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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Scholars have long identified the months after Stalin's death in March, 1953 as a critical juncture in the history of the cold war. The dictator's departure presented his successors with both challenges and opportunities: on the one hand, they had to renegotiate the bases of legitimacy for a regime closely identified with Stalin's personal leadership; on the other hand, his death enabled them to explore policies he would have rejected. In foreign policy, for example, the new leaders sought to reduce external pressures on the regime by promoting a more substantive policy of peaceful coexistence, including most notably efforts to end the conflict in Korea. In East Europe, they took steps to modify and even reverse the disastrous policies of forced collectivization and industrialization that Stalin had pushed in the last years of his life. These two trends in Soviet foreign policy converged in East Germany, where Moscow pressured East German leader Walter Ulbricht to reverse the policy of forced Sovietization he had begun in 1952 even as it signaled new flexibility on the issue of reunification. Unfortunately, the clumsy implementation of this policy precipitated a general uprising in East Germany on 17 June that could be suppressed only with Soviet tanks. Soon thereafter, the Soviet leadership lost their enthusiasm for the New Course in Eastern Europe and instead took steps to consolidate their control over their client states in the region.

Much of the current scholarship on these events attribute the shifts in Soviet policy at least partly to struggles within the Kremlin, and more particularly to the fate of Secret Police Chief Lavrenti Beria. Though this literature accepts that both peaceful coexistence and reform in East Europe enjoyed some consensual support in the leadership, it usually identifies Beria and Premier Georgii Malenkov as the chief proponents of reform and regards Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov as a stubborn defender of Stalinist orthodoxy. This explanation gained greater credibility in the early 1990s when a body of new evidence--including the personal reminiscences of Khrushchev and Molotov as well as the transcripts from a July, 1953 Plenum of the Communist Party's Central Committee--all made the same accusation that Beria had advocated abandoning the socialist project in East Germany in order to reunify Germany as a neutral, capitalist country. The link to Beria was further reinforced by the recollection of East Germany Politburo member Rudolf Herrnstadt that the Soviet shift from reform to consolidation coincided almost exactly with the arrest of Beria on 26 June, 1953. In the three-part article entitled "The Early Post-Stalin Succession Struggle and Upheavals in East-Central Europe," however, Mark Kramer presents new evidence to challenge this version of events and proposes an alternative that is sure to arouse controversy.

First, Kramer finds little evidence that the new leadership disagreed significantly on the new policy towards Eastern Europe. Indeed, citing protocols from meetings of the Party Presidium as well as documents from the Foreign Ministry archives, Kramer contends that it was the hard-nosed Molotov, not Malenkov or Beria, who initiated the move to reform in East Europe. Similarly, Kramer finds no contemporary evidence that Beria differed significantly from his colleagues on policy towards East Germany. On the contrary, Kramer reports that the draft documents formulating the new German policy include revisions made in both Molotov's and Beria's handwriting that indicate the two had worked together on the issue. Finally, Kramer argues that the uprising of 17 June was not a contributing factor to Beria's arrest: Khrushchev and Malenkov had started plotting against Beria before the uprising occurred and would have acted sooner had not the uprising forced a postponement. Moreover, Kramer cites some remarkable new evidence--including the notes Malenkov brought with him into the Presidium on the fateful 26 June, as well as letters Beria wrote to the leadership while awaiting trial after his arrest--to show that the arrest was not motivated by differences in foreign or even domestic policy, but driven instead purely by a struggle for power. The indictment against Beria did include one charge that the Police Chief had violated principles of collective leadership in negotiations with Germany and Hungary, but Kramer goes on to cite official records of those negotiations to dismiss the charge as spurious.

In short, Kramer concludes, the accusations that Beria wanted to abandon East Germany must have been manufactured after the arrest to allow leadership to vilify him more easily. Once having made such an accusation, however, the leadership could no longer pursue the New Course without associating themselves with this new enemy of the people. Thus, the Soviet decision in 1953 to consolidate its control over East Europe, with all its implications for the configuration of European politics during the cold war, was not a response to external pressures or even the result of the impact of external events on internal politics. Rather, it emerged as an historical accident, the need for the Soviet leadership to find ammunition in a struggle that coincided with the uprising in Germany. Such a conclusion can only dishearten scholars looking for predictable patterns in international politics.

