

Nov 04, 2016 by [Nicholas J. Cull](#)

1956 All That ... U. S. Public Diplomacy And Khrushchev's Secret Speech ^[1]

"[T]hrough the press section of USIS that the Communist parties themselves represented at the Moscow Congress have come to know one of the most serious and dramatic documents in the Communist literature of the world."

--Pietro Nenni, Secretary General, Italian Socialist Party, 1957

Given coincidence of the current on-going debate over the future of US public diplomacy and the fiftieth anniversary of Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin, it is a good moment to note the role that the organs of US public diplomacy played in heightening the impact of the speech around the world. The case is yet another set piece example of the importance of a solid investment in international communication, and more specifically inter-agency cooperation and sound direction from the top.

US public diplomacy was at this time the responsibility of the United States Information Agency. As of January 1956 USIA was approaching its third birthday. It had been created in August 1953 from elements of the State Department, wartime and Marshall Plan information apparatus to resolve a perceived crisis in U.S. international propaganda. The jewel in its crown was the shortwave radio station Voice of America. Other players in the field included Radio Liberation (later Radio Liberty) and Radio Free Europe, a group of stations staffed by émigrés and covertly funded by the CIA which aimed to serve as surrogates for free media in the Eastern bloc. The whole apparatus was overseen by the so-called Operations Coordinating Board of the National Security Council. Eisenhower took a personal interest in operations and conducted regular meetings with his USIA director, former-media executive Ted Streibert.

1956 began quietly enough for USIA. The agency had four key objectives for the year: 1) promoting the unity of the freed world as the "best chance to reduce the Communist threat without war." 2) Exposing local Communist parties as expressions of global "Red Colonialism" directed by the U.S.S.R. or People's Republic of China. 3) Communicating the message that: "The United States champions peace and progress through peaceful change" and 4) Atoms for Peace, a program by which the United States sought to disseminate nuclear technology for peaceful uses. But in the next few months, new and dramatic opportunities opened.

It began in secret, at midnight on 24-25 February 1956. In a seven-hour secret session speech to the Twentieth Communist Party Congress in Moscow, Communist Party General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev made a full and damning case against his predecessor Joseph Stalin. He denounced Stalin's cult of personality, his mismanagement of the economy, and legion brutalities. The U.S. ambassador in Moscow, Bohlen, picked up a rumor of the speech at a French embassy reception on 10 March. CIA director Allen Dulles briefed the NSC on its likely contents on 22 March. While the CIA began frantic attempts to get hold of the complete

text, the beginnings of a de-Stalinization campaign around Eastern bloc gave USIA more than enough material to exploit the growing crisis of faith in communism. Measures included the end of Cominform. In May the Operations Coordinating Board urged VOA and the USIA International Press Service to use broadcasts and un-attributed press articles to ridicule the Soviet campaign, emphasize its myriad contradictions, and generally "sow confusion and doubt." OCB hoped that the de-Stalinization campaign would unleash popular pressure for reduced military spending and increased political and economic reform.

By June the CIA had obtained a copy of the speech from Israeli intelligence. They passed it to the New York Times where it appeared on 5 June. Now the campaign began in earnest. In a circular message of 7 June, Streibert instructed USIS posts to argue: "We can believe [that the] present regime has repudiated Stalinism only when it supplants [the] denunciation [of] certain Stalin excesses by cessation [of] methods of Stalin[']s dictatorship." VOA broadcasts and USIS press releases gave maximum publicity to the story, including the text of Khrushchev's remarks and the reactions of leaders around the world to them (but avoided repeating any U.S. comment). As Eastern bloc sources remained utterly silent on the subject, the USIA's material had all the more impact. The Italian Socialist Party leader and Communist Party ally, Pietro Nenni remarked on the irony that "through the press section of USIS that the Communist parties themselves represented at the Moscow Congress have come to know one of the most serious and dramatic documents in the Communist literature of the world."

The changes in Eastern Europe were, initially, most pronounced in Poland where Khrushchev's speech caused the Secretary General of the Polish Communist Party, Bolesław Bierut, to drop dead with a heart attack. The new leader, Edward Ochab, announced a program of reform and the State Department began overtures towards cultural exchange. On 28 June pressure for further liberalization and anger at food shortages boiled over in riots in Poznań. Targets included a radio jamming station. USIA responded both by circulating eyewitness accounts of violent repression of the riots by Polish troops and revealing the secret arrival of Soviet food aid, hoping thereby to drive a wedge between the Kremlin and its own people, who knew their country had little to spare.

The Polish Crisis reached its climax that autumn. By the end of October, however, a new government headed by Władysław Gomułka had side-stepped a planned Soviet military intervention, restored a semblance of stability, and set Poland on a course towards idiosyncratically Polish communism rather than the Moscow dictated line. Although Gomułka's changes were few they included a greater openness to information from the West. In November 1956 the new government suspended its jamming of Voice of America, thereby saving a sum equivalent to \$17.5 million at 1956 values. Polish TV began to screen USIA programs, including a Report from America documentary on the presidential election of 1956. USIA had a new customer. The parallel developments in Hungary ended very differently, but Eastern Europe would never be quite the same again.

As historians and analysts look back on Khrushchev's speech it must be remembered that the machinery of U.S. overseas information played a vital role in spreading the news of this volte-face and ensuring that Eastern Europe dealt with its consequences not at the controlled pace preferred by Moscow but at a pace dictated by the reach of U.S. broadcasting and the spread of U.S. newspaper stories. It is a reminder that the Cold War may have been won for the free market media but it was not won by the free market media but by government funded work. At a time when such stalwarts of U.S. public diplomacy as VOA English language broadcasting are slated for liquidation it is a salutary lesson.

