



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.

Commentary by **Thomas R. Maddux**, California State University, Northridge
Published by H-Diplo on 28 November 1999

Mark Kramer’s three part study that explores the connections between the post-Stalin succession struggle in 1953 and Soviet efforts to manage its empire in East-Central Europe in the face of disturbing internal challenges expands on his contributions to Cold War studies. Since the second issue of the Cold War International History Project *Bulletin* in Fall 1992, Kramer has been a regular contributor of analytical assessments of newly released primary documents on Soviet policies in Eastern Europe and the more general Cold War. More recently Kramer has become director of the Harvard Project on Cold War Studies and editor of the new *Journal of Cold War Studies* which published the first part of the above study in its first issue and the second and third parts in subsequent issues. All of Kramer’s articles display a scholarly perspective in a subject area that has frequently produced substantial ideological and polemical fireworks. Kramer’s studies also exhibit another quality missing from many American Cold War studies, a most impressive use of archival documents from not only the Soviet Union but also German, Czechoslovakian and Hungarian records.

Kramer’s central focus is an evaluation of the possible connections between the maneuvering within the Soviet leadership after Stalin’s death and the eruption of problems in the Soviet sphere in East-Central Europe, most notably in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany. The central thesis that Kramer convincingly develops in the overall study emphasizes the contingent nature of Soviet policy throughout the spring crisis. Starting with an initial consensus on the necessity for a “New Course” in the Soviet empire that would back away from Stalinist repression and forced collectivization and industrialization programs, the new collective Soviet leadership featuring Georgii Malenkov, Lavrentii Beria, and Nikita Khrushchev soon faced worker protests in Eastern Europe that ultimately precipitated an uprising in East Germany that the Red Army had to put down. In the immediate aftermath, the Kremlin leaders found themselves preoccupied with an internal power struggle culminating in a successful plot to remove Beria. This internal conflict, in turn, prompted Soviet leaders to slow down the “New Course” in Eastern Europe in the face of resistance from local party leaders and to make important shifts in policies toward East Germany that contributed to the long term division of Germany. Kramer concludes by exploring the relationship between his case study and recent theoretical assessments of the linkage between domestic and international politics. Throughout his study Kramer also offers valuable evidence on the methods that the Kremlin used to manage its empire which can be compared with U.S. methods and the Western alliance during the same period.

In part one Kramer disagrees with a number of previous authors such as Vladislav Zubok and Vojtech Mastny concerning the degree of consensus among Soviet leaders on East-Central Europe once they finally focused on this area in May 1953. Despite the intensity of the internal power struggle, Kramer notes a significant consensus on maintaining general Soviet control and avoiding violent disturbances. Despite the later desire, the Kremlin faced three events in May and June that confirmed the necessity for a “New Course” in the Soviet empire: an increase in East Germans fleeing to West Germany in response to a Stalinist “Construction of Socialism” program; riots by workers in Bulgaria, a most loyal Soviet ally; and extensive unrest in Czechoslovakia that culminated in an uprising of workers at Plzen joined by party members and municipal officials. Despite their ongoing internal maneuvering, Soviet leaders moved to impose new directions on Eastern Europe that would back away from Stalin’s socialist campaigns. This led to discussions in June with Eastern European communist leaders who found themselves under substantial criticism and pressure to step aside for pursuing policies that Beria, Malenkov, Khrushchev and Vyacheslav Molotov has recently backed under Stalin. They had little opportunity to reflect on the irony of this situation as Moscow stepped up its efforts to ease Walter Ulbricht, General Secretary of the East German Socialist Unity Party, out of East Germany, to replace Matyas Rakosi in Hungary with Imre Nagy, and to pressure Enver Hoxha of Albania into reforms. As Kramer emphasizes, the Soviet leaders maintained a dominant position, exhibiting little interest in what the satellite leaders thought about the situation, although Beria and others did suggest that the “new course” could lead to a relationship that would provide for more cooperation and less top-down supervision by Moscow.

Kramer concludes part one with a discussion of the East Germany uprising. Workers protested the delayed response of Ulbricht and party leaders to rescind new work quotas, and they were joined by others on June 16th in East Berlin. The protest spread outside Berlin on June 17th to some 450 towns as even members of the communist party, youth organizations and government officials joined the uprising. Kramer’s assessment of how Moscow moved to restore order in the most important part of its empire reveals the significant assets it had on hand under the commander in chief of the Soviet occupation forces in Germany who secured East Berlin with a massive display of force and also sent Soviet units into most East German towns to stop the rebellion without extensive loss of life. The Soviet command also used Soviet intelligence personnel in the MVD to arrest demonstrators and to assist East German intelligence forces, the Stasi, to undermine the protestors.

In part two Kramer shifts his focus from Soviet policy and Eastern Europe to the struggle within the Kremlin for dominance that culminated a little more than a week after the East German rebellion in the arrest of Beria. Kramer downplays any significant impact of disagreements over the proposed “New Course” policies on Eastern Europe as well as any discord over domestic policies on the power struggle. Instead, the author emphasizes the concerns of Khrushchev who viewed Beria as his main rival for dominance and the careful efforts of Khrushchev, Malenkov and Molotov to win over the other Presidium members. The detailed development of the “Plot against Beria” (52 pages of text that make extensive use of documents from the Russian Presidential Archive) from initial recruitment to detailed planning on how to seize Beria at a meeting of the CPSU Presidium on June 26th, the successful removal of Beria from the Kremlin past MVD guards, and ensuing trial and execution reads like a best selling political thriller.

