“Reenacting the Story of Tantalus”
Eisenhower, Dulles, and the Failed Rhetoric of Liberation

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This article explores the relationship between public rhetoric and confidential foreign policy decision-making during the Eisenhower administration. President Dwight D. Eisenhower and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, pursued two contradictory diplomatic strategies. On the one hand, they wanted to establish a globalist foreign policy.¹ A key component of this strategy was “liberation policy”; that is, freeing the peoples of Eastern Europe from Soviet control. They believed they could best preserve globalism by “educating” the U.S. public and North American Treaty Organization (NATO) allies about the danger posed by the Soviet Union and the need for liberation. Eisenhower and Dulles consciously chose to use what I have called rhetorical diplomacy in order to achieve this goal.² Rhetorical diplomacy involved the use of belligerent rhetoric in private meetings with allied and Soviet officials and in public speeches, addresses, and press conferences. Publicly, the Eisenhower administration embraced liberation policy while appealing to an audi-


2. The Random House Webster’s College Dictionary has defined rhetoric as “the study of the effective use of language”; it can also be defined as “the undue use of exaggeration or display; bombast”; or, (in classical oratory) “the art of influencing the thought and conduct of an audience.” All three definitions are appropriate for this article.

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ence of unilateralists, liberationists, East European exiles, and the East European nations themselves.

On the other hand, Eisenhower and Dulles wanted to compete with the Soviet Union without resorting to a war that neither side could win. Eisenhower and Dulles believed that actual liberation might induce the Soviet Union to react violently. Hence they confidentially rejected military liberation as impractical and dangerous. Instead, they decided to pursue a tricky, risky, and long-term strategy of radio broadcasts and covert action designed to undermine, rather than overthrow, Soviet power in Eastern Europe.

Although earlier presidents had publicly endorsed policies diametrically opposed to those they actually pursued—for example, Franklin Delano Roosevelt endorsed the “Four Freedoms” of the Atlantic Charter while secretly acquiescing in the division of Europe—the evidence indicates that Eisenhower and Dulles elevated this to a conscious strategy. But the two leaders evidently did not realize that their public strategy of rhetorical diplomacy endangered their confidential strategy of competitive coexistence. They failed to understand that their words could be so powerful and that rhetoric could affect policy. The failure to reconcile public and confidential strategies had unintended consequences. Unilateralists advocated liberation, and hawkish officials in the administration argued that Eisenhower and Dulles must fulfill their promises and confront the Soviet Union militarily in Eastern Europe. However, U.S. and allied diplomats repeatedly warned, to no avail, that rhetorical diplomacy had strained the relationship between Washington and its allies. In any case, the Soviet Union ignored the rhetoric of liberation policy and forcefully put down rebellions in East Germany in 1953 and Hungary in 1956. Far from helping the situation, rhetorical diplomacy often eluded control as a tool of strategy, causing increased tensions between Washington and Moscow.

As Ira Chernus has noted, Eisenhower paid particular attention to discourse. For Eisenhower (and Dulles, as I will show) “ideological discourse . . . was absolutely central to the life, commitments, and political decisions of a cold warrior.” However, despite Chernus’s contention to the contrary, the evi-

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3. I have defined as “confidential” those policies or positions that Eisenhower and Dulles formulated during national security meetings, telephone conversations, and other classified or off-the-record deliberations.

4. As Richard Neustadt has argued, presidents derive substantial persuasive powers from the authority of their office, enabling them to achieve the results they want given the checks and balances represented by Congress, foreign leaders, and public opinion. See Richard Neustadt, Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan, 2nd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1990), pp. 30–33. Francis A. Beer and Robert Harriman have noted a connection between speech and action, and this article reflects my “interest . . . in the effect the discourse has on conduct.” See Francis A. Beer and Robert Harriman, “Realism and Rhetoric in International Relations,” in Francis A. Beer and Robert Harriman, eds., Post-Realism: The Rhetorical Turn in International Relations (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996), p. 11.
idence shows an enormous disconnect between Eisenhower’s public and private discourse and his confidential rhetoric.\(^5\)

For years, rhetorical analysis has been used by political scientists and communications theorists, but only recently has it been used by diplomatic historians. In 1922 the influential journalist and writer Walter Lippmann examined the connection between representative government and “the pictures inside people’s heads,” or “stereotypes.” Lippmann identified “pictures of themselves, of others, of their means, purposes, and relationships” as “public opinions.” His path-breaking book influenced generations of scholars.\(^6\) Murray Edelman, drawing on Lippmann’s study, discussed the importance of symbolism in political leadership. B. Thomas Trout adopted Edelman’s description of symbols to examine how the United States and the Soviet Union used symbolic phrases such as “imperialist” and “free world” to promote “societal goals” that contributed to each system’s sense of legitimacy. Building on Edelman’s work, Doris Graber noted the link between language and actual policy, especially the way “oratory can create the psychological intangibles which condition action.” Jeffrey Tulis examined the role of the presidency and how the office itself “enhances the tendency to define issues in terms of the need of persuasion rather than to develop a discourse suitable for the illumination and exploration of real issues.”\(^7\)

Two works that analyze rhetoric have been critical to this study. Chaim Perelman argues that a speaker must “adapt himself to his audience if he wishes to have any effect on it,” and that, if the audience changes, the orator must modify “the appearance of the argument.” Eisenhower and Dulles adapted their rhetoric to their audience. When they spoke to allied and Soviet

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leaders both publicly and privately, they employed strident, often threatening rhetoric. In their confidential deliberations, they eschewed the advice of hawkish officials and instead used moderate, non-confrontational rhetoric. David Green has shown how political discourse can be “manipulated” so that a speaker may define “a few key terms or labels that serve as organizing concepts and thus as political weapons.” Eisenhower and Dulles used specific discourse to further their political goals but failed to recognize how their words could backfire.

Numerous scholars have examined the link between international relations and rhetorical analysis by highlighting the importance of beliefs and images in the construction of friends and enemies. Lynn Boyd Hinds and Theodore Otto Windt Jr. have described how the Cold War became “a rhetorical state of mind” among U.S. policymakers. Douglas Foyle has highlighted the “domestic determinants of international relations,” and John Fousek has examined the link between the “public sphere,” the use of public discourse, and cultural analysis in his study of the roots of anti-Communism during the Truman administration.


Although Fred Greenstein has described Eisenhower’s use of “words as instruments for communicating substance and emotions,” Greenstein’s analysis is limited to how Eisenhower obfuscated issues or displayed “ambiguity” in his dealings with subordinates and with foreign leaders. Greenstein does not analyze how Eisenhower publicly employed rhetoric. Only recently have diplomatic historians in general and historians of the Eisenhower administration in particular probed the relationship between public rhetoric and policymaking. The latest scholarship in this area has increasingly emphasized the relationship between rhetoric and policy, showing that rhetoric overwhelmed or at times became policy. Martin J. Medhurst, for example, has argued that “discourse intentionally designed to achieve a particular goal with one or more specific audience” became the true “currency of Cold War combat.” He convincingly demonstrates that Eisenhower “understood the power of language and was extremely sensitive to its nuances, tones, and suggestions.” Kenneth Osgood has examined the rhetoric of Eisenhower’s arms control initiatives and has described how the president deliberately integrated psychological warfare into his national security strategy to achieve “the effective coordination and implementation of policies” that would “produce the maximum psychological effect” on audiences such as NATO allies, the U.S.


public, and the Soviet Union. In a later review essay, Osgood contended that “American policy makers increasingly realized that the Cold War would be won or lost on the plane of public opinion, rather than by blood shed on the battlefield.”

Ira Chernus has likewise argued that Eisenhower believed “public discourse was the vital weapon of national security.” Eisenhower’s rhetorical diplomacy, however, created a paradox. As Eisenhower claimed to want peace, he needed to “wage war” rhetorically in order to maintain national unity. John Gaddis maintains that Dulles’s “penchant for overstatement” personified the gap between the administration’s capabilities and policies. This gap, Gaddis says, “confused” and “alarmed” the public in the United States and Europe and “thoroughly bewildered” Soviet leaders. Actually, confusion and alarm became the logical, though wholly unexpected, results of the pursuit of mutually exclusive public and confidential strategies. Moreover, I will show that these strategies emboldened Soviet leaders rather than bewildered them.

The Early Rhetoric of Liberation

The 1952 Republican primary contest between Senator Robert A. Taft (R-Ohio) and Eisenhower centered on the foreign policy divide between the unilateralists and the globalists. The clash had been brewing beneath the party’s surface since the late 1930s during the debate over whether the United States should aid Britain in the early days of World War II. Taft opposed such a policy, whereas globalists such as John Foster Dulles, in bipartisan fashion, backed President Roosevelt. After Pearl Harbor brought the United States into the war, Governor Thomas Dewey, the Republican nominee for president in 1944; Dulles, his adviser on foreign affairs; and Senators Arthur Vandenberg (R-Michigan) and Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. (R-Massachusetts) in turn continued bipartisanship and resisted unilateralism’s temptations. As D-
vid Green has shown, Roosevelt’s successful labeling of those opposed to joining the war as “isolationists” demonstrated how rhetoric could shape national discourse.16

The conflict erupted in the winter of 1950–1951 during the “Great Debate” over whether the Senate should ratify the NATO treaty. Unilateralists such as Taft and former president Herbert Hoover rejected collective security, fearing that NATO would imperil the sovereignty of the United States. Taft in particular argued that containment did not distinguish between vital and peripheral interests.17 Globalists, on the other hand, strongly endorsed the NATO treaty, worked vigorously for its passage, and backed Eisenhower, who repeatedly cited Taft’s approach to foreign policy as his main reason for seeking the presidency.18 Eisenhower ultimately defeated Taft and became the Republican nominee for president against Democrat Adlai E. Stevenson, the governor of Illinois.

To unite the party, Eisenhower and Taft asked Dulles to write the foreign policy plank of the 1952 Republican platform. In deference to unilateralists, the platform affirmed that Republicans would not condone “secret” agreements such as those allegedly made by Roosevelt at Yalta. To assuage the globalists, Dulles called for the liberation of Eastern Europe. Liberation would “mark the end of the negative, futile and immoral policy of ‘containment’” and result in the “genuine independence of those captive peoples.”19 The Republicans charged that President Harry Truman had allowed the Soviet Union to consolidate its hegemony over Eastern Europe and had actually

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16. For more on the unilateralists versus the globalists in the 1930s and during the war, see Miles, *The Odyssey of the American Right*, esp. pp. 63–74; and Green, *Shaping Political Consciousness*, pp. 135–139.


strengthened the Soviet Union through his misguided policies. Liberation would instead show that the United States could actively combat the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe.

During the campaign, Dulles and Eisenhower fleshed out the Republican call for liberation. Dulles told the Baltic Freedom Committee that the Baltic peoples “have a right to continuing recognition as independent states.” Eisenhower repeatedly condemned Truman for “silently consenting” to Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and for failing to offer a “positive, clear cut, long term action for peace.” He also faulted Truman for ignoring the importance of psychological warfare.

In fairness to Eisenhower and Dulles, close examination of their speeches and the Republican platform’s foreign policy plank reveals that they never promised military aid to the captive nations. For example, in a speech on 8 October 1952, Dulles rejected “a war of liberation or an effort now to stir up the captive peoples to violent revolt.” Instead, the United States, he declared, “should activate stresses and strains within the Russian Communist empire so as to disintegrate it.” As Andrew M. Johnston has noted, shortly after Eisenhower’s victory over Stevenson, Dulles privately assured the British that the

22. See Eisenhower’s “Address at Philadelphia’s Convention Hall,” 4 September 1952, in Dwight D. Eisenhower Library (DDE Library), Papers of Stephen Benedict: Materials on General Eisenhower’s 1952 Campaign Speeches, Box 1 (hereinafter referred to as Benedict Papers). On Eisenhower’s criticism of Truman for ignoring psychological warfare, see Osgood, “Form before Substance,” p. 408. Osgood points out that Eisenhower’s campaign statements represented “more than mere rhetoric, for they reflect his heartfelt commitment to psychological warfare.” Gregory Mitrovich, however, has convincingly demonstrated that the Truman administration was committed to a form of liberation for years. The use of, in George F. Kennan’s words, “all methods short of war,” including aggressive psychological warfare, propaganda, and the exploitation of tensions within the Soviet bloc, had begun in the late 1940s as a necessary and logical complement to the Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine, and NATO. Indeed, Truman created the Psychological Strategy Board (PSB) in April 1951 ostensibly to streamline the various covert activities that fell under the rubric of psychological warfare. But Sarah-Jane Corke has argued that the PSB suffered from a lack of clear direction and that, contrary to Mitrovich’s assertion, Truman lacked “a grand strategy” against Moscow. The Truman administration could not decide whether the PSB would serve as a propaganda board or an instrument of covert action, including sabotage and the arming of the captive peoples. Eisenhower and Dulles capitalized on this confusion and successfully belittled Truman’s diplomacy by using the powerful rhetoric and image of liberation just as Roosevelt had used isolationism to denigrate Taft. See Gregory Mitrovich, Undermining the Kremlin: America’s Strategy to Subvert the Soviet Bloc, 1947–1956 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp 5–11, 59–64, 72–74; and Corke, “Bridging the Gap,” pp. 55–57. For Kennan’s advocacy of propaganda, see Daniel Foglesong, “Roots of Liberation: American Images of the Future of Russia in the Early Cold War, 1948–1953,” International History Review, Vol. 21, No. 1 (March 1999), pp. 57–79.
United States would not take any “rash action in the direction of forceful liberation of the satellite people.” The British should simply ignore campaign rhetoric made “in the heat of the campaign.” Yet *publicly*, calls for liberation during the next three years implied that the administration supported military, not merely rhetorical, liberation.24

Despite his campaign rhetoric, Eisenhower conspicuously failed to refer to liberation policy in his inaugural address. Instead he emphasized the theme of supporting West European unity and promised that his administration would uphold the Truman administration’s commitment to NATO. The West European press, which had endorsed Stevenson after Eisenhower had promised liberation in a speech to the American Legion in August 1952, reacted with relief. France’s *Le Monde* declared unilateralism “dead” and “found satisfaction in the fact that the president had said nothing of the ‘liberation of oppressed peoples.’”25

Nevertheless, Eisenhower in his first State of the Union Address, which was broadcast to Eastern Europe over the Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe (RFE), and Radio in the American Sector (RIAS) Berlin, reversed course and resumed his public support of liberation policy.26 He vowed he would never consider any group of people “expendable” and promised to sub-


mit a resolution to Congress “making it clear that this Government recognizes no kind of commitment contained in secret understandings of the past with foreign governments which permit this kind of enslavement.”

The following day, the administration submitted the Captive Nations Resolution to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC). The resolution contended that the Soviet Union had violated the spirit of the Yalta agreements and the United Nations (UN) Charter by forcibly taking over Eastern Europe. The resolution also claimed that the United States had “never acquiesced in such enslavement of any peoples” and called for self-determination behind the Iron Curtain. Two days later, the president told the Council of Free Czechoslovakia that “America remains true to its great traditions, and firm in its conviction that tyranny cannot long endure in a world where free men are strong, united, and resolute.” A week after introducing the Captive Nations Resolution, Dulles appeared before the SFRC and again publicly committed the United States to liberation policy through peaceful means. These public remarks were repeated throughout the spring. In the meantime, Dulles privately assured the British and French ambassadors and Congress that the resolution never anticipated “any repudiation of actual agreements.”

Yet the president also strongly backed the Volunteer Freedom Corps (VFC), for, as James Jay Carafano has noted, the Corps represented “a positive, dramatic symbol of resistance against Soviet and Communist aggression” in Europe. The VFC would be made up of stateless (displaced) persons from Europe’s “ethnic and nationalistic” minorities who would bolster Western Eu-

29. “Memorandum from Dulles to Eisenhower,” 13 February 1953, in DDE Library, Ann Whitman Files (AWF), White House Memoranda Series, Box 1, February 1953, Folder 3; “Memorandum of President’s Meeting with Congressional Leaders, Supplementary Notes,” 2 March 1953, in DDE Library, AWF, Legislative Meetings, Box 1, 1953, Folder 3; and “Report Drafted by the Staff of the President’s Committee on International Informational Activities,” 24 February 1953, in U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Vol. VIII, pp. 54–55 (hereinafter referred to as FRUS, with appropriate year and volume numbers).
rope’s collective security. The VFC was also “consistent” with “the appearance of an activist . . . presidency” epitomized by liberation policy.  

**The Post-Stalin Opening**

After the Soviet dictator Josif Stalin died on 5 March 1953, some officials in Washington believed that his successors might be interested in pursuing a thaw in the Cold War. U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union Charles Bohlen secretly advised the administration to react cautiously to Stalin’s death. Bohlen believed the Soviet “peace offensive” following Stalin’s death, including calls for a new Four-Power Conference on Germany, was genuine. He recommended that the administration not seek to intensify divisions among Stalin’s successors—Nikita Khrushchev, Lavrentii Beria, Vyacheslav Molotov, and Georgii Malenkov—who were jockeying for power. Bohlen argued that attempts by Washington to exploit the situation would cause the post-Stalin leaders to circle the wagons and, at least in the short term, “be harder rather than softer” toward the outside world. The National Security Council (NSC) agreed and recommended that Eisenhower publicly call for peace and mutual disarmament.

A more jaundiced view was expressed by the Operations Coordinating Board (OCB) of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which recommended that Washington “exploit to the full” Stalin’s death through psychological warfare that had already begun under the PSB’s auspices. The OCB also urged the president to call for peace and a summit “to consider certain major outstanding issues.” Because the new leaders in Moscow would likely want to consolidate their power “and avoid serious external difficulties,” the OCB argued that such a speech would not be deemed provocative. Secretary of State Dulles disagreed, however, arguing that a speech could “be interpreted as an appeal to the Soviet people to rise up against their rulers in a period of mourning.” At the next NSC meeting on 11 March, Dulles also warned that “in our attempt to destroy the unity of the Soviet orbit we must not jeopardize the unity of our own coalition.”

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32. On the OCB’s advice, see “Effects of Stalin’s Death,” 6 March 1953, in NA, RG 273, State Dept
Actually, the difference between Dulles and the OCB and Bohlen was more tactical than substantive. Both Dulles and the OCB warned only against overt provocation. They agreed that the United States should try to split Eastern Europe from the Soviet Union through covert action and psychological warfare and should publicly emphasize the need for free world unity in the new, post-Stalin atmosphere. At a press conference on 3 April, Dulles dismissed the Soviet peace overtures in the wake of Stalin’s death, arguing that there was no change in “the basic situation or danger in which we stand.”

By contrast, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill believed that Stalin’s death might usher in a new Soviet policy. After reading an initial draft of the speech Eisenhower was preparing to give, Churchill apparently convinced the president to moderate his rhetoric. Eisenhower had originally planned to demand German reunification based on free elections as well as free elections in the rest of Eastern Europe without acknowledging that Stalin’s successors might be interested in easing tensions with the West. Churchill argued that world opinion would see this rhetoric “as rather a negative act” and that “it would seem as if a sudden frost had nipped spring in the bud.” The president agreed and said he would modify the text.

Eisenhower’s speech of 16 April, titled “The Chance for Peace,” called for a peaceful accommodation with the Soviet Union and mutual disarmament. However, the president agreed to only a few of Churchill’s suggestions. Eisenhower demanded that the USSR end the Korean War, sign the Austrian peace treaty, and release remaining German prisoners-of-war as proof of “good faith.” Dudley Goar has called the speech “a weapon of psychological warfare

33. “Press Conference,” 3 April 1953, Dulles Papers, Box 312. Osgood shows that Eisenhower agreed and saw the Soviet “peace offensive” in the wake of Stalin’s death “as a psychological threat of the first magnitude” because it reflected only a tactical change, not an evolution, in Soviet policy. See Osgood, “Form before Substance,” pp. 410–411. Klaus Larres has argued that psychological warfare would “exploit the inexperience and confusion of the new leaders in Moscow.” See Klaus Larres, Churchill’s Cold War: The Politics of Personal Diplomacy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 199–201. On the other hand, Christian Ostermann argues that the United States rejected the psychological offensive because the Soviet call for talks on Germany threatened the stability of West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer’s government, which was preparing for elections and would be challenged by the Socialists to meet with the new leaders in Moscow. See Ostermann, “Keeping the Pot Simmering,” pp. 62–66.

which would put the onus of Cold War tensions squarely on the Soviet Union”; Kenneth Osgood has dubbed it “a defensive countermeasure” in which the president refused to offer concessions of his own to the new Soviet leadership; and Klaus Larres has shown that the speech “certainly was not meant to be a beginning of an era of détente, negotiations, and arms control.”

Many scholars, however, have noted that in the ongoing battle of wills between the United States and the Soviet Union, the new Soviet leaders also refused to back down, pointedly refusing to agree to Eisenhower’s conditions. Moscow rejected German reunification on Western terms and instead demanded that the United States recognize the reality of Soviet control over Eastern Europe. As David Holloway has pointed out, Khrushchev in particular believed that “peaceful coexistence” did not “mean ideological coexistence . . . nor did it entail renunciation of the struggle with imperialism.” Instead, only through the achievement of strategic, political, and diplomatic parity could the Soviet Union avoid nuclear war. John Young has also noted that the new Soviet leaders used the peace offensive “as a weapon of the Cold War” to fight “a determined enemy in a struggle where lies and deception were the norm.” In this sense, the Soviet “peace offensive” after Stalin’s death was a tactic by the new leaders to regain the diplomatic offensive.

Two polls taken in June 1953 reflect the administration’s mixed record in “educating” the U.S. public. When asked “what are the greatest dangers facing the United States,” 26 percent of the respondents replied the Cold War, the Soviet Union, the state of U.S. defenses, and the spread of Communism. But 44 percent said war with the USSR and the Korean conflict. The administration’s use of harsh rhetoric had scared the audience. At the same time, the poll found that four out of ten people favored helping the captive nations to


become free—an indication that the administration’s rhetoric about liberation had resonated with the U.S. public.37

**Liberation Put to the Test**

Liberation failed its first test when Washington looked on as Moscow quashed the East German uprising in June 1953.38 Scholars such as Vojtech Mastny and Mark Kramer have argued that the rebellion occurred because of the GDR’s decision to increase work quotas and its failure to end the emigration of East Germans to the West. Rolf Steininger claims that the GDR, which had “developed into a sort of burdensome mortgage for the Kremlin” by the early 1950s, became suddenly “no longer expendable” and “required shoring up” if Soviet leaders hoped to convert it into a bulwark against West Germany. Others such as Hannes Adomeit and Klaus Larres (and Kramer) have noted that Khrushchev, Molotov, and, to a lesser extent, Malenkov used the uprising to accuse Beria of making a power grab and removed him from the leadership. Valur Ingimundarson has factored liberation policy into his analysis, and argues that the administration had rejected military liberation by the spring of 1953 in order to pursue ratification of the European Defense Community. Ingimundarson correctly notes that the administration had confidentially rejected military liberation, but he fails to acknowledge that Eisenhower and Dulles continued **publicly** to use it as a rhetorical tool.39

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38. The East German rebellion came on the heels of a lesser known, but no less explosive, revolt in the western Czechoslovak city of Plzeň on 1 June. Thousands of Czechoslovak workers, many chanting “We shall have good times again, the boys from the USA will come back again,” “Long Live Eisenhower,” and “Death to the Communists” and waving Czechoslovak and American flags, protested against a currency reform measure. Although the Czechoslovak authorities quickly declared martial law and managed to keep the revolt quiet, the Soviet Union recognized the potential for widening instability. See Mark Kramer, “The Early Post-Stalin Succession Struggle and Upheavals in East-Central Europe: Internal-External Linkages in Soviet Policy Making (Part 1),” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter 1999), pp. 20–24. See also Christian Ostermann, “The Origins of the Crisis: Introduction” in Christian Ostermann, ed., *Uprising in Germany 1953* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001), pp. 16–17.
As it turned out, Frank Wisner, the head of the CIA’s Office of Policy Coordination (OPC), and Allen Dulles, the director of the CIA, backed by Eisenhower and Dulles, refused to arm the East German workers. They believed that the preponderance of Soviet power in the region would mean that any U.S. military action, whether overt or covert, would merely encourage more “bloodshed.” Although the riots represented, in Dulles’s words, an “excellent propaganda opportunity,” he urged caution. Referring to the Plzeň protests of June 1, he reminded his colleagues that “we had carefully refrained from urging the Czechs to open revolt, while encouraging them to passive resistance and to prepare for future possibilities.” He then argued that the United States should use propaganda in the form of radio broadcasts to take advantage of the “psychological implications” that the uprising would have on the Soviet Union. The CIA later augmented the propaganda with a food relief program designed to build a wedge between the GDR and the Soviet Union. But even during the revolt, as a recently declassified CIA report indicates, the United States may have contributed more than is often realized. East German authorities long blamed the “provocation of foreign lackeys” for the rebellion, and the CIA report acknowledges that RIAS had spread word of the uprising throughout East Berlin and had allowed the leader of the German Trade Unionist Association to make a speech demanding the release of political prisoners without informing the German government in advance.

Union Federation in West Berlin to use its facilities so that he could ask “the East Berlin population to support the day’s demonstrations.”

In the wake of these events, the PSB argued that the United States should seek to “nourish resistance . . . short of mass rebellion” in Eastern Europe and should “covertly stimulate acts and attitudes of [defiance] short of mass rebellion aimed at . . . provoking open Soviet intervention in both the GDR and the other satellites.” The USIA proposed that its informational activities be integrated with broader intelligence gathering in order to “focus attention on the psychological implications or the foreign public opinion aspects of proposed foreign policies.” This “psychological intelligence” would provide “estimates of public reactions to proposed policies,” allowing the administration to reach both governments and citizens.

Eisenhower and Dulles secretly accepted this advice. They stressed that Washington could not incite a revolt “which might well lead to bloody reprisals,” and they ruled out “any physical action of any kind that could be classed as intervention.” They concluded that the United States should limit itself to psychological warfare through the use of propaganda that would gradually undermine Soviet control over the Eastern bloc. But the drawback to this strategy, regardless of their private motivations, was that the propaganda and rhetoric implied U.S. support for liberation.

Because Eisenhower and Dulles still believed they must educate the public about the Soviet threat, they refused to publicize their secret determination to ease tensions with Moscow. The president declared that “programs for informing the American public, as well as other populations, are indispensable if we are to do anything except to drift aimlessly, possibly to our own eventual destruction.” To protect the United States, he concluded, “we must have the
enlightened support of our friends in the world.” But the administration’s rhetorical strategy and its public information campaign could not be reconciled with its confidential repudiation of military liberation.45

In September 1953, U.S. diplomats in Europe noted that “there is some inclination to believe that we let [the East Germans] down by failing to support the riots.” They advised the White House to tone down its rhetoric rather than mislead the East European peoples into believing that the United States would act. They also warned that the NATO allies were increasingly concerned about what they saw as U.S. saber-rattling. Dulles and Eisenhower ignored this advice.46 Meanwhile, a September 1953 poll found that 52 percent of those asked believed that the chances of “avoiding all-out war with Russia” had worsened as compared to a year or two before.47

With the administration still publicly committed to liberation, the USIA looked further at the use of propaganda and psychological warfare in Eastern Europe. A researcher at the National War College interviewed East European refugees and concluded that broadcasts relating to “the strength of the West and a conviction that liberation would be accomplished only by means of war” resonated most in “any Psychological Warfare communication.” Later in the month, however, the NSC again rejected military liberation.48 Hence, even as the White House secretly ruled out military liberation, the USIA remained intent on doing the opposite for propaganda purposes.

In October 1953, the administration began to implement the “New Look,” a reorientation of U.S. national security strategy that Eisenhower had commissioned in the spring to help secure passage of the European Defense Community (EDC).49 The New Look, embodied in NSC 162/2, “Basic Na-

45. “Memorandum from the President to the Secretary of State,” 8 September 1953, in DDE Library, AWF, White House Memoranda Series, Box 1, Folder 2; emphasis in original.
46. See “Summary Minutes of the Chiefs of Mission Meeting at Vienna, September 22–24, 1953,” 29 September 1953, in NA, RG 59, Misc. Office Files of the Asst Secretaries of State, Box 31. See also “Memorandum from the President for the Secretary of State,” 24 October 1953, in DDE Library, AWF, Box 2, Dulles-Herter Series: “I agree with their report that during this period our work should be carefully thought out and should be in concert with the ideas of our allies.”
49. In a March 1953 letter to U.S. Special Representative to Europe William Draper, Eisenhower argued that collective security forced the United States “to seek new and cheap solutions. I quite agree with you that new weapons and new methods may—in the long run—bring about some fundamental changes” in the world situation. See “Letter from Eisenhower to Bill Draper,” 16 March 1953, in Dulles Papers, White House Memoranda Series from Eisenhower Library, Box 1, Folder 6. The EDC was a supranational army made up of West European soldiers, including those of West Germany, that
tional Security Policy” or “Project Solarium” (so named because the members of the NSC committee met in the White House Solarium), rejected, for budgetary reasons, a prolonged buildup of U.S. ground forces and conventional weapons. It instead recommended a combination of strategic nuclear weapons and the EDC (with West German forces) to ensure Western security. The NSC paper also urged a rigorous public offensive of “dynamic political warfare designed to create a climate of victory which will encourage the free world.” How would the United States reconcile these contradictory aims? The answer lay in the use of rhetorical diplomacy and, as John Gaddis and Kenneth Osgood have pointed out, psychological warfare. NSC 162/2 considered psychological warfare and U.S. military and economic strength equally important in meeting national security goals, not least because the document, like earlier NSC and CIA studies, saw little “likelihood of general war.” The U.S.-Soviet rivalry was a test of wills, and Washington must strike psychologically at Moscow rather than militarily.

It was in this context that Eisenhower gave his “Atoms for Peace” address at the UN General Assembly on 8 December. The president painted a bleak picture of a world threatened by the U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms race. He proposed that the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union donate fissionable materials to a new UN-run International Atomic Energy Agency that would use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, especially in the production of elec-

would, in Brian Duchin’s words, help provide “Free World Security over the long haul at a price that the United States and its allies could afford.” See Brian Duchin, “The ‘Agonizing Reappraisal’: Eisenhower, Dulles, and the European Defense Community,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 16, No.2 (Spring 1992), p. 204. Yet in a confidential NSC meeting on 31 March, Dulles argued that although reducing the budget deficit was laudable, “the psychological factor abroad” would lead the Europeans to believe that they had been fooled by the administration’s rhetoric. He noted that Europeans “have been taught to believe that a Republican administration” would “return to isolation.” On this basis, Dulles warned that any cutback in military aid “might therefore produce panic” in Europe. See “Memorandum of Discussion at a Special Meeting of the National Security Council,” 31 March 1953, in DDE Library, AWF, NSC Series, Box 4.


tricity in the Third World. Eisenhower also proposed another Four-Power Conference to discuss Austria, Germany, Korea, and general disarmament.52

The speech was followed by the inception of the U.S. Atoms for Peace program, a program that had been suggested earlier in the year by a scientific panel chaired by J. Robert Oppenheimer, the director of the wartime Manhattan Project. The panel argued that the administration should adopt “a policy of candor toward the American people by revealing fully the dangers engendered by the atomic arms race,” and it called on the administration to share technical information with U.S. allies to promote “the unity and cohesion of the non-Soviet world.” After the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) approved the idea, the PSB prepared to implement an informational campaign. But Eisenhower and Dulles immediately pulled back, fearing that they could never convince the public to support an honest discussion about nuclear weapons and the effects of nuclear warfare. Instead, the administration absorbed “Operation Candor” into its larger strategy of educating the public about globalism or, as Ira Chernus has said, as “an exercise in emotion management, intended to rally the nation's will to wage cold war for the long haul.”53

Three days after Eisenhower’s speech, the NSC adopted NSC 174, which renounced an aggressive policy of rollback and liberation. The document noted that despite the best efforts by Washington and indigenous resistance groups, Moscow’s control over Eastern Europe “has not been appreciably reduced.” The NSC endorsed the continued use of psychological warfare and covert action, yet specifically warned that Washington must avoid any “commitments on the nature and timing of any U.S. action to bring about liberation.” This cautious policy, however, was never publicly announced. The term “candor” seemed ironic in this respect.54 The same pattern held through 1954. Eisenhower claimed in his State of the Union address that his administration had begun to erode the Soviet Union’s hold on Eastern Europe. He in-


sisted that his “active” foreign policy had enabled the United States to reclaim “that precious intangible, the initiative.”

Confidentially, however, the administration did not subscribe to this overblown rhetoric. In February 1954 the CIA averred that even though the Soviet Union remained “fundamentally hostile to the [United States],” it would “avoid courses of action which in its judgment would clearly involve substantial risk of general war.” This judgment was not made public. Instead, the administration continued its public espousal of liberation and played up the Soviet threat. On 15 May, Dulles publicly backed the Eastern European exiles against “the forces of despotism [that] today are more formidable than ever before.” He described the “struggle” between Washington and Moscow in starkly Manichean terms. The United States, representing the forces of freedom and spirituality, could not “concede hundreds of millions of souls to despotic rule.”

Despite these pronouncements, the OCB noted in August 1954 that U.S. options in Eastern Europe were “extremely limited.” The board endorsed propaganda and covert activities that avoided “incitement to premature revolts, commitments on the nature and timing of any U.S. action to bring about liberation, and incitement to action.” Yet, just ten days later, Eisenhower publicly vowed that the United States “will never willingly exchange” freedom “for the stifling shroud of regimentation under which the Communist despotism hides its silent, captive peoples.” In December 1954 the NSC debated an internal JCS memorandum prepared six months earlier. The Chiefs pressed for a tougher stand against the Soviet Union, reminded the administration of the promises it had made during the 1952 presidential campaign, and averred “that the threatening course of the Cold War” warranted “a reappraisal” of U.S. tactics. If Moscow wished to achieve real secu-

rity, the JCS argued, it must “release the satellite nations and allow them the free choice of their own form of government.” Otherwise, the Chiefs believed that the United States, “by means of positive actions,” should “confront the USSR with the risks which might attend such a failure.”

Dulles realized that the JCS had turned the tables against him, but he was determined to eschew inflammatory action. Dulles cited the CIA’s warning that an attempt to overthrow the Communist governments in Eastern Europe “would involve the United States in a general war.” He argued that “this kind of aggressiveness was not in the best interests of the United States.” Eisenhower agreed and dismissed the JCS’s recommendations. Not surprisingly, though, these confidential deliberations were not made public.

Instead, the administration continued to pursue its mutually exclusive strategies in 1955. Although Eisenhower softened his rhetoric in his State of the Union address by not mentioning the bloc countries by name, he vowed that “through a vigorous information program,” the United States would “keep the people of the world truthfully advised of our actions and purposes.” In reality, Dulles and Eisenhower had no intention of intervening directly on behalf of the East European states, not least because the Soviet Union was continuing to fortify its nuclear arsenal. In February 1955 the NSC endorsed a study undertaken by a committee headed by James Killian of the Scientific Advisory Commission that examined the “relative military strength” of the United States and Soviet Union. The Killian Report concluded that the U.S. advantage in strategic nuclear weapons would last only until 1958, when the Soviet Union would achieve parity with the United States.

The Killian Report and previous CIA estimates convinced the administra-

61. “Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense,” 23 June 1954, in DDE Library, AWF, Administration Series, Box 23, Joint Chiefs of Staff Folder.


64. “Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (Merchant) to the Undersecretary of State (Hoover, Jr.),” 4 January 1955, in *FRUS*, 1955–1957, Vol. XXV, pp. 4–5. See also “Summary Paper Approved by the Operations Coordinating Board,” 5 January 1955, in NA, RG 273, State Dept OCB and NSC, OCB, Box 31. “Unless the power balance between the United States and the Soviet Union changes dramatically in our favor, there is little likelihood of detaching a major satellite at any time without grave risk of war except by negotiation.” The administration showed no indication that it would publicly negotiate with Moscow.
tration to work for a nuclear test ban in order to “lock in a substantial U.S. advantage over the Soviet Union.” The JCS approved the report, provided that the administration would not “make concessions in advance of similar action by the Soviets.” Eisenhower, for his part, believed that a test ban would also help prevent a nuclear exchange that neither side could hope to survive. The NSC noted that the threat of “extensive destruction . . . could create a condition of mutual deterrence in which each side would be strongly inhibited from deliberately initiating general war.” Significantly, however, the NSC further argued that Soviet leaders would modify their behavior if the United States maintained its propaganda activities while strengthening NATO. The problem was that the propaganda itself could increase the risk of war through the very miscalculation the NSC wanted to avoid.

Thus in February the president publicly vowed that “we must help intensify the will for freedom in the satellite countries.” Eisenhower promised that “so long as their people are reminded that the outside world has not forgotten them,” the United States would continue to press their cause “in this most critical of battles—the winning of men’s minds. Without this victory, we can have no other victories.” The implication was that Communism could not be defeated while Eastern Europe remained under Soviet control.

On 10 May 1955, Khrushchev announced a “sweeping disarmament proposal” that included deep cuts in nuclear weapons by both sides and called for a U.S.-Soviet summit. Together with the Austrian State Treaty signed the same week, the Soviet overture suggested that Washington and Moscow might be able to reach a wider agreement. Eisenhower consented to a meeting with Khrushchev in Geneva in July.68 Because the administration had endorsed the Killian Report, Khrushchev’s proposal should have been acceptable. But subsequent events showed that the administration could not abandon rhetorical diplomacy.

Dulles worried that the Austrian treaty had set a dangerous precedent and that the neutralization of Austria would be extended to Germany. He was wary of Khrushchev’s disarmament proposal and feared that the Soviet leader would score propaganda points by meeting with Eisenhower. The JCS agreed with Dulles, and the president himself shared this skepticism. Whether rightly or wrongly, the administration’s basic distrust of Soviet motives led almost invariably to the dismissal of Soviet offers. Eisenhower therefore continued his public support for liberation. In June 1955, at the tenth anniversary celebration of the founding of the UN in San Francisco, he argued that every nation had “the inherent right to the kind of government under which it chooses to live and the right to select in full freedom the individuals who conduct that government.”

Shortly before the summit meeting with Khrushchev, the administration again confidentially rejected military liberation. The NSC adopted a report concluding that “the elimination of Soviet control over the satellites” should “be pursued [only] by ‘appropriate means short of military force,’ including ‘if possible, negotiation with the USSR.’” But the document also claimed “that Soviet control of the satellites is one of the principal causes of world tension and is incompatible with lasting conditions of peace.” The report stressed that if the president would “publicly assert this position,” he could remind the world why the United States had to oppose the USSR. Thus even in the same document, the administration pursued mutually exclusive strategies.

At the start of the Geneva meeting, Eisenhower called for “a new spirit that will make possible future solution of problems which are within our responsibilities.” The Geneva talks turned out to be a mixed bag for the administration. On the one hand, the summit temporarily eased the bellicose image the administration had projected since the 1952 election. Moscow’s rejection of Eisenhower’s “Open Skies” plan, which provided for mutual inspection of each country’s military establishment, seemed to belie Khrushchev’s


70. See Larson, Anatomy of Mistrust, pp. 49–57; and Evangelista, Unarmed Forces, p. 92.


contention that he wanted a peaceful world. On the other hand, the admin-
istration could not convince the Soviet leader to reunify Germany on Western
terms. Instead, Khrushchev agreed to a vague, non-binding, resolution calling
for the eventual reunification of Germany.

Each side believed it had triumphed over the other at Geneva, albeit for
different reasons. In a nationwide address, Eisenhower declared that the dif-
ference between democracy and Communism was as “wide and deep as the
gulf that lies between the concept of man made in the image of his God and
the concept of man as a mere instrument of the State.” Only in the latter half
of the speech did he strike a conciliatory note, arguing that “negotiations,” as
at Geneva, “can [not] be conducted with propaganda and threats and invective.” The bulk of the speech, however, was couched in the belligerent rheto-
ic of liberation.

The administration’s renewed rhetorical offensive angered Soviet leaders,
who assumed that the United States had recognized de facto Soviet hegemony
in Eastern Europe. Khrushchev accused Eisenhower of violating the spirit of
Geneva. The idea of “the Spirit of Geneva,” like other symbolic images such
as isolationism, containment, and coexistence, in actuality represented a ªght
over rhetoric. Each side construed the “Spirit of Geneva” according to its own
interests. Washington interpreted it as the reunification of Germany on West-
ern terms, the defense of the UN Charter, and the end of Soviet domination
in Eastern Europe. For Moscow, it meant public acceptance of parity between
the two superpowers, acceptance of the division of Germany, and recognition
of a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. The Eisenhower adminis-
tration in its private deliberations had in fact largely accepted the Soviet ver-

74. Many historians have argued that Eisenhower knew his Open Skies proposal would never be toler-
ated by the Soviet Union. See esp. Robert Dallek, The American Style of Foreign Policy: Cultural Politics
and Foreign Affairs (New York: Knopf, 1983), p. 198. Dallek also contends that the proposal offered
an easy way for Eisenhower to claim America’s “moral superiority” over the Soviet Union without
committing the United States to anything concrete.
pp. 390–394.
76. See Vladislav Zubok, Soviet Foreign Policy Aims at the Geneva Conference, 1955,” in Bischof
and Dockrill, eds., Cold War Respipe, pp. 55–74. Zubok claims that Soviet leaders, especially Khrush-
chev, saw the Geneva Conference as a crucial psychological success because they had forced the United
States to agree to the meeting as equal partners and had not allowed themselves to be intimidated.
Zubok also highlights the domestic divisions between Khrushchev, Molotov, and Malenkov as the
three struggled for political supremacy.
77. “Radio and Television Address to the American People on the Geneva Conference,” 25 July 1955,
Eisenhower Papers 1955, pp. 727, 728. See also “Address at the Annual Convention of the American
Bar Association,” 24 August 1955, Eisenhower Papers 1955, p. 808. Eisenhower declared that in the
wake of the Geneva Conference, “the domination of captive countries cannot longer be justified by
any claim that this is needed for purposes of security.”
864, p. 84. Hagerty himself quoted Khrushchev’s criticism of the Christmas message.
sion, but it was unwilling to announce this publicly. The schizophrenic nature of U.S. policy increased tensions between the superpowers.

**The 1956 Hungarian Revolution and the Hollowness of Liberation**

In his 1956 State of the Union address, Eisenhower restated his view that the USSR had squandered a real chance for peace in the wake of Geneva by dragging its feet on German reunification and failing to restore independence to the countries of the Soviet bloc. He described Eastern Europe as a region in which “grave injustices are still uncorrected. We must not, by any sanction of ours, help to perpetuate these wrongs.” Less than a week later, however, the administration again secretly rejected military liberation as a viable goal, and it did so even as it vowed to meet with exile groups and promote “peaceful” liberation.

Events in Eastern Europe in 1956 again exposed Washington’s inability to reconcile its public call for liberation with its confidential decision to avoid a direct clash with Moscow. In a secret speech at the 20th Soviet Party Congress in February 1956, Khrushchev denounced many of the crimes committed by Stalin in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. He promised a new relationship with the Warsaw Pact countries and seemed open to the notion that different countries could take different paths to Communism. But the rapid growth of unrest in Poland and Hungary in the summer and fall of 1956 tested the limits of Khrushchev’s willingness to move further with “de-Stalinization.”

R. Craig Nation has described the secret speech as “dovish” because Khrushchev rejected the inevitability of war between capitalism and socialism. Nation also asserts that Khrushchev’s doctrine of peaceful coexistence reshaped Soviet foreign policy and could not be “designated a temporary tactical expedient.” The Eisenhower administration confidentially agreed with this assessment. The CIA noted the correlation between “the significance of nuclear weapons” and this “policy shift.”

however, the administration publicly dismissed Khrushchev’s speech as a tactical ploy.82 Later in the spring, the Hungarian National Council, an exile group, reacted positively to a statement by Eisenhower endorsing freedom for Eastern Europe.83 Meanwhile, U.S. diplomats in Eastern Europe informed the State Department that liberation policy still resonated and was taken seriously in the bloc countries.84

In May 1956, student unrest in Czechoslovakia was quickly and quietly suppressed.85 But in June a violent workers’ rebellion in the western Polish city of Poznań made headlines around the world. Although administration officials were impressed by the overwhelming “anti-Communist attitude of the great majority of the population in each satellite,” they believed that “Soviet domination remains firm.” The president and his aides recognized the importance of nationalism and the “real and growing split in most satellite parties between those amenable to close Soviet control and the ‘national Communists,’” but they saw no real chance of liberation unless a maverick leader like Yugoslavia’s Josip Broz Tito took power in one of the other East European countries.86

In October 1956, however, a concrete chance for liberation suddenly emerged when the Communist nationalist Władysław Gomułka returned to power in Poland and called for the withdrawal of Marshal Konstantin Rokossovskii and other Soviet commanders from the Polish army. (Rokossovskii, a Soviet officer, had been sent to Poland by Stalin in 1949 to serve as national defense minister and commander-in-chief of the Polish


83. “Telegram from Mr. Bela Varg to President Eisenhower,” 25 April 1956, in DDE Library, General File, Foreign Countries and Foreign Affairs, Box 814, Folder 1, White House Central Files. Varg, reacting to Eisenhower’s speech, noted that “these words have strengthened the captive nations” and hoped that “through the ceaseless efforts of the Free World led by the United States they will regain their genuine freedom and self-determination.”

84. See “Telegram from the Embassy in Switzerland to the State Department,” 29 March 1956, in NA, RG 306, USIA, Box 35.


armed forces, as well as a member of the Polish Politburo.) Eisenhower publicly hailed this turn of events, insisting that “a people, like the Poles, who have once known freedom cannot be always deprived of their national independence, and of their personal liberty. That truth applies to every people in Eastern Europe.” He also declared that he would “never compromise the fundamental principle” of “self-government” in Eastern Europe.

Yet the administration secretly again vowed to “strike a public posture which is restrained and which makes clear that while we welcome greater Polish independence we are not seeking to gain a position of special influence for ourselves in Poland.” Even though Eisenhower and Dulles recognized the danger of publicly endorsing the changes in Poland, they never assured Moscow either publicly or privately of their true intentions.

Even as Poland was seeking greater independence from Moscow, a violent rebellion erupted in Hungary on 23 October. The popular leader Imre Nagy, who had been ousted in 1955 by his Stalinist rivals, returned as the head of the revolutionary government. After initially relying on Soviet troops to restore order, Nagy demanded their withdrawal on 28 October and promised free elections. Although officials in Washington were aware of the risks of creating false expectations, they did not prevent RFE from continuing to broadcast pro-independence propaganda into Hungary, including some statements that were distinctly inflammatory.


88. “Record of a Meeting of the Policy Planning Staff,” 23 October 1956,” in FRUS, 1955–1957, Vol. XXV, pp. 259–260. See also “Memorandum from Jacob D. Beam to Undersecretary Merchant,” 24 October 1956, in NA, RG 59, Misc Office Files of the Asst Secretaries of State, Box 23, Folder 1. Beam reiterated the administration’s unwillingness to publicize its desire to give Poland economic aid. Indeed, when Dulles had appeared on television two days earlier, he had ruled out U.S. military intervention if the Soviet Union were to invade Poland. See also Csaba Békés, “The 1956 Hungarian Revolution and World Politics,” Working Paper No. 16, Cold War International History Project, Washington, DC, September 1996, p. 15.

89. This development should not have surprised the administration. In the summer of 1955, the USIA had described how Soviet leaders had accused Nagy of “Titoism” for daring to question their directives. The report also noted that “the Hungarians were more rebellious (with the exception of the Poles and the Slovaks) than other peoples behind the Iron Curtain.” See “IRI Intelligence Bulletin,” 29 July 1955, in NA, RG 306, USIA, Office of Research, Intelligence Bulletins, Box 3.

90. “[W]e believe that broadcast of ‘Americana’ to Hungary during people’s rebellion and description of same as ‘riots’ counterproductive and should be immediately reexamined.” See “Telegram from the Director of the Munich Radio Center of the International Broadcasting Service (d’Alessandro) to the
When the NSC met on 26 October to discuss Hungary, Dulles recognized the dilemma faced by Soviet leaders as they decided whether to send in troops to crush the revolution or to allow events to continue unchecked. The latter option, Dulles pointed out, would threaten Soviet control over all of Eastern Europe. Eisenhower worried that the Soviet Union might “resort to very extreme measures and even precipitate global war” in order to reassert control over Hungary.91 Later that day, the British government privately advised the United States to limit its public support for the Hungarians, for fear of provoking “needless self-slaughter” and prodding Moscow to take “preventive actions in other satellites.” British officials also urged the U.S. administration to assure Khrushchev that the United States would not intervene in Hungary.92

By contrast, U.S. diplomats in Budapest and RFE/RL personnel in Munich lobbied the State Department to support the Hungarian revolutionaries. The Legation in Hungary argued that “both from [a] practical standpoint of maintaining stature and influence among captive peoples” and from the “moral responsibility to stand behind past official statements implying support for captive peoples,” the administration must “use all of its influence to mobilize world opinion against [the] ruthless suppression of Hungarian insurgents by Soviet power.” Radio Liberty staff in Munich reported being “demoralized and bitterly unhappy” that they had been ordered to restrict their broadcasts “to pure news output and a ‘second hand’ press commentary.” They “unanimously” believed that RL had become “a ‘neutral information bureau’ at the very time when Iron Curtain events provide [the] first real op-


91. “Memorandum of Discussion at the 301st Meeting of the National Security Council,” 26 October 1956, in DDE Library, AWF, NSC Series, Box 8. Mark Kramer has demonstrated that, by 31 October, Khrushchev and all the other members of the Soviet Presidium except Anastas Mikoyan and Maksim Saburov favored large-scale military action. Saburov eventually came around in support of the invasion, but, as Kramer points out, Mikoyan continued to oppose it. Kramer shows that Khrushchev’s rivals, especially Molotov, used the crisis to push for a decisive crackdown and to undercut Khrushchev’s position. See Kramer, “New Evidence on Soviet Decision-Making,” pp. 366–367. On the Hungarian government’s point of view, see Charles Gati, Hungary and the Soviet Bloc (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986), pp. 128–129. Gati argues that until the end of October, Nagy was aligned with the Soviet Union and was searching for a way to “reconcile Soviet power-political interests with those of a new—somewhat independent and somewhat pluralistic—Hungarian political order.” Nagy became a committed Hungarian revolutionary only when Soviet troops secretly reentered Hungary en masse on the night of 31 October.

92. “Telegram from the Embassy in the United Kingdom to the Department of State,” 26 October 1956, in FRUS, 1955–1957, Vol. XXV, pp. 303–304; and “Telegram from Secretary Dulles to Ambassador Bohlen,” 29 October 1956, in DDE Library, AWF, Box 7, October 1956, Folder 1, Dulles-Herter Series. Dulles reiterated that “we do not look upon these nations as potential military allies. Bohlen should make this stance clear to the Soviets.”
portunity to justify its raison d’être.” Nothing could better illustrate how the gap between the administration’s public rhetoric and its refusal to act had confused its own people. Five days later, the NSC again categorically rejected military action. But this decision was not publicly disclosed; nor did the White House inform U.S., NATO, or Soviet diplomats.

Imre Nagy had been heartened by the initial Soviet troop withdrawal from Budapest, and on 30 October he indicated to Soviet envoys in Budapest that he was considering pulling Hungary out of the Warsaw Pact. In a radio address two days later, he announced Hungary’s withdrawal from the Pact and declared Hungarian neutrality. The Eisenhower administration could barely contain its glee. Allen Dulles claimed that “what had occurred there was a miracle. . . . Because of the power of public opinion, armed force could not be effectively used.” RFE, for its part, continued to transmit broadcasts urging the Hungarians to resist. Publicly, Eisenhower stated that

it has been consistent United States policy . . . to seek to end this situation. We have sought to fulfill the wartime pledge of the United Nations that these countries, overrun by wartime armies, would once again know sovereignty and self-government. We could not, of course, carry out this policy by resort to force. Such force would have been contrary both to the best interests of the Eastern European peoples and to the abiding principles of the United Nations. But we did help to keep alive the hope of these peoples for freedom.

On 4 November, Soviet troops moved forcefully to crush the Hungarian revolution. The Eisenhower administration, being preoccupied with the

95. Mark Kramer has argued that when Soviet leaders learned of Nagy’s intention to declare that Hungary would withdraw from the Warsaw Pact, it strongly influenced their decision on 31 October to invade Hungary. See Kramer, “New Evidence on Soviet Decision-Making,” pp. 369–370. He also argues that the Suez Crisis and Khrushchev’s failure to anticipate the rift between the United States on the one hand and the British and French on the other played a key role in the Soviet Union’s decision to take military action in Hungary.
96. See Borhi, “Rollback, Liberation, Containment, or Inaction?” pp. 107–109; and “Memorandum of Discussion at the 302nd Meeting of the National Security Council,” 1 November 1956, in DDE Library, AWF, NSC Series, Box 8.
98. For vivid descriptions of the Soviet invasion, see Békés, “The 1956 Hungarian Uprising and World Politics,” pp 24–25; Kramer, “New Evidence on Soviet Decision-Making,” pp. 376–377; and Borhi, “Rollback, Liberation, Containment, or Inaction?” pp. 103–106. For the view that the administration took the Suez Crisis more seriously than the Hungarian revolution, see Herman Finer, Dulles
Suez crisis at the time, merely condemned Soviet actions and expressed sympathy for the Hungarians. At an NSC meeting, the president underscored the dilemma he had been facing since the 1952 election. He described the failure of the Hungarian revolution as “a bitter pill for us to swallow...we say we are at the end of our patience, but what can we do that is really constructive? Should we break off diplomatic relations with the USSR? What would be gained by this action?” If the administration had been willing to abandon rhetorical diplomacy and publicly renounce its support for liberation, this type of soul-searching might not have been necessary. But under the circumstances of the time, such a stance would have entailed great political costs both domestically and internationally.

**Conclusions**

Did liberation policy help spur the Hungarians to revolt? On the one hand, Békés argues that the United States bears only indirect responsibility for promoting the revolution. He maintains that the Hungarian revolution was not even in America’s interest because it threatened the administration’s pursuit of “détente.” This is true if one analyzes only the administration’s confidential deliberations. Eisenhower and Dulles had indeed secretly ruled out liberation in favor of peaceful accommodation with the Soviet Union and efforts to weaken Moscow’s hold on Eastern Europe through covert action, propaganda, and psychological warfare. But Békés does not take into account the power of the administration’s public rhetoric supporting liberation.

The available evidence indicates that reckless U.S. propaganda may have contributed to the revolt. A 28 October telegram from the U.S. embassy in Austria to the State Department claimed that the Austrians were convinced that RFE and balloon flights over Hungary, which dropped leaflets calling for revolution, had “incited the Hungarians to action.” The Austrians also blamed the United States for not taking meaningful action after having urged the Hungarians to rebel. In addition, the embassy reported that “hundreds,
if not thousands of Hungarians with whom we have had direct or indirect contact” were angry at the administration for not acting. They specifically mentioned the numerous “radio and balloon operations” that led Hungarians to believe “that we would be prepared to do more than we actually” did. Surveys of Hungarian refugees showed that although most did not believe that RFE had instigated the revolt, they did infer from the broadcasts that the United States would fight for them. István Bauer, who was twenty-two in 1956, later claimed that RFE broadcasts had expressed support for the rebellion. Bauer complained that the “Americans gave us nothing. We got chocolates, and that’s all.” General Lucius D. Clay, when asked whether RFE played any role in the revolution, conceded that “it may have. We did moderate our policies to some degree thereafter, because there was a general feeling that Radio Free Europe may have contributed to creating a revolt in which there would be no help from outside.”

Until November 1956, many U.S. officials outside the top policymaking circles had been convinced that the administration was committed to military liberation. When Eisenhower told Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge that the United States “had always been against violent rebellion,” the president was “amazed” that Lodge believed otherwise. On 12 November, Eisenhower questioned why Europeans had assumed that liberation meant military intervention. “Peaceful” liberation had always been U.S. policy, he

102. See “Telegram from the Embassy in Austria to the Department of State,” 11 November 1956, in FRUS, 1955–1957, Vol. XXV, p. 181. For the official rebuttal to charges that the administration incited the revolt, see “Notes of the 46th Meeting of the Special Committee on Soviet and Related Problems,” 13 November 1956, in FRUS, 1955–1957, Vol. XXV, pp. 436–440. “RFE has never incited the Eastern European populace to any action on the basis that such assistance might be forthcoming.” See also “Oral Interview with Charles Bohlen,” in DDE Library, Columbia University Oral History Project (CUOHP), OH-136, p. 11. On Hungary, “we didn’t have any force” to achieve liberation. But the invasion “didn’t come as a surprise.” He knew that despite what Bulganin said about pursuing negotiations with the Hungarians, “as an American, I knew perfectly well that we were helpless in Hungary.” Nation, in Black Earth, Red Star, p. 223, argues that the Soviet repression was inevitable because it served as “a reinforcement to Cold War structures.”


105. “Telephone Call from President Eisenhower to Undersecretary of State Hoover,” 8 November 1956, in DDE Library, AWF, International Series, Hungary, Box 28, Folder 1. Eisenhower “told Hoover also of the . . . erroneous feeling in [the] U.N.: that we more or less egged the Hungarians on into this mess.” See also “Telegram from the Legation in Hungary to the Department of State,” 19 November 1956, in FRUS, 1955–1957, Vol. XXV, p. 472. The legation reported that Béla Kovacs, the Secretary General of the Hungarian Smallholder Party, “expressed opinion that US radio misled Hungarian people into believing they could count on effective US aid in event of trouble with Soviets. Kovacs also said official pronouncements from highest US Government levels had also lent toward creating this illusion . . . there is no question that our past radio propaganda is at present source of much embarrassment to us.”
explained. Dulles meanwhile described the Soviet move against Hungary as “a defeat and setback for the Soviet rulers.”

Supporters of liberation were stunned by the administration’s lack of response and accused Washington of betraying the Hungarians. The National Review editorialized that the administration had “re-enact[ed] the story of Tantalus” by holding out the false hope that the failed revolution would bring freedom to Eastern Europe. To gauge the effect of liberation policy on Hungarians, the USIA commissioned a series of opinion surveys among Hungarian refugees during the winter of 1956–1957. In one survey, conducted approximately three weeks after the Soviet invasion, 82 percent of the respondents said they listened to Western radio stations, especially RFE. Most refugees overwhelmingly called for either UN intervention or some sort of military aid to the Hungarian rebels even though they did not expect the United States to go to war on their behalf.

A second survey of 1,000 Hungarian refugees asked whether U.S. radio broadcasts influenced Hungarians’ decisions to rebel against Moscow. Most said “the example of Poland and not alleged encouragement from the West primarily motivated the Hungarians.” But 75 percent of the respondents said they had expected military aid from the United States, and “somewhat more than half . . . believed American broadcasts gave the impression that the [United States] was willing to fight if necessary to save Hungary.” A third survey of 800 Hungarian refugees in early 1957 provided some disturbing answers for the administration. Although 85 percent of the refugees said they were not incited to revolt by outside influences, 50 percent claimed that be-

106. “Several times during the conversation, the President expressed concern over reports which seem to indicate that many European people had the impression that the [United States] had incited the Hungarians to revolt . . . he said it has never been our policy to incite captive peoples to insurrection, but we have always stood ready to assist in their peaceful liberation through giving strong moral support to the captive peoples.” “Memorandum from Douglas MacArthur to Acting Secretary of State Herbert Hoover Jr.,” 13 November 1956, in FRUS, 1955–1957, Vol. XXV, p. 435.


110. “Telegram from USIA Vienna to USIA Washington,” 17 January 1957, in NA, RG 306, USIA, Refugee Radio Listening Attitudes, HU 5602, 7 Hungary, December 1956–January 1957, Box 39. See also Borhi, “Rollback, Liberation, Containment, or Inaction?” pp. 82, 108. Borhi argues that “some of the insurgents arrested by the Hungarian regime for conspiracy told their interrogators that they were inspired by Western broadcasts.”

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fore they began fighting they had believed they would receive military aid from the West. Similarly, 87 percent said they had expected aid after the Soviet invasion on 4 November. Béla Király, a high-ranking Hungarian military officer who was forced to flee to the West in late 1956, called the U.S. radio broadcasts “irresponsible.”

U.S. policymakers were the only ones who believed that liberation was always meant to be peaceful. The audiences to whom Eisenhower and Dulles were appealing—conservative Republicans, East European émigrés, and indigenous resistance leaders, including some Hungarian revolutionaries—took the administration’s words at face value. Because public renunciation of liberation would have been politically risky for an administration ostensibly committed to a dynamic foreign policy, Eisenhower and Dulles kept their true policy secret. The reality was that Eisenhower never intended to go to war against the Soviet Union to free the East Europeans. Liberation was no more than a complex, problematic, and risky strategy of rhetorical diplomacy—a strategy at odds with the administration’s own desire to minimize the likelihood of bloodshed.

**Note**

The views presented here are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of State or the U.S. government.

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