Panel: “Cold War Politics”

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Title: “Khrushchev’s Yugoslavia Gambit and the Forces Compelling His Decision”
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Abstract

The transition from the rule of Joseph Stalin to the rule of Nikita Khrushchev was one of great change for the Soviet Union. This was true of the USSR’s internal politics and policies as well as the leadership’s approach to foreign relations. Khrushchev’s new policies towards the Eastern Bloc were a practical departure from Stalin’s approach, and yet they were also a continuation of the earlier regime’s primary goal, which was domination of the Bloc. The primary question was about how such domination would be achieved. For Stalin, it was a matter of imposition of his will on the communist states of the Bloc. Khrushchev often took a more nuanced approach, although he was in no way opposed to the use of force or intimidation when and where it served his purposes. He was, however, more willing to prod and cajole than Stalin had been, and the greatest example of this was the relationship between the USSR and Yugoslavia during Khrushchev’s early reign, a relationship that had previously been weakened, nearly to the point of destruction, but earlier Stalinist policies.

The split between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia had its origins specifically in Stalin’s foreign policy and in the shattered dreams that he represented for Yugoslav communists. After his death, virtually anyone could have established better relations with Yugoslavia that Stalin had; he was anathema to Tito and other prominent members of Yugoslavia’s ruling party. Even more importantly, Yugoslavia’s leadership was entirely willing to accept a peace proposition the moment they learned that Stalin had died and in fact anticipated that one would come. The politics of the power struggle precipitated by Stalin’s death also drove Khrushchev towards rapprochement; unless he wanted to support Molotov in his greatest strength, there was no option but to treat Tito as something other than an enemy. Unrest in the Eastern Bloc also forced Khrushchev’s hand, both in a general sense and on the occasions of very specific crises, like the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the Soviet Union was now in a position to truly make itself felt in the Cold War and the game of superpower politics during the mid-1950’s, the beginning of Khrushchev’s reign. Courting Yugoslavia presented both the opportunity to snub an important U.S. ally in the Soviet’s sphere of influence as well as the potential to gain allies in the Third World to help tip the balance of power in the Soviet Union’s favor. As a neighboring state, Yugoslavia simply had too much to offer to not attempt reconciliation. In consideration of all of these factors, Khrushchev’s greatest contribution was his recognition of the opportunities presented him and the forces working upon him.
Bibliography


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