



**Mark Kramer, “The Early Post-Stalin Succession Struggle and Upheavals in East-Central Europe: Internal-External Linkages in Soviet Policy Making (three-part article),” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 1, Issues 1 (Winter 1999): 3-55; Issue 2 (Spring 1999): 3-38; and Issue 3 (Fall 1999): 3-66.**

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(Please note that I received the articles by email, and as a result am not able to provide page references)

Once again, Mark Kramer has rendered a great service to the historical community. In the present undertaking, Kramer, whose articles in the Cold War International History Project Bulletin have for the past several years provided historians with both the raw materials to advance their own research, and cogent contextual analysis to accompany the documentation, incorporates a wealth of material from East European and Russian archives and a vast array of the latest secondary sources, in order to delve into another Cold War controversy. Kramer’s central argument is that Soviet internal politics (and, to the point, the post-Stalin succession struggle) and events in the countries of Eastern Europe combined for a potent dynamic that affected policy making in both the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe. Embedded within the core argument is a reevaluation of the extent of discord in the views of the post-Stalin leadership regarding Eastern Europe; a thesis that chance played a key role in the events of 1953 in Eastern European politics; and, as is always the case in Kramer’s work, rich detail on events in Eastern Europe that comes from an envious command of recently released archival material.

The argument is persuasive that events in Eastern Europe were intertwined with Soviet policy making, yet such an argument would suggest that the Soviets were well informed of what was happening in both the Communist parties and broad sections of society in Eastern Europe and that this information was translated into a useful product for decision makers. Kramer’s argument would have been enhanced had this aspect of it been better illuminated, for it remains unclear the precise manner in which information from Eastern European countries was transmitted to Soviet leaders, and subsequently turned into policy. As Kramer relates, in the aftermath of the June uprising, reports from Soviet officials in East Germany that unrest continued in various sectors prompted the Soviet leadership to send a special delegation of Soviet workers to East Germany. This episode raises questions as to whether Soviet party officials in Eastern Europe were the primary source of information, and, if so, where the elaborate intelligence networks fit into the gathering and transmission of information. The flow of information to the Soviet leadership and its transformation into policy requires some description, especially in light of the fact that *Battleground Berlin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), which Kramer cites approvingly, makes clear that intelligence was not translated into useful knowledge because the Soviet leaders rejected intelligence that did not conform to their preconceptions. The authors argue that the Soviet Union, by its very nature, broke the

intelligence cycle, an assertion that clashes with Kramer's view that the Soviet leadership made extensive use of information obtained from various levels in Eastern Europe.

In the course of the article, Kramer pays attention to the interplay between the countries of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, relegating the role of the United States to a secondary consideration. If Kramer is correct - and it appears that we are only at the beginning of this debate - that the Soviet Union was not fixated on the US while it involved itself with Eastern Europe, then much of Cold War literature and Soviet history must be rewritten. From John Dziak's *Chekisty: A History of the KGB* through Vojtech Mastny's *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity*, an underlying theme has been the deep-seated suspicion of the Soviet Union for the bourgeois world, not the least of which resulted from the Soviet Union's conspiracy birth and its immediate invasion by the West. Kramer's account throws into question the long-held assertion of a Soviet institutionalized view of the West as conspiratorial and determined to undermine the socialist world.

The information contained in the article provides corroborating evidence to the material available in the archives of the various countries of Eastern Europe. In the case of East Germany, the article confirms that the June 1953 uprising was not an isolated event, but rather the most significant in a series of disturbances that began in East Germany (and, as the article makes clear, in Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia) in the fall of 1952 as a result of the Socialist Unity Party's "Construction of Socialism" (*Aufbau des Sozialismus*), and which continued into 1954. The suggestion that historians must take a broader timeframe in order to interpret the June 1953 uprising and its consequences was proposed in Armin Mitter/Stefan Wolle/Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk's, *Der Tag 'X' - Die 'innere Staatsgründung' der DDR als Ergebnis der Krise 1952/1954* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1995) which relied exclusively on German documents. Although Kramer does not refer directly to this thesis, his article provides evidence that supports several aspects of it, namely that there were a series of crises in East Germany around the June 1953 uprising, and that these events had a major effect on the existence of an East German state. Mitter, Wolle and Kowalczyk argue that the events of 1952 and 1953 in East Germany caused both East German and Soviet authorities to undertake the "internal founding" of the GDR in order to prevent future disturbances which would require Soviet assistance and further undermine the legitimacy of the SED. This process, the authors argue, was of greater importance than the cosmetic establishment of the GDR in 1949. Both Kramer and Mitter/Wolle/Kowalczyk point to the establishment of a motorized "rapid reaction" police force and the reinvigorating of the East German secret police (Stasi) as key components of this post-53 process. Kramer's article complements *Der Tag X's* emphasis on internal issues as it provides the Soviet-East German dynamic that contributed to the decision to firmly establish an East German state. Kramer further traces the path of the Soviet view of "two Germanies" from the Stalin era through the succession struggle, demonstrating that the two Germanies approach was firmly entrenched by July 1953.

One aspect of the discussion on the reinvigorating of the East German (and other) secret police systems is unconvincing, however. The idea that the Stasi had failed in June 1953 because it had not predicted the uprising is a theme that underlays much of the literature on this period in East Germany, and comes out in part 3 of Kramer's article as well. As Kramer states, however, the Stasi had prior to the uprising 4,000 regular employees and a rudimentary system of unofficial coworkers (IMs, in Stasi jargon). This is hardly sufficient to "know everything and report

everything worth knowing” on East German society. A more plausible explanation for Stasi surprise on 17 June would be that the Stasi worked in a highly selective fashion - targeting groups where enemies of socialism were likely to reside, such as the West Berlin anti-Communist organizations, the non-Marxist political parties, and church groups.

Kramer’s article should also help to lay to rest a persistent myth about the June 17 uprising in East Germany. Both earlier works on the uprising (like Arnulf Baring’s *Uprising in East Germany: June 17, 1953* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972) and more recent works that have incorporated previously inaccessible archival material (notably Torsten Diedrich’s *Der 17. Juni 1953: Bewaffnete Gewalt gegen das Volk* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1991) have argued that the uprising had petered out prior to Soviet involvement. These authors employ this evidence to downplay the revolutionary aspect of the uprising, claiming it to be more akin to a strike. Kramer’s article lays out in definitive fashion the massive Soviet military presence that was required to put down the uprising. As Kramer writes: “By the 17th, the scale of unrest was much too great for the East German Volkspolizei, KVP, and state security organs to handle without Soviet aid.”

Where Kramer’s article is less helpful is in the portrayal of the reasons for discontent in East Germany and other countries of Eastern Europe. Kramer describes little known, or previously poorly documented, events which revolve almost exclusively around factory demonstrations and economic discontent. Readers are given the impression that economic demands alone were at the heart of the rebellions in Eastern Europe. This approach - one that is common in the literature - leaves the impression of either a deadened population driven by a shallow bread (not even circuses) view of life that had grown accustomed to repression and lack of freedoms, or, conversely, suggests that repression and lack of political freedom was minimal. Certainly, the issue of repression was important enough for the SED to accord it significant attention in the 11 June *Neues Deutschland* which announced the New Course. As cited by Kramer, the statement pledged to “abolish forced collectivization, shift emphasis from heavy industry to consumer production, safeguard private enterprise, encourage free political debate and participation, restore “bourgeois” instructors and students to the schools from which they had been expelled, guarantee freedom of religion, rehabilitate the victims of political trials, and reaffirm the “great goal of German unity.” (Emphasis added.) Economic considerations certainly played a major role behind opposition in Eastern Europe, but these should not entirely overshadow the role that repression played.

Several minor organizational points detracted from the essay. First, the length of the article distracted. There was a great deal of information that would be more properly found in books. Much of the information - although highly illuminating, such as the Soviet response to the American food program following the June 1953 uprising - was not crucial to the argument, and could have been omitted. Indeed, the entire second part, which provides a fascinating account of the political machinations around Beria’s fall could have been a stand-alone article, rather than a component of this three-part undertaking. Second, after taking the reader through a splendid field of historical narrative, the author drags the reader in the last few pages through the gnarled forest of theoretical constructs, where terms such as “win-set”, “synergistic issue linkage,” and “epistemic communities” appear. This section of the article contributed little to the overall

argument, which stood as an important historical thesis without need for the application of models.

Nevertheless, Kramer's argument is compelling and comprehensive and will likely only be eclipsed by a team of historians combining their language skills and knowledge. The second part of the article which deals with the fall of Beria will slake anyone's thirst for riveting narrative history. The editor of the new *Journal of Cold War Studies* has set the standard for future contributors.

Gary Bruce

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