

# 2008

*h-diplo*

## H-Diplo Article REVIEWS

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/>

Published on **10 April 2008**

Vojtech Mastny. "The 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty: A Missed Opportunity for Détente." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10.1 (Winter 2008): 3-25. doi:10.1162/jcws.2008.10.1.3. <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1162/jcws.2008.10.1.3>.

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/Trachtenberg-Mastny.pdf>

Reviewed by **Marc Trachtenberg**, University of California, Los Angeles

---

“**W**as the Limited Test Ban Treaty (LTBT) of 1963 a watershed in the Cold War?” That’s the question Vojtech Mastny asks at the very beginning of his article on that treaty, and his answer seems to be no. He certainly doesn’t think that that agreement was nearly as important as many people have claimed. A “budding détente” was “in the air” in late 1963, he says, but it “did not bloom” (pp. 23-24). A real détente would have been possible only if a political accommodation had been reached, but this, in his view, was simply not in the cards at the time. The treaty itself could be signed, he suggests, only because it did not have any great political meaning: “What did happen in 1963 was the separation of arms control from the political agenda, making the test ban possible without deeper détente” (pp. 24-25).

And why was a political settlement not possible in 1963? Part of the problem, according to Mastny, is that the Americans tended to think in mainly military terms. They were excessively concerned with the fine points of the strategic balance. Unlike the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, who was “ahead of his time” in this regard, President John Kennedy “was in thrall to the fanciful theories of U.S. ‘defense intellectuals’ about the increasingly complex nuclear postures required to deter the Soviet Union from attacking” (pp. 12, 13, 24). But the more basic problem, as he sees it, had to do with Soviet policy—with obstacles “posed by such extraneous issues as relations with Cuba and China and political infighting in the Kremlin” (p. 24).

What is to be made of these arguments? It is fairly clear, I think, when you look at the Cold War as a whole, that 1963 was something of a watershed year in the history of that conflict. The Cold War continued, of course, but its character changed. The threat of nuclear war, and especially of general thermonuclear war, receded—quite dramatically, in my view. The real question here is whether the Test Ban Treaty had anything to do with this. Or maybe I should be a little more precise. I don’t think the issue is whether this particular agreement,

as such, played a major role in bringing about that fundamental change. The real issue is whether the treaty was just an arms control agreement or whether it had broader political meaning—and in particular with whether it was in some way linked to a set of political understandings that allowed the two main powers to relate to each other in a more relaxed way in the post-1963 period.

The key issue here has to do with Germany, the central political issue in Europe, and indeed, to my mind at least, in the Cold War more generally. Was the Test Ban Treaty tied in any fundamental way to the German question? My view is that it was—that the treaty suggested (albeit not in any direct or ironclad way) that West Germany would remain non-nuclear, and that the Federal Republic's non-nuclear status was part of a package designed to stabilize the status quo in Europe, and in particular around Berlin.<sup>1</sup> But Mastny feels there was little connection here. To be sure, he notes that Khrushchev himself “posited a link between a test ban treaty and a settlement in Berlin” at the end of 1962, and he quotes the Soviet leader telling the British and American ambassadors in April 1963 that “Germany was the key to everything.” But he doesn't think either comment is to be taken at face value (pp. 9-10, 15).

His argument at these two points turns on chronology, quite clearly in the first case but perhaps a little less clearly in the second. “The Berlin question,” he says, “had largely been resolved before the test ban treaty became topical” (p. 10). It had in fact been solved, he thinks, by the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961: “The Wall provided a de facto solution to the Berlin question, though not to the larger German question, prior to the test ban treaty and independent of it” (p. 10). The idea seems to be that if Berlin was no longer an issue, the question of Berlin's status could not have played a major role in the 1963 talks. But that particular argument does not strike me as very strong. The Wall, of course, did not end the Berlin crisis, which continued until well into 1962. And even after the threat to Berlin went into remission, the situation there remained a source of concern. To link Berlin to the German nuclear question (a subject the test ban treaty was directly related to), by including both issues in the same “package,” might have a certain impact on Soviet policy. That linkage could help secure the status quo in the city: it suggested that if the Soviets wanted, as they did, to keep Germany non-nuclear, they would have to accept things as they were in Berlin. The goal of the linkage, from the point of view of the western powers, would be to make sure that the threat to Berlin remained in remission. The package policy thus might still make sense, well after the Wall had been built.

The second point has to do with Khrushchev's decision to accept the idea of an atmospheric (or technically a three environments) test ban, instead of “the comprehensive ban he had been insisting on thus far,” a decision which Mastny shows was made in April 1963 (p. 15). This he views as a major finding: the fact that the Soviet leader shifted course that early “changes the prevailing view of how the treaty became possible” (p. 15). The negotiations

---

<sup>1</sup> This argument is laid out in some detail in my book *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), chapter 9 and esp. pp. 379-391. Mastny refers to this section of that book at the beginning of his article.

that followed, he argues, could not have played a central role in shaping the outcome: “the subsequent three months of Soviet haggling about the terms of the treaty amounted mostly to posturing” (p. 16). In particular (the assumption seems to be), anything that was said about Germany in those talks could not have played a major role because the key decision about the limited test ban had been made before those talks even began. But again I don’t think this follows. The Americans had in effect put a plan on the table, most notably in the “Principles” document of March 1962, whose goal was to stabilize the status quo in Europe. Assurances about Germany’s non-nuclear status (via more general arms control agreements) and about the status quo in Berlin were key parts of that package. If the Soviets were now accepting the American plan for a test ban, that decision would have been made in a particular context: they were quite familiar with that more general American policy. The fact that Soviet policy had shifted thus points in a certain direction: it suggests that the Soviets were now open to the kind of arrangement the Americans had proposed.

At any rate, that’s my interpretation, and Mastny obviously does not see things the same way. How then do you get to the bottom of this issue? It would be nice if we had some hard evidence that threw some light on Khrushchev’s motives at this point: *why* exactly did the Soviets shift their position in April 1963? Mastny, in the introduction to his article, promises to go into this issue: “The article highlights the reasons for [Khrushchev’s] indecision in assigning the treaty the priority it deserved *as well as the reasons for his eventual embrace of the concept of a limited treaty* in order to attain a success he badly needed” (pp. 4-5; emphasis added). But he doesn’t quite deliver on that promise. He brings up the point about Khrushchev shifting course on p. 15, in the middle of a paragraph that begins with the Soviet leader telling the American and British ambassadors that “Germany was the key to everything and that the test ban treaty no longer mattered.” Mastny then goes on to say that “he meant precisely the opposite.” It is this claim, presumably, that the point about Khrushchev’s shift, which he then brings up, is meant to support. But Mastny does not either in this paragraph or in the paragraphs that follow give any real evidence that might help explain why Khrushchev shifted course. He refers to Khrushchev’s own explanation that “military comrades” thought atmospheric testing was no longer necessary, but then goes on to point out that this was not the military view. “Khrushchev’s argumentation on this point,” he then says, was similar to the argument laid out a little earlier by the nuclear scientist Victor Adamskii—but then he notes that there is no evidence Khrushchev had actually read the Adamskii memorandum. We’re evidently supposed to believe that Khrushchev changed his position because he had come to believe that nuclear testing was no longer necessary for military reasons, although there is little hard evidence or argument to support that point. But even if Khrushchev had reached the conclusion that testing was of little military value, it’s hard to understand why that should lead him to accept a *limited* test ban and abandon the attempt to work out a *comprehensive* test ban. Mastny doesn’t deal with that issue. He simply goes on to comment that “Khrushchev decided to endorse the idea as not only mutually beneficial but also good for public relations.” But this scarcely explains why the policy changed. What exactly was “mutually beneficial” about the limited test ban? If the idea was “mutually beneficial” in 1963, why hadn’t it been “mutually beneficial” in 1962? And why was this a good decision in “public relations” terms? Why wouldn’t the policy of continuing to insist on a

comprehensive test ban also have been “good for public relations”? My point here is simply that the analysis of this change of course does not cut very deep.

So in the absence of direct evidence, how do you get at these issues? To a certain extent you can get a feel for what both Soviet and U.S. policy was by looking at the western sources. You can see from those sources that for both America and Russia all these issues—the German issues and the nuclear issues—were connected. You can tell from the way these questions were discussed that for both sides these linkages were understood.<sup>2</sup> But you can also get some insight into this set of questions by looking at the general picture—by trying to understand the general thrust of both U.S. and Soviet policy at this point.

And in a sense this is what Mastny tries to do. He thinks the U.S. government placed too much emphasis on military issues and did not pay enough attention to the political side of the U.S.-Soviet relationship. The Americans, in his view, “could not easily afford” a rapprochement with the Soviets (p. 8), in part because they were held back by their European allies. In particular, he seems to think, the U.S. government was not willing to accommodate the Soviets on one key issue, their “demand for the recognition of the GDR [the German Democratic Republic]” (p. 24). The Soviets, for their part, also could not “easily afford” détente. They too were held back by alliance considerations. In fact, for him the “more important obstacles were on the Soviet side, including those posed by such extraneous issues as relations with Cuba and China and political infighting in the Kremlin” (p. 24). If that picture is correct, then not much could have been done in 1963: the political meaning of the test ban treaty was bound to be quite limited.

But is this an accurate picture of both U.S. and Soviet policy at the time? I think the idea that Kennedy “was in thrall to the fanciful theories of U.S. ‘defense intellectuals’” does not hold up in the light of the evidence. The president did not really believe in the theory of “controlled and discriminate general nuclear war.” His basic view was that nuclear weapons had a very powerful deterrent effect, but that once both sides had survivable capabilities, the numbers did not matter all that much.<sup>3</sup> And Kennedy was intensely concerned with the political problem, which he understood was absolutely fundamental. He was willing to go very far in this area, regardless of what the allies thought—and it is quite astonishing how often U.S. officials, even in talks with the Soviets at the time, emphasized that latter point. The Americans, in particular, were willing to recognize the GDR “as an existing fact,” as Secretary of State Dean Rusk told Anastas Mikoyan in November 1962.<sup>4</sup> And Rusk also made it clear at that meeting that the U.S. government

---

<sup>2</sup> For some of the evidence, see *ibid.*, pp. 386-390.

<sup>3</sup> See esp. *ibid.*, pp. 318-320.

<sup>4</sup> The Americans, Rusk said, were in favor of “recognizing existing facts, of which there are three important elements—the existence of East Germany, West Germany and West Berlin.” Rusk-Mikoyan meeting, 30 November 1962, United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States* [FRUS], 1961-63 series, vol. 15, p. 451.

would not be held back by West German objections. Mikoyan had referred to the “stubbornness” of German chancellor Konrad Adenauer, and Rusk picked up on that point:

Referring to Mr. Mikoyan’s remark about Adenauer, the Secretary emphasized that the United States was not speaking on behalf of our Allies or their interest, but rather of the vital interests of the United States. It would be a great mistake to think the United States was paralyzed or tongue-tied by the attitude of one or more of its Allies.<sup>5</sup>

I don’t know how many times I saw documents from this period in which similar points were made.

As for the Soviets, I don’t think this picture of the USSR being held back for reasons having to do with other Communist countries makes much sense. The problem with China gave the Soviets an incentive for improving relations with the West. And as for Cuba, it was very clear at the time that there was a certain similarity between the situation around Berlin and the situation in the Caribbean. In each case, the neighboring great power had local military superiority, and the fact that the situations were similar meant that the two problems were linked. Cuba was a hostage to American power; that hostage relationship might provide Berlin with a degree of security. Berlin was hostage to Soviet power, and preserving West Berlin for its hostage value might, for the same reason, provide Cuba with a degree of security. The Americans, as President Kennedy recognized, would have to “limit [their] actions” in Cuba because of the Berlin situation.<sup>6</sup> This implied that the two sides had a certain incentive to reach an understanding, based on mutual acceptance of the status quo. For the Soviets, the Cuban situation was not an obstacle to détente; from a purely power political point of view, it presumably would have pushed them in the opposite direction, toward an accommodation with the Americans.