Along with the high drama of Beria's demise, Kramer emphasizes a significant impact of the domestic crisis on Soviet policy toward East Germany and the Eastern bloc in a lengthy concluding part three. Whereas initially the East German revolt increased the consensus of Soviet officials on the "New Course", the power struggle contributed to the Kremlin leaders backing away from the "New Course" as they blamed Beria for all domestic and foreign policy mistakes and "crimes" that they themselves had participated in, initiated or endorsed. The new official line was presented at a special CPSU Central Committee plenum on July 2-7 and distributed throughout the Soviet Union to party and state organizations. Kremlin leaders blamed Beria for the East German revolt, accused him of abandoning East Germany to the imperialist forces of the West, and shifted away from any consideration of a unified, demilitarized Germany with an indefinite presence of Red Army forces in Germany. Further consequences ensued in that Soviet leaders backed off from the effort to remove Walter Ulbricht who purged his opponents and the party and abandoned "New Course" reforms; the Kremlin phased out East German reparations and expanded economic assistance; and Moscow shifted from insistence on political changes to a more moderate emphasis on economic advances. Stalinist party leaders in Eastern Europe such as Matyas Rakosi in Hungary followed Ulbricht's example, and in the other bloc countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and Poland, Kramer demonstrates how initial adoption of "New Course" policies in the summer and fall of 1953 did not produce much change outside of the economic sphere.

Kramer's extensive use of recently released primary documents offers a revealing perspective on the methods that the Kremlin relied on to manage its empire in East-Central Europe. From the most dramatic use of the Red Army to stop the East German uprising to the daily reports of Soviet diplomats, MVD intelligence officials, and Red Army leaders, the Kremlin maintained close surveillance and supervision of the Eastern bloc. As extensively documented by Kramer, Soviet leaders maintained very close consultation with party leaders and their politburos through Soviet representatives, through frequent consultations in Moscow in which officials like Rakosi and Ulbricht received a thorough and critical working-over from the Presidium leadership, and through detailed policy guidelines like the "New Course" documents. Kramer, moreover, demonstrates in part three how the Kremlin expanded internal and Soviet supervision in the wake of the East German crisis and continuing unrest in order to contain any spread of disturbances from East Germany. Starting with the official line of the CPSU Presidium that falsely depicted the crisis as a result of reactionary and imperialist forces, the Kremlin stepped up its control of media coverage on Germany, banned the sale of East German books, censored mail and petitions going to and coming from East Germany, and sent delegations of workers and union officials to meet with East Germans and report back. In the face of the failures of East European security forces to provide adequate warnings about emerging problems and deal with them successfully, the Kremlin reversed an earlier decision to reduce the Soviet MVD security forces in East Germany and increased MVD and counterintelligence officials and reformed and increased similar East German forces. Similar measures followed in other East-Central European states as well as stepped up campaigns to wipe out underground nationalist movements and preparations of Soviet forces to suppress future uprisings in the empire.

Throughout Kramer's study the issue of the U.S. role in Soviet calculations from the spring of 1953 through the aftermath of the East German crisis remains on the margins. In contrast to the pervasive assumptions of Cold War specialists that the Kremlin and Washington were focused

on each other, anticipating possible opportunities and weighting each others intentions and actions, Kramer depicts the United States as peripheral to most of the Soviet leadership's immediate concerns. In part one on Soviet efforts to shift Eastern European CP leaders to the "New Course" the United States, according to Kramer, had no direct impact on Kremlin calculations despite the arrival of Dwight Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles and their rhetoric of a new strategy to rollback communism with brinkmanship and threats of massive retaliation based on a "New Look" military force structure. With the outbreak of the East German uprising, Kramer does address the impact of Washington's actions and inactions on Soviet policy. The cautious response of Washington and its allies to the crisis, despite limited and ineffective plans to manipulate future unrest in the Soviet bloc, reassured Soviet leaders that they could implement plans to stop forcefully any future rebellions in the empire. The most specific impact of U.S. actions came in the aftermath of the East German crisis and Beria's demise when Washington announced a food assistance program on July 10th in which the U.S. transferred \$15 million worth of food packages to the West German government to distribute to East German citizens in West Berlin. The program, which continued into October, precipitated a substantial response from East Germans with 200,000 people a day visiting the distribution centers and more than 5.5 million food packages distributed in Berlin and in the German Democratic Republic. As Kramer points out, the success of the program prompted East German officials to harass the program and to worry about losing support from workers and peasants. The Soviet CPSU Presidium closely followed the program, noting undesirable political consequences, and linked the food program to a general shift in economic policies toward the GDR of food aid and credits rather than postwar reparations.

Tom Maddux
CSU Northridge

Copyright © 1999-2004 by H-Diplo, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the H-Diplo Article Discussion Co-ordinator, George Fujii, gfuji@umail.ucsb.edu.
