



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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Based on untapped sources mainly from Moscow archives, the article greatly contributes to clarifying age-old problems of Soviet policy-making after Stalin’s death. Mark Kramer sheds new light particularly on the succession struggle, on the Kremlin leaders’ innovative domestic and bloc policies, the 17 June crisis in East Germany, Beria’s arrest, and its impact on the client countries. Crucial developments which have been unclear and/or controversial to date, can now be assessed with a higher degree of certainty. There is substantial additional evidence on the interaction within the Soviet leadership; intra-bloc events such as notably the uprising in the GDR are elucidated from Moscow’s perspective. Particularly important for historical insight are the most detailed findings on the Moscow power struggle after Stalin’s death, on crises in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, on assessment of both East Germany’s disastrous situation and Ulbricht’s contribution to it, on the dominating kind of attitude displayed by the Kremlin vis-a-vis the SED regime, on Soviet reaction to GDR developments on 15-17 June, and on conspiratorial action to arrest Beria.

My task in the following comments is not to enumerate the merits of Mark Kramer’s research but to look at any deficiency which may be there. For this reason, the wrong impression may be created that I am rather critical of his achievement. I therefore want to emphasize my appreciation before I will discuss his article against the background of relevant German research including my own. In contrast to Mark Kramer, we have had to make inferences from largely indirect evidence. I feel it may be instructive to see both to what extent the different methods will allow to arrive at common conclusions.

In Germany, major attention has been paid to the victorious Kremlin faction’s claim that Beria had intended to “betray” the GDR by seeking East-West agreement on German unity. As his opponents have alleged at a CPSU Central Committee Plenum convened to explain Beria’s arrest, the defeated leader planned to sell GDR socialism for all-German neutralization (a proposal which, for many years, Western observers had expected to be made by Moscow). It was during intra-leadership discussions on the New Course in the GDR that Beria’s “betrayal” was said to have come to light.[1] The thesis has been taken at face value both before there was evidence from Moscow archives.[2] In the light of Soviet documents which have recently become available, the argument has been presented in a more refined form. In modification of this, Malenkov has been seen as a Beria associate who took identical views on policies in the GDR and in Germany and thus joined him against the other leaders, notably hardliner Molotov.

According to this portrayal, he defected to the opponents of Beria only on the eve of the latter's overthrow.[3] One of this thesis's adherents justifies his argument partly by referring to the accusations against Malenkov when, in 1955, he shared Beria's fate of being ousted from power (but not of being arrested and liquidated).[4]

The thesis that Beria and his leadership colleagues were in discord, has been challenged: The victorious Kremlin faction is seen to have justified its condemnation against Beria by doubtful argument: There were both all kinds of inconsistencies and ideological deduction rather than concrete detail. Simultaneously, the few sources available on the New Course policy-making are interpreted as pointing to consensus rather than conflict within the leadership. Adherence to the opposing view is largely explained by misapprehension of terminology in internal Moscow discourse. On the basis of Soviet statements, the New Course designed to replace East German "socialism" by "capitalism", is seen as a rescuing operation along the lines of Lenin's New Economic Policy in 1921: In order to maintain the communist regime during a critical period, elements of market economy and reduction of political pressure are introduced. Accordingly, revocation of the GDR's affiliation with the "countries of socialism" was per se excluded: This would have been tantamount to accepting not "capitalism" but "imperialism".[5]

Mark Kramer provides clear evidence that Soviet policy on East Germany resulted from agreement among the members of the Council of Ministers Presidium. He also shows that the authors of the New Course - Molotov, Malenkov, and Beria - had not serious controversy when discussing it. His statement is equally plausible that the final document was essentially prepared by Molotov (subsequently one of Beria's major opponents who denounced him most vehemently for having "betrayed" the GDR), respectively by his staff, with Beria and Malenkov simply being asked for their judgments. Mark Kramer's argument is not quite as convincing on the Foreign Minister having been the main driving force of political change in East Germany. In any case, however, the author of the article provides ample evidence that the denunciations directed against Beria after his overthrow, resulted not from disagreement in the decision-making process but from ex post fabrication. This can be seen to confirm the judgment that the accusations at the July CPSU Central Committee Plenum (as equally the anti-Malenkov polemics at the Plenum in January 1955) were largely arbitrary and that there was a conspiracy against Beria rather a Beria conspiracy.[6]