And of course there were the East Europeans to consider. Mastny says, at the very end of his introductory section: “New sources from Eastern Europe reveal the Soviet Union’s inability as well as unwillingness to use the treaty as the starting point toward a deeper détente” (p. 5). But what do those new sources actually show? Do they really demonstrate that the USSR was incapable of moving “toward a deeper détente”? The closest Mastny comes to proving this point with such sources is on pp. 22-23, where he shows the Soviets “feeling out” their allies about the possibility of taking a more flexible line on the MLF [Multilateral Force] issue. The Poles and the East Germans were against a softening of the Soviet position on this matter, but it doesn’t seem that this was enough, as he sums up the situation, to get the Soviets to abandon the idea. He concludes his discussion of this issue by saying that “Rusk’s intuition” that détente was now a real possibility was correct. In any event, opposition to a softening of the Soviet line on the

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 452.

<sup>6</sup> National Security Council meeting, 22 January 1963, FRUS 1961-63, vol. 8, p. 458.

MLF, even if it had been effective, would not have foreclosed the possibility of a *détente* policy. For Kennedy at this point, the MLF was simply a bargaining chip. He thought, in fact, that the “West might want to trade the idea off” in the Moscow talks.<sup>7</sup> But perhaps the main point to be made here is that it certainly doesn’t seem that the East Europeans were opposed to the sort of settlement Kennedy had in mind, a settlement in which a non-nuclear West Germany was a key component.

And I think it’s quite likely that the Soviets, on some level, were drawn toward a settlement of this sort—a settlement based on a general acceptance of the status quo, above all in Central Europe. To be sure, they were not willing at this point to go all the way and work out a formal, overt agreement along these lines, and even the Americans saw a certain advantage to not being too explicit about these matters. But that doesn’t mean that the test ban treaty and the talks that led up to it were devoid of political importance. It doesn’t mean that more or less tacit understandings were not taking shape, or that those understandings had no impact on political relations in the post-1963 period.

What then did I take away from the article? For me, there were some real surprises here. I was struck in particular by the light Mastny’s discussion threw on the USSR’s relations at that time with what we used to call the East European “satellite” countries. He points, for example, to Romania’s “stunning breach of loyalty to the Soviet alliance” during the missile crisis (p. 7); he shows Khrushchev “rushing” to Bucarest in June 1963 to “discard his ill-conceived plan for an international division of labor” among the east bloc countries—a plan the Romanians had objected to—and to “apologize for his failure to consult with the allies on the Cuban missile deployments” (pp. 17-18). He shows the Soviets withdrawing their proposal to bring Mongolia into the Warsaw Pact, quite possibly in response to objections from the East Europeans (p. 19). This was all quite revealing. Everyone knows, of course, that Khrushchev was not Stalin and that relations within the eastern bloc had changed since 1953. But I hadn’t realized that the changes had gone this far. After all, the Americans never apologized to their allies for not consulting them during the missile crisis.

But the most important thing I came away with was a sense for how little we know about Soviet policy during this period, at least in comparison with what we’d like to know. With regard especially to Khrushchev’s decision to accept a limited test ban agreement, Mastny obviously did all he could to find sources that might throw some light on that issue. But there wasn’t much that could help us understand what was behind Soviet policy at that point. In this case, as in so many others, we just don’t have a good sense for what was going on in Khrushchev’s mind. It will be very interesting to see what sort of evidence turns up in the future.

**Marc Trachtenberg** is Professor of History at UCLA and previously was Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. His publications include *Reparation in World Politics: France and European Economic Diplomacy, 1916-1923* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); Editor of *The Development of*

---

<sup>7</sup> See Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, pp. 388-389.

*American Strategic Thought*, 6 vols. (New York: Garland, 1988); *History and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) which received the American Historical Association's George Louis Beer Prize (for European international history since 1895) and the AHA's Paul Birdsall Prize (for European military and strategic history since 1870); a roundtable discussion of this book appeared in [H-Diplo](#) in August 2000; Editor of *Between Empire and Alliance: America and Europe during the Cold War* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); and *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

**Copyright © 2008 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.**

---

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu).

*Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge*