A VISITOR FROM THE EAST

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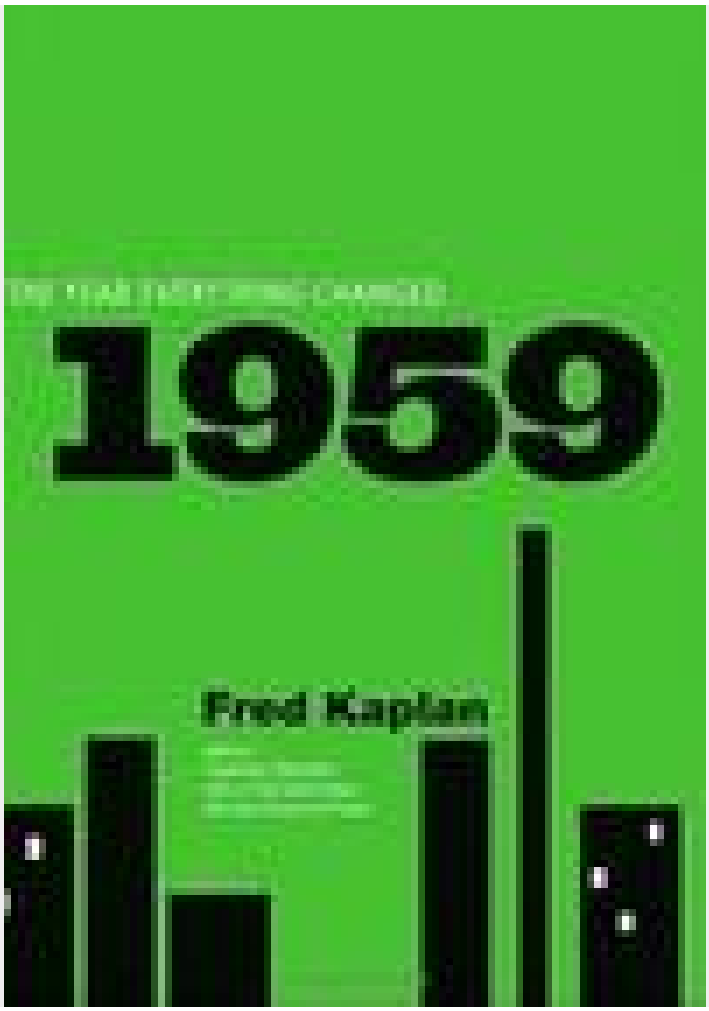

Category: Opinions

By Fred Kaplan

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The biggest novelty was the journey itself. No Soviet official of such high rank had ever set foot in the United States. Hardly less remarkable was how the trip came about. For the previous two years, Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet premier, had tried to arrange face-to-face talks with the American president, Dwight Eisenhower, to no avail. The two leaders had met four years earlier at the multinational disarmament conference in Geneva, but as Eisenhower himself complained, those sessions were by nature "sterile" set pieces, too large and formal to be useful. So, on December 17, 1958, with no advance notice, Mikoyan sent the U.S. Embassy in Moscow a routine request for a visa, explaining that he wanted to visit his friend Mikhail Manshikov, the Soviet ambassador in Washington.

Word of the impending trip quickly leaked out, and a dozen elite organizations across the United States—the Council on Foreign Relations, the Economic Club of New York, the Union Club of Cleveland, among others—cabled the embassy or the Kremlin, inviting Mikoyan to come talk at their forums while he was in the country. The New York Times reported that the trip had "aroused more excitement and anticipation . . . than any similar visit by a foreign dignitary in many years."

The visit caught Eisenhower off guard. His secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, scrambled to set up a meeting. The day before Mikoyan's arrival, Dulles, having just returned to Washington from a vacation in Jamaica, grumbled to reporters that the whole business was highly irregular—no

appointments had been made, no agenda had been set. "But," he said, "I will certainly try to see him."

Mikoyan wound up meeting twice with Dulles—once at the State Department toward the start of the trip and once more, at the White House with President Eisenhower, toward the end. In between, Mikoyan hit the road by motorcade and plane, trailed by a pack of reporters who covered his even move as they would a celebrity. Newspaper readers learned that while stopping for breakfast at a Howard Johnson's on the New Jersey Turnpike, Mikoyan chatted with the waitress and admired the Formica countertop. He strolled through downtown Washington, eyeing a bookstore window display of Boris Pasternak's Doctor Zhivago, the new best seller that was banned in his homeland. In Manhattan, he traipsed through the aisles of Macy's and lunched with Wall Street bankers. Touring a Hollywood studio, he kissed Jerry Lewis is on both cheeks and chatted with Sophia Loren.

Mikoyan delivered speeches to workers at Detroit Edison's River Rouge power plant, to furniture salesmen at the Chicago Merchandise Mart, and to industrialists in San Francisco— everywhere talking peace and drawing vigorous applause. He told rapt audiences that he now realized American capitalists didn't want war because it would destroy their factories. "We are all tired of the Cold War and would very much like to have a hot peace," he said to a crowd of auto executives at the prestigious Detroit Club. To a packed ballroom of 1,100 businessmen at New York's Waldorf-Astoria, he complained that the U.S. government had met Moscow's peace pro-posals with "a nyet, nyet, nyet," and pleaded, "Let us now make an effort to have a da, da, da in our relations." Harrison Salisbury, the New York Times's foreign correspondent, who rode along with the press pack, likened Mikoyan's tour to "a presidential campaign" and admired his "outstanding gift of public relations." His "blunt words, crackling wit, and unfailing good humor," Salisbury wrote, were sure to have a "deepening impact."

Mikoyan was the ideal emissary for this PR blitz. Dapper, soft-spoken, and self-assured, he seemed more like a European businessman than a Red apparatchik, and in a way, he was both. At sixty-three, he was an authentic "Old Bolshevik" who had joined Lenin's Communist party before the 1917 Revolution—one of just two such men still alive after the scourge of war and Stalin's purges.

Back in 1926, Mikoyan was named commissar for internal and external trade, and he spent the next three decades keeping the Soviet state financially afloat. He had traveled to the United States once before, in 1936, and came away impressed with the American worker's standard of living, even during the Great Depression. He was especially taken with such treats as Corn Flakes, Puffed Wheat, canned food, and, above all, ice cream. Upon his return to Moscow, he ordered the construction of a meat-canning plant to U.S. standards and set up Russia's first ice-cream factory with machinery bought from American companies. During World War II, he served as the Red Army's grand quartermaster, mobilizing the eastward retreat of factories from Moscow and Leningrad and processing delivery of Lend-Lease aid from America. After the war, he devised the economic policy that tightened Soviet control of Eastern Europe, wresting away the region's natural resources—including uranium from East Germany and Czechoslovakia—and setting up front-

companies that funneled the revenue to Moscow. Unlike any of Khrushchev's other men, he could speak the language of Western financiers, almost to the point of passing as one of them.

But Eisenhower's intelligence officials were suspicious. Mikoyan was also known to be loyal to the regime and hard as nails. Two years earlier, a Time magazine cover story about Mikoyan was aptly headlined "The Survivor." During the purges and show trials of the thirties, he was a member of Stalin's dinner-table clique. As the winds shifted after Stalin's death, so did he. At the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, where Khrushchev catalogued the late dictator's crimes, Mikoyan stood and delivered the first anti-Stalin speech. But the same year, when Khrushchev wanted to crush the rebellion in Hungary, he sent Mikoyan to oversee the crackdown. (It was for this reason that during his American trip, he was followed not only by cheering crowds yearning for peace, but also by Hungarian émigrés shouting, "Mass murderer!") In 1957, when a group of high-ranking party members conspired to oust Khrushchev, Mikoyan alone stood by his side. Khrushchev sent the conspirators off to small factories in the provinces; one of them, the experienced diplomat Vyacheslav Molotov, was named ambassador to Outer Mongolia. Mikoyan, on the other hand, was promoted to deputy premier. Khrushchev affectionately called him "my Armenian" and "my rug merchant." It was only natural that Mikoyan would be sent on this trip to America; there was literally no other choice.

To a degree that no one in the West understood at the time, Khrushchev was under tremendous pressure at the start of 1959. For all his bluster about churning out missiles, he had nothing; his ICBM program was in a rut; he was bluffing, in an attempt to deter an attack by the United States, which was encircling Soviet borders with military bases and deploying medium-range missiles within striking distance of Russian bases and cities.

Khrushchev was also panicked by a deepening crisis in Berlin. Berlin was the Cold War's hot spot, an unsettled anomaly of the armistice ending World War II. After their victory, the Allied powers divided Germany into four zones—separately occupied by the United States, England, France, and the USSR—corresponding to the position of each nation's army at the time of the Nazis' surrender. The Allies also divided the capital city of Berlin into four sectors. As East-West relations deteriorated into Cold War, Germany was divided into two nations—Communist-ruled East Germany in what had been the Soviet zone and West Germany as the merger of the three Western sectors. Berlin also remained divided, but the city was trapped a hundred miles inside East German territory. In 1948, Stalin ordered a blockade of all roads leading into West Berlin. The United States mounted a massive airlift, dropping and delivering packages of aid into the city for more than three hundred days. Finally, Stalin halted the blockade, and the four powers signed an agreement guaranteeing permanent Western access to the enclave.

Over the next decade, as West Germany grew free and prosperous while East Germany stagnated under the Soviet boot, Easterners immigrated to the West in droves, using West Berlin as the transit point. By the fall of 1958, East Germany had lost two million people, with continued losses of more

than ten thousand per month, including some of its best-educated youth.

In November, a desperate Khrushchev announced that, within six months, he would sign a "peace treaty" with East Germany, declaring the agreement of a decade earlier "null and void," and placing all of Berlin under East German sovereignty, which essentially meant Moscow's control. If the United States resisted and tried to retain free access to West Berlin, there would be war.

The launching of Lunik was deliberately timed. To Sergei Korolev, the visionary director of the Soviet Union's space program, it marked a grand first step toward exploring the moon, the planets, and the stars. To Khrushchev, the feat was meant to reinforce his great bluff—that he had an advanced missile program that could threaten the Americans and perhaps pressure them into surrendering Berlin.

Lunik was a massive capsule—seventeen feet long, eight feet in diameter, weighing over three thousand pounds and carrying nearly eight hundred additional pounds of instruments. During the previous fall and winter, the United States had tried three times to launch much smaller capsules toward the moon. None of them covered even half the distance before tumbling back to Earth.

Two days after Lunik went up, on the same day as Mikoyan's visit, the New York Times called the launch "unquestionably the greatest achievement of the Space Age" but also a sign "that the Russians have more powerful rockets and therefore greater capacity to deliver intercontinental ballistic missiles." The "big question as the New Year begins," the story concluded, was "whether Moscow will press her challenge to the point of war."

What no American knew—what remained secret until decades later, after the Soviet Union collapsed and the Kremlin's archives were opened—was that Khrushchev's threats against Berlin touched off a political battle inside the Kremlin and that Mikoyan, normally the premier's top ally, led the dissent.

Mikoyan had been in Germany during the Berlin blockade; he knew how much the Americans valued West Berlin as a banner of freedom and as a token of their commitment to the defense of Europe. He had never bought the Communist doctrine that deemed war with the capitalist nations "inevitable." More than this, he knew, as did his boss, that the Soviet Union was far from ready for a war with the United States. He feared that if Khrushchev pushed his ultimatum, there might really be a war and the outcome would be disastrous.

And so Mikoyan proposed a trip to America, as a vehicle for softening Khrushchev's provocation. Before leaving, he'd persuaded the premier to modify his Berlin policy, but the compromise was lame. Khrushchev agreed to let West Berlin exist as a "free city" but under East German auspices—that is, free in name only. When Mikoyan presented the notion to Eisenhower and Dulles, they replied that it still sounded like an ultimatum, and he must have known they were right. What Khrushchev allowed him to say would not be enough to undo the diplomatic damage. So, Mikoyan set out to alter the broader climate, taking to the American road and making his case—that the

Soviet Union did not want war, that the Cold War should end, and that the two nations should resume active trade—directly to the American people and their captains of industry.

On those terms, Mikoyan's mission was a stunning success. James Reston, the New York Times's diplomatic correspondent, wrote in his analysis of the Soviet visitor: "He brought nothing new as a solution to the Cold War. He changed nothing of substance. And yet his performance stands as a reminder that the old diplomacy with its rigid forms and courtesies is gone, and the new diplomacy, part tourism, part missionary zeal, part propaganda, is here to stay." Mikoyan pursued an approach, Reston wrote, for which Americans once had a knack—"avoiding old forms and adopting new."

At the start of his seventh year as president, Dwight Eisenhower— the supreme allied commander during World War II—was the very embodiment of old form. He was sixty-eight, up till then the oldest man ever to hold the office. He had recently suffered a heart attack. John Foster Dulles, his notoriously belligerent secretary of state, was terminally ill with cancer and would die before the summer. After prolonged postwar prosperity, the American economy was in recession; the country seemed rudderless, stagnant, its world position in decline, its people suffering a crisis of self-confidence. As a result, Eisenhower's Republican Party lost a record sixteen Senate seats in the 1958 midterm elections and forty-eight seats in the House, turning the Democrats' slight edge, which they had picked up just two years earlier, into an indomitable majority for the subsequent two decades.

Eisenhower was shrewder than he seemed; he had quietly stood up to Soviet pressures and staved off the war hawks in his own military and in Congress. But he was not only losing the global battle for image, he was failing to see that it had suddenly become a key battleground. The world had grown suddenly smaller, through the revolutions of jet travel and, more perilously, nuclear-tipped missiles capable of destroying civilizations in a matter of minutes. Foreign crises could no longer be the exclusive province of hidebound diplomats attending leisurely summits in neutral capitals. Crises had to be engaged, on the spot, in the moment, by and between the leaders who really had power.

At the end of 1959, John F. Kennedy, the young Democratic senator from Massachusetts, would launch his campaign for the presidency on a promise to "get the country moving again." This theme was no less crisply articulated at the start of the year, as the new session of Congress opened, by Lyndon Baines Johnson of Texas, the Senate majority leader, who was planning his own run for the White House. Emboldened by his party's swollen ranks, Johnson lambasted the Republican administration for a "deficit of vigor." a tendency to "exalt the static," and a failure to meet the challenges of "a new age," adding, "Free men can afford much," but they "can never afford the price of inertia."