

To what extent did N. Khrushchev succeed in his policy of de-Stalinisation?

A process that was established to neutralise and denounce the influence of Joseph Stalin, 'de-Stalinisation' sought to change the system of the Soviet Union. Nikita Khrushchev, the then Soviet leader after Stalin's death in March 1953, was clearly concerned about the 'cult of the personality' of Stalin and the effect it had. "At present, we are concerned with a question... with how the cult of the person of Stalin has been gradually growing, the cult which became at a certain specific stage the source of a whole series of exceedingly serious and grave perversions of Party principles, of Party democracy, of revolutionary legality..." (Sorrentino and Curcