



Johanna Granville. *The First Domino: International Decision Making during the Hungarian Crisis of 1956.* College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004. xx + 323 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58544-298-0.



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Does Knowing All Explain Anything? The Virtues and Limits of the New Cold War History

Of all the expectations accompanying the New Cold War History, the most exciting has been the hope that newly opened archives in the states of the former Soviet bloc will modify our understanding of previously familiar events. Such information from the “other side” can encourage scholars to revisit old debates, leading to radical re-evaluation of long-held positions, and perhaps even the ultimate resolution of controversial questions. After decades in which most works on Eastern Europe included some version of the caveat, “this is all we can know until the archives are opened,” many hope that we are entering a new era in which we will know all that can be known about the past, and that knowing all will help us, to paraphrase an old French aphorism, to explain, if not excuse, everything.

Johanna Granville’s study of the 1956 Hungarian crisis offers a very good example of the high hopes that can be inspired by this new scholarship, even as it also shows how far we are from being able to understand how this new information will translate into new understandings of the Cold War as a broader phenomenon. The issue here is not whether new information can shed new light

on events (that is certainly both true and very welcome), but rather what sense scholars and their students should make of the new perspectives that emerge.

Before we get to that conceptual puzzle, however, we should begin by discussing the positive qualities of this impressively researched, well-organized, and clearly written work. Granville’s book is the product of truly stunning multi-archival research that “lives up to the hype” associated with the New Cold War History. Simply learning the notoriously complicated Hungarian language would have been impressive enough, but Granville goes even further, making intense use not only of Hungarian archives, but also Russian, Polish, German, Austrian, and American documents to create a detailed reconstruction of the 1956 crisis within the Soviet bloc; a crisis that found its most extreme expression in Hungary but was by no means limited to that unhappy land. All scholars can learn a lesson from Granville’s commitment to language study and its importance in writing real international history.

This wide reading allows a much more detailed and nuanced interpretation of the Hungarian situation and

its relationship to the larger crises of 1956 than previous scholarship could provide. Most importantly, Granville shows that, contrary to many assumptions made at the time and since, neither the Soviet leadership under Nikita Khrushchev, nor the Hungarians, nor (least of all) the Americans were completely in control of events during that turbulent fall. Her research unearths a great deal of conflict beneath the familiar story. One especially interesting element of Granville's work is her dissection of the complex relationship between Imre Nagy's rebellious Hungary and Tito's Yugoslavia. Although one might expect that Tito would embrace Nagy as a fellow "national communist," Granville reveals that Tito's concerns about possible nationalist "spillover" from Hungary into multiethnic Yugoslavia led him to cooperate with Khrushchev's plans for military action to crush the Hungarian revolt. Tito's later protests about the treatment of Nagy and his comrades after they sought refuge in the Yugoslav embassy in Budapest, Granville argues, were an example of Yugoslav efforts to maintain their independent image, but should not obscure the ambiguity of Tito's actions leading up to the Soviet invasion, which helped encourage Khrushchev to intervene (pp. 100-112). The Yugoslav connection is itself only part of Granville's larger discussion of relations between the Soviet Union and its satellites. She convincingly shows that Soviet decisions had to emerge from a complicated landscape that included rivalries among the satellites, as well as within the fractious Soviet leadership. Thus Khrushchev could never isolate his decision making on Hungary from outside concerns, be they the situation in Poland, relations with Tito, the ongoing problems along the Suez Canal, or concerns about rising Chinese challenges to Soviet control of the Communist world. A final chapter on American policy shows that the Eisenhower administration pursued no coherent policy either, contradicting both the hopes of many Hungarians and the fear of many Soviets and other Communists for American support of "roll back." Ultimately, Granville suggests that issues of ideology were subordinated to the practical problems of managing crises. As a result, leaders in Moscow, Budapest, and elsewhere were not consistent or determined on a single course. Each hesitated at key moments, and many contradicted themselves, often operating on incomplete or inaccurate assessments of the larger situation and their own capabilities.

That assessment lies at the heart of Granville's argument, which emphasizes the significance of misperception in policy making. To that end she makes explicit and extensive use in her introduction and conclusion of

the theories of Robert Jervis, especially his book, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, 1976). This use of international relations theory is one of the strengths and weaknesses of the book from a historian's perspective. It certainly helps to provide an overall frame for the book, but the level of abstraction of Jervis's analysis, which includes such common human failings as misunderstanding one's own capabilities, assuming that the other side is more unified and determined than oneself, or overestimating one's own centrality to events, does not add significantly to this reader's overall impression of the work. Few historians who study international affairs need elaborate theoretical frameworks to appreciate the importance of individual (mis)perceptions among leaders in making decisions, good or bad. Granville's diligent archival work, so admirable in itself, can stand on its own. More important should be the search for the roots of those misperceptions, which brings us back to the conceptual problem discussed at the beginning of this review.