In spring 1953, the new Soviet leaders' effort to overcome Stalin's legacy included also revision of policy on Germany. Mark Kramer feels that one of the goals in May-June 1953 was unification of Germany on a democratic basis. He sees this original intention to have been abandoned only when, as a result of the 17 June crisis in the GDR, soft policies were substituted by harder ones. As he argues, those communist leaders in Moscow and other Eastern capitals who saw the uprising to increase the need of departing from Stalinist policies, lost out against those who concluded that old firmness and discipline were required more than anything else. As a result, the scope of reform was reduced. Consolidation of Ulbricht's shattered position is attributed to this reason. Taking this view, Mark Kramer actually joins the adherents of the "GDR betrayal" thesis, with the only difference that he feels that all the Kremlin decision-makers - rather than Beria alone - sought relinquishment of both the socialist system and the USSR's control.

The sources underlying the article, do not bear this out. At the same time, there is evidence which points to the contrary. As early as in April and May, Molotov's subordinates prepared drafts which were designed to put unification on the backburner: The Soviet note proposal of 15 August 1953 which Mark Kramer interprets as resulting from the 17 June experience, was in fact worked out already in spring.[7] That the Kremlin's innovative effort was not aimed at German unity already before 17 June, follows, inter alia, from repeated internal acknowledgment that East Germany was not a case of its own but had to be seen and handled as part of the general intra-bloc situation. New Course policies were therefore prepared for the Eastern people's democracies as well.

Mark Kramer's argument also suffers from contradiction: The intent ascribed to the Soviet leadership would not have been in line with the expressly stated objective to restabilize the GDR by revoking Stalinist measures which had proven counterproductive. If East Germany was to be given away, why take pains both to solve domestic problems there and to establish a new kind of intra-bloc relationship? Another inconsistency is inherent in the role assigned to Molotov: This staunch hardliner who has never been suspected by anyone of being willing to abandon the GDR or any other socialist country, may well have understood that excessive socialist transformation was self-defeating (as he has indeed argued) but he certainly did not initiate socialist East Germany's surrender to the "class enemy" (as any non-communist group or regime was labelled). Seen from the USSR's point of view in 1953, this would have been a decision without precedent. It was not by coincidence that precisely this accusation was subsequently chosen as a crucial weapon to defame Beria among party cadres at home and abroad: Abandonment of a country already within the "socialist camp" was utterly unacceptable to any communist, even if he was much less of a hardliner than Molotov.

In support of his thesis, Mark Kramer argues that, in May-June 1953, a "peaceful and democratic Germany" was official policy. To interpret this correctly, Moscow's official terminology must be taken into account: The quality of being both "peaceful" and "democratic" were invariably and exclusively ascribed to the USSR and the people's democracies; no country, organization, or group outside the sphere of Soviet dominance was given this credit. Ever since Stalin had abandoned the idea of German dismemberment and expressed support for the defeated nation's unity in May 1945, the USSR always unfailingly employed the formula that a "peaceful and democratic Germany" had to be created. After proclamation of the GDR in fall 1949, there was often little distinction between "Germany" as a united country on the one hand, and a separate East German state on the other: In the Kremlin's view, the GDR represented the very order of things to be established equally in the Western part of the country once "peaceful" and "democratic" tendencies would have gained the upper hand there, too.[8] In this context, the evidence provided by Mark Kramer that Molotov emphasized the need for German unity in 1945-46 is meaningless: It neither implies a distinctive preference expressed by the Foreign Minister, nor does it indicate willingness to allow for unification on conditions of Western democracy. Quite on the contrary: East-West discussion on the U.S. demilitarization treaty initiative to which most of the quoted documents relate, induced the Kremlin leaders, including Molotov personally, to clarify their attitude by openly postulating that all Germany had to join the socio-political transformation process which the occupation power had initiated in the Soviet zone.[9]