Kramer's article is undoubtedly the most detailed, the most informed and the most compelling account of these events currently available. His knowledge of sources in Russia and Eastern Europe has no equal in the West--and probably the world--and his use of the materials is careful and meticulous. The article provides many new and fascinating details about Soviet decision-making procedures after Stalin's death as well as new insights into Soviet reactions to uprisings in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and of course East Germany during May and June of 1953. The new material on Beria's arrest make for fascinating reading, as does Kramer's account of Soviet efforts to restructure Eastern European security forces after 17 June. Kramer's article is also far more comprehensive than most other accounts of the period, placing Soviet policy towards Germany both before and after the uprising within the context of policy towards other Eastern Europe countries. Finally, his account provides a healthy reminder to scholars of international politics that accident and coincidence are powerful forces in shaping international structures.

Despite the new evidence Kramer brings to the story, however, crucial elements remain open to interpretation, and Kramer's interpretation will remain controversial. For example, Kramer offers relatively little new evidence regarding the Kremlin's ultimate intentions towards East

Germany in early June, 1953. He maintains that not just Beria, but the entire leadership--even Molotov--would have considered sacrificing the East German state for a reunified, demilitarized Germany, provided that the Soviet Union could retain occupation troops in the Eastern zone (which the United States would not have accepted). At other times, however, he cites documents in which Soviet officials justify the New Course precisely as a means to save socialism in East Germany.

Similarly, though Kramer is probably correct in arguing that the leadership exaggerated the differences between themselves and Beria after his arrest, he may be presumptuous in arguing that the differences that did exist were insignificant. For the most part, Kramer's interpretation is based on a narrow reading of available documents with little room for speculation. He often cites unanimous decisions within the leadership as evidence that no differences existed, even though we know that the Presidium tried hard to find consensus on all its decisions, such that many negotiations over policy probably took place informally, outside the range of official documents. For example, relying heavily on memoir accounts, Kramer describes the artful maneuvers undertaken by Khrushchev and Malenkov to manufacture an official consensus behind Beria's arrest even when at least two of the members entered the fateful meeting on 26 June agreeing only to his demotion. It is conceivable, too, that Malenkov's accusation that Beria violated the norms of collective leadership in negotiations with East German leaders may have signified that he, too, took the lead and manufactured an ostensible consensus on an issue that, in retrospect, other leaders no longer accepted. Moreover, both Khrushchev's and Molotov's accounts suggest that key moments in the politicking around East Germany in late May took place over the telephone or in other informal settings. In most cases, unfortunately, historians will never have access to such informal negotiations, or even know when they occurred, but they should consider the possibility that official consensus can obscure informal bargaining.

Kramer's cautious approach to the documentation also leads him to neglect some of the underlying, unspoken political and ideological contexts in which these decisions were made. For example, if Kramer is correct in arguing that power rather than policy drove Beria's enemies to arrest him, and I believe he is, why did they choose to accuse him of seeking to abandon socialism in East Germany? If the leadership continued to believe even after the uprising that the New Course in Germany should be deepened rather than abandoned, as Kramer argues, would it not have made more sense to accuse Beria of obstructing the new policy and provoking the events of 17 June? Their decision to blame Beria for advocating more reform rather than obstructionism suggests that for some reason the leadership felt that saddling Beria with the reputation as a dangerous reformer would be more politically palatable. This suggests that the decision to consolidate Soviet power over East Europe was not so haphazard or accidental as Kramer suggests, but reflected a response to domestic and international pressures unconnected with Beria's arrest. Indeed, Kramer's argument that the shift in Soviet German policy after 26 June occurred only to justify the accusations against Beria does not jibe well with other evidence he cites that the Soviet leadership was surprised at the extent of the hatred against the regime in East Germany and the regime's inability to respond. The Soviet decision to restructure the security forces in East European regimes, by his own evidence, seemed to have been motivated by fear that unrest would spill over into other regimes. Clearly, then, the interplay between the leadership struggle, domestic and international concerns may be more complicated than Kramer suggests.

These objections notwithstanding, Kramer's article represents the most important account of Soviet policy after Stalin's death currently available. Given Kramer's thorough treatment of the evidence, scholars who try seriously to challenge his interpretation have a daunting task ahead of them.

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