Her use of Jervis reflects Granville's ultimate problem in trying to decide what larger conclusions readers should draw from all this new information. As the foreword from noted Soviet specialist Raymond Garthoff argues, the end of the Cold War allows scholars to view the entire period as a whole, a new perspective that, enriched by the access to formerly closed archives, "makes possible a more fruitful understanding of its nature" (p. ix). This sentiment is shared by virtually all Cold War specialists, but in its simple form it begs an even bigger question: how does one best get at the nature of that conflict? For Garthoff, who has never been comfortable with the traditional anticommunist emphasis on ideology, it means in this case "overcoming the contemporary Western view of [intra-Eastern relations] as monolithic and directed from Moscow." That is not completely satisfying. It should of course be the desire of all scholars to show how much more complicated historical reality was than the often simplified politically-tinted contemporary views would allow (while paradoxically also trying to make that complexity easier to understand, a different philosophical puzzle altogether), but it is not immediately clear how new such a perspective is. After all, a generation of scholars (including Raymond Garthoff himself) has argued against the notion of a monolithic Soviet Bloc for almost three decades, long before any new archives were opened. To say that the Cold War was primarily a political struggle like previous political struggles raises questions about the role that ideological motivations ever played in a conflict that, after all, dragged on

for decades. To do that would require scholars to link politics and ideas in ways that traditional international relations scholarship, even as solid a work as Johanna Granville's, rarely accomplishes.

Although Granville tries to fit her analysis of the Hungarian crisis into the larger history of the Cold War, or of Eastern Europe, her conclusions are tentative and problematic. As her title indicates, the Hungarian uprising is, for her, "perhaps the first major 'domino' in a process that resulted ultimately in the Soviet Union's loss of hegemony over Eastern Europe in 1989" (p. xv). This is a very debatable proposition on several fronts. If by "first domino," we mean that the crisis demonstrated for the first time that Soviet domination of Eastern Europe depended more on Red Army tanks than the will of the people, then Hungary must come in at least second place, behind the 1953 uprising in the GDR. Certainly the 1956 revolt, as Granville asserts, occupied a central role in Hungarian national memory (alongside, in a delightful example of the need for a broader historical consciousness than that held by most Americans, the 1849 Tsarist Russian intervention to crush the secessionist Hungarian Republic led by Lajos Kossuth), and the reburial of Imre Nagy in 1988 was a major milestone toward the Revolution of 1989. Nevertheless, a study that focuses so heavily on the nuts and bolts of diplomatic decision making, and ends in 1958, appears ill suited to prove a connection with events three decades later. If Hungary 1956 was the first domino, it took quite a long time to fall. Observers at the time, and in the thirty years that followed, agreed that the Soviet invasion and its aftermath stabilized the Eastern Bloc. Whether that stability was something to be welcomed, bemoaned, or simply accepted, remained a matter of debate, and indeed should inspire further research into the political and intellectual accommodations that followed. Nevertheless, the stabilization of communism in Central Europe was what later advocates of détente (who would have blanched at the idea that the invasion proved the illegitimacy of Soviet power anyway) liked to call a "political reality" that contemporary historians cannot wish away. Knowing that the Soviet empire collapsed in 1989 may console

historians who study these events that the victory of the Red Army in 1956 was not permanent, but that does not mean one can simply skip over the intervening decades, as though the ultimate conclusion was always foreseeable. In this case (and also in some recent work on the 1953 uprising in the GDR), the *New Cold War History* skirts dangerously close to the same teleological fallacies that already plague the study of more distant historical events, from the defeat of the Spanish Armada to the rise of Nazism.

Granville's attempt to relate her analysis to the issue of responsibility for the Cold War is on firmer, though unspectacular, ground. Admitting that she has little space to settle the debate, her last word is: "In short, multiarchival research tends to confirm the postrevisionists' theory about the Cold War: it was everyone's fault and no one's fault. It resulted from the emerging bipolar structure of the international system, a power vacuum in the center of Europe, and spiraling misconceptions." (p. 214) That is an important corrective to simplistic assumptions about superpower omnipotence, but it does not exactly break new ground. It also reveals a failing of much recent Cold War history, new or otherwise. This sort of shoulder shrugging, which points to abstract forces without addressing the role of individuals and their ideas in shaping those forces, may help us understand what happened, but brings us no closer to appreciating why things happened the way that they did.

One should of course not expect one book to do too much. Granville's work should become an important resource for anyone who wants to understand the Hungarian uprising and its immediate context. That its conclusions fail to satisfy is not an indictment of Granville's work, but a reminder that opening new archives is just the first step in the process of historical understanding. Despite the continuing excitement about new information, it is sobering to see that, after such an impressive marshaling of heretofore-unknown information, the best we can say is that a complex story is more complex than we used to think. Far from allowing us to understand all, what we now know only makes us more aware of how much we still have to learn.

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