Mark Kramer sheds new light on the Soviet leaders' decision-making on the New Course in the GDR. From Russian analysts' research, it was previously known that, on both 14 and 20 May, the Council of Ministers Presidium had intensified discussions on the GDR's threatening situation. Bits of information in Molotov's reminiscences recorded by Feliks Chuev seemed to indicate that the Presidium's 27 May exchange was on a draft prepared in the Foreign Ministry and that a controversy resulted which was quickly straightened out by a commission with Molotov, Beria, and Malenkov as members. From this information, I have concluded that, at the 27 May session, the New Course document must have been discussed and evoked some momentary dissension which was then easily overcome. This view was reinforced by an awareness that normal bureaucratic procedure was bound to be quite lengthy: One week, or even two, must be considered as a very short period of time for drafting any major paper; the few days between 27 May and 2 June (when the SED leaders were handed the New Course document) would not suffice. Despite all these good reasons, I have been put wrong by Mark Kramer: He has been able to use the relevant session protocols, direct evidence is therefore on his side. It was only on 27 May that the Presidium decided to have detailed instructions drafted to make reluctant SED leaders, notably Ulbricht, initiate a change of policy. That it was nonetheless possible to have the relevant document ready by 2 June, was due to the fact that drafting the New Course for the GDR was not only an affair of highest priority but also entrusted to three top leaders themselves rather than to the bureaucratic apparatus.[10]

A point which continues to be unclarified, is Ulbricht's return to graces in Moscow. While Mark Kramer has succeeded in demonstrating that the Kremlin did not only blame the SED Secretary General for his hardline policies (as previously available documents had suggested) but clearly wanted his resignation, respectively overthrow (which he temporarily avoided by skilful maneuvering), he provides no evidence on how Ulbricht managed to regain the Soviet backing which allowed him both to restore political control and to oust major intraparty critics. The author simply assumes that, after the 17 June crisis, the USSR leaders felt that they needed an intransigent hardliner in East Berlin and supported him for this reason. But was this really the case? Thus far, we have no concrete information on this at all. Doubt is invited by two facts: Moscow's support for Ulbricht's critics continued at least ten days beyond the uprising, and there were no Soviet restrictions on the New Course in the GDR. On the contrary: The Kremlin was most anxious to avoid general political harshness so as not provide any focus for new discontent. To alleviate the domestic situation, it even gave substantial material aid (which it had evaded before). In the light of this argument, Mark Kramer's assertion that, after the New Course, there was another fundamental revision of policy on Germany requires examination. To the extent that there was a political shift, it may not have been a response to the 17 June events.

When the hardline SED Secretary General stayed in power, he had to accept continuation of New Course. It is therefore implausible that he received Soviet support to restrict and contain the New Course. Coincidence in time between Beria's overthrow and the rise of Ulbricht's political fortune seems indicative of another interconnection. The Beria case provided Ulbricht with the unique chance to take advantage of the "betrayal" accusation by associating his principal intraparty adversary Zaisser with the deposed and denounced Kremlin politician. After all, Zaisser was Beria's counterpart in the GDR; the state security service he controlled was closely linked to Beria's organ. For all practical purpose, Zaisser had been Beria's subordinate. Therefore, the claim was bound to appear plausible that Zaisser had allegedly participated in

Beria's policy-making. If this assumption is correct (which cannot be ascertained on the basis of the sources thus far available), then Ulbricht must have used his unmatched Moscow contacts to convince crucial Soviet decision-makers that he deserved support against Zaisser whom he succeeded in depicting as Beria's East German accomplice.[11]

