermore, Kapitonova follows by mentioning that the Soviets argued that the row had been planned by Russian émigrés in collusion with the Americans, as well as with the full knowledge of Eden's government. If true, this is an immense find. But the article relies only on Soviet sources, and takes them at face value. The Soviet conclusion that the row was the work of American provocateurs sounds a great deal like the accusations levelled at the U.S. by the Kremlin in the wake of the East German Uprising- and therefore requires further examination. What is more, the expressions of anger by rank-and-file Labour Party members towards their leaders after the Gaitskell-Brown/Khrushchev shouting match is told only from Soviet documents, which unsurprisingly, show the Labour grassroots as being on the side of Khrushchev and Bulganin (145). This interpretation is inevitable if one relies solely on Soviet documents to tell the story of a Soviet-UK argument.

Kapitonova should be commended for focussing on this episode of the Cold War from the Soviet angle. Her research could potentially shed a great deal of light on this particular episode in Anglo-Soviet Cold-War relations. As well, she should be commended for working for the release of these documents. However, the overwhelming reliance on Soviet sources, even if newly released, leaves the reader with a one-sided impression of an event that, by its nature, must be told from both sides. This is all the more frustrating since Kapitonova raises a number of points that could be of great importance if researched further from the Soviet standpoint, or if contrasted with freely available Western sources. The article does not offer any real conclusions. It is a narrative from the Soviet standpoint of the visit. This is a contribution in itself, but it has the potential to be much more.

Wes Ullrich is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of International History at the London School of Economics. He was previously Pinto Ph.D. Scholar at LSE IDEAS, and a George C. Marshall-Baruch Fellow. His Ph.D. thesis explores U.S. perceptions of destalinisation and regime change in the USSR from Stalin's death through 1956. He has published in *Cold War History* and the *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*.

© 2014 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).