
URL: http://tiny.cc/AR738

Review by Jonathan Hunt, University of Southampton

For decades, the speech at which President Dwight D. Eisenhower proposed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was more famous than the agency itself. The IAEA came into existence in 1957; it became a household name in the 1990s, when its inspectors crisscrossed Iraq in search of Saddam Hussein’s defunct nuclear-weapon program, culminating in IAEA Director Hans Blix’s failure to deflect the George W. Bush administration from a preventive war waged on the shaky grounds that Baghdad was flouting its commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Among Eisenhower’s speeches, only his valedictory forewarning the pernicious influence of a military-industrial complex in American life ranked alongside “Atoms for Peace.” Those gathered in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly Hall met with thunderous applause his peroration: “the United States pledges before you, and therefore before the world, its determination to help solve the fearful atomic dilemma—to devote its entire heart and mind to find the way by which the miraculous inventiveness of man shall not be dedicated to his death, but consecrated to his life.”

That dilemma (and Eisenhower’s failure to grasp its true dimensions) is the subject of David Holloway’s new article, which rewrites the IAEA’s origin story. It joins a surge of new work on the agency: a roundtable in H-Diplo last year, Mara Drogan on the U.S. Atomic Energy Agency’s follow-through, the new IAEA History Research Project that Elisabeth Roehrlich directs at the University of Vienna, and two international

---

conferences on IAEA history at its headquarters in Vienna, Austria (the article under review was drafted for the first colloquium in 2012).\(^2\)

When Eisenhower called for the creation of an international fuel ‘bank’ in 1953, the United States was the established world leader in nuclear science and technology. And although it was clear that other states would need to be ‘principally involved,’ only one was mentioned by name; with Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin dead, “the Soviet Union must, of course, be one.”

The ‘bank’ would accomplish four tasks: facilitate peaceful research worldwide; reduce military stockpiles of enriched uranium among states with nuclear stockpiles; bring nuclear science and technology to the developing world; and generate momentum for international nuclear diplomacy that had been stuck in neutral since 1946. One motive was left unsaid: counteract an emergent taboo against the use of nuclear weapons then threatening the credibility of the U.S. nuclear arsenal and Eisenhower and U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles’s quick-trigger doctrine of massive retaliation.

Holloway is the foremost historian of the Soviet nuclear program (his *Stalin and the Bomb* is the authoritative account).\(^3\) Recently, he has branched out to evaluate how distrust between Washington and Moscow eventually gave way to dialogue, to common knowledge, and finally to cooperation on such issues as non-proliferation and such concepts as strategic stability, even as their arsenals reached monstrous proportions.

Here Holloway looks at “the earliest example of formal US-Soviet cooperation in the nuclear field,” and its effects on the Agency’s Statute and its relationship with its member states. (3) He begins with the post-war failure of American and Soviet proposals for the international control of atomic energy. The U.S. Baruch Plan set out a UN Atomic Energy Commission to own uranium mines, fissionable materials, and nuclear plants worldwide; an inspection regime whose imposition would precede disarmament; and the nullification of UN Security Council vetoes (including that held by the USSR) if inspections were thwarted, or evidence of weapons work revealed. The Soviet plan echoed earlier bans on heinous weapons, namely the 1925 Geneva Protocol outlawing the use of chemical and bacteriological weapons, with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko’s proposal going one step further by barring the mere possession of these new weapons of mass destruction.

Historians tend to dismiss the Gromyko plan, yet Holloway shows that Soviet officials were open to some forms of international control in 1947. They wanted states to control their own facilities on which periodic inspections would be allowed on a case-by-case basis. Yet the devil was in the details, and the window for international solutions closed shut in 1948 as distrust between the superpowers grew insurmountable.


Eisenhower’s address five years later, with its more modest vision of international regulation and cooperation, found a “sceptical, but not dismissive” (6) audience in Moscow, where the world’s first civilian nuclear power plant went online that year. New Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov was quick to point out, however, that the proposals would do little to avert nuclear war or slow the arms race. He pressed Dulles on the most intractable problem: most nuclear reactors were dual-use, with military as well as civilian value.

It is striking to learn that neither Molotov nor Dulles understood exactly what this meant. Soviet scientists had briefed Molotov while U.S. Special Assistant for Atomic Energy Affairs Gerard Smith had to explain to Dulles the relative ease of tweaking power plants to yield weapon-grade plutonium, uranium-233, or tritium. Holloway maintains that Soviet advisors were worried about the existing states with nuclear weapons—the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom—rather than states then lacking them. While scholars such as Matthew Fuhrmann, Matthew Kroenig, and Joseph Pilat claim that Atoms for Peace abetted widespread nuclear proliferation, at the time there were surprisingly few misgivings.4

Moscow nonetheless signalled its intent to play ball. At the Geneva four-power summit in July 1955, the Soviet Union made a small donation of fissionable material as well as moves towards engagement. Its experts met with their foreign counterparts to think up solutions to the dual-use problem. And its officials joined those from eleven other states in Washington the following spring, when the Soviets pushed for UN oversight, unconditional assistance, permanent status for communist powers, eligibility for the People’s Republic of China (which was then outside the UN), and due respect on the inspection issue for the “sovereign rights of states.” (12)

This forthcoming attitude belied disagreements within the Soviet government. The Ministry of Medium Machine Building (the deceptively named nuclear-weapon complex) warned about supercharging the U.S.-Soviet arms race, while the military was loath to reveal information about its lacklustre arsenal. The Department of International Organisations in the Foreign Ministry eventually prevailed. Since the IAEA would happen with or without Soviet approval, non-involvement would just serve to hand leadership over to the capitalist world.

At the ensuing 82-nation meeting in New York, Moscow’s diplomats resisted the intrusive safeguards preferred by the United States, which were akin to those Washington required for recipients of U.S. nuclear aid. This was for fear of speeding the production of fissile material as well as to curry favour with nonaligned India, Egypt, Iran, Syria, and Indonesia, who were dubious about international measures that smacked of colonialism. The resulting compromise stipulated without dictating foreign inspection, placing the IAEA at a disadvantage until the 1968 NPT tipped the balance further (but not fully) toward strict international oversight.

Holloway has filled a gap in the history of nuclear diplomacy, international institutions, and the Cold War. His story’s richness is evident even when his research beckons rather than resolves. Evidence that Soviet officials curried nonaligned favour is intriguing. To what extent did the United States and the Soviet Union eschew their usual disarmament games to cultivate Latin American, African, Asian, and the Middle Eastern elites? After all, by 1960 the United States and the Soviet Union were sending competing nuclear delegations to New Delhi. He also mentions that the Soviet decision in 1955 to aid nuclear programs in Eastern Europe and China piggy-backed on the decision to participate in the IAEA.

Was the arms race a less powerful driver of Soviet and American nuclear policy than historians have assumed? Today Atoms for Peace is easy to caricature (or condemn), yet during the early Cold War, nuclear science and technology—with their utopian promise of limitless energy and a glittering tomorrow—exemplified modernity. What Mara Drogan calls the “nuclear imperative” drove a techno-ideological competition akin to the space race, yet with greater exportability to a world being remade by decolonization (and with greater potential profits for titans of industry). Roehrlich has written of how developing nations fought “atomic colonialism” at the IAEA’s genesis. When the Second Geneva Conference on the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy launched on September 1, 1958, not only the scientific conference (the largest in history) drew crowds, but also the industrial pavilion, where industrial firms, mining interests, and national champions displayed their atomic wares, signalling the arrival of a global nuclear market, the form of whose governance still bedevil international security decades after Dulles stared at Molotov so uncomprehendingly.

Jonathan Hunt is a lecturer in modern global history at the University of Southampton. He is writing a book on nuclear non-proliferation as an idea, a strategy, and a myth from Hiroshima to the NPT.

© 2018 The Authors | Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License

---