Mark Kramer must be given credit of having clarified the crucial points of the "Beria case" and the Kremlin's related policy on Germany. He has notably provided convincing evidence that there was no "betrayal of the GDR". The concept of a New Course must be seen as an effort to rescue the USSR's outer empire from the dire consequences of overaccelerated and excessively radical socialist transformation which had become counterproductive so that continuation of Soviet control was put on risk. This anxiety and concomitant willingness to correct previous policy was shared by all members of the Soviet leadership, irrespective of whether they may be ascribed harder or softer attitude. It is telling that the New Course initiative was seen as an analogy to the New Economic Policy in the USSR when Lenin had decided to allow for introduction of capitalist production and more liberal habits in general as a means to save his regime from internal collapse. To be sure, Mark Kramer's article has failed to solve some minor riddles linked to Soviet policy-making on the GDR in May-July 1953. But to the extent that this is the case, he has created an excellent basis for further research.

Notes:

1. Delo Beriia. Plenum TsK KPSS. Iyul' 1953 goda. Stenograficheskiy otchet, in: Izvestiya TsK KPSS, 1/1991, pp. 140-212, 2/1991, pp. 141-206.
2. See e.g. Richard Lowenthal in his introductory remarks to: Arnulf Baring, *Der 17. Juni 1953*, Cologne 1963, pp. 14-15.
3. Vladislav Zubok, "Unverfroren und grob in der Deutschlandfrage..." Berija, der Nachfolgestreit nach Stalins Tod und die Moskauer DDR-Debatte im April-Mai 1953, in: Christoph Klessmann/Bernd Stoeber (eds.), *1953 - Krisenjahr des Kalten Krieges in Europa*, Cologne 1999, pp. 29-48.
4. Michal Reiman, Berija, Malenkov und die deutsche Einheit, in: *Deutschland Archiv*, 3/1999, pp. 456-460.
5. Gerhard Wettig, *Bereitschaft zu Einheit in Freiheit? Die sowjetische Deutschland-Politik 1945-1955*, Munich 1999, pp. 235-261; Gerhard Wettig, Berijas deutsche Plaene im Lichte neuer Quellen, in: Christoph Klessmann/Bernd Stoeber (eds.), *1953 - Krisenjahr des Kalten Krieges in Europa*, Cologne 1999, pp. 49-69.
6. This has been the conclusion drawn by V.P. Naumov, *Byl li zagovor Berii? Novye dokumenty o sobytiakh 1953g.*, in: *Novaya i noveyshaya istoriya*, 5/1998, pp. 17-39.
7. For details see Gerhard Wettig, *Die beginnende Umorientierung der sowjetischen Deutschland--Politik im Fruehjahr und Sommer 1953*, in: *Deutschland Archiv*, 5/1995, pp. 495-

507; Elke Scherstjanoi, Die sowjetische Deutschlandpolitik nach Stalins Tod 1953, in: Vierteljahrshefte fuer Zeitgeschichte, 3/1998, pp. 503-517.

8. See, for example, Stalin's congratulatory telegram when the GDR had been founded, in: Dokumente zur Deutschlandpolitik der Sowjetunion, vol. 1, [East] Berlin 1957, pp. 238-239.

9. See, inter alia, Obsuzhdenie v SSSR amerikanskogo predlozheniya o zuklyuchenii dogovora o razoruzhenii i demilitarizatsii Germanii (1945-1947gg.), in: Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn', 8/1996, pp. 69-76; W.M. Molotow, Fragen der Aussenpolitik, Moscow 1949, pp. 39-74.

10. It is against this background that the following statements are provided with context: Elke Scherstjanoi, Die sowjetische Deutschlandpolitik nach Stalins Tod 1953, in: Vierteljahrshefte fuer Zeitgeschichte, 3/1998, pp. 513-525.

11. For details of my argument see G. Wettig, Berijas deutsche Plaene, op. cit., pp. 64-69.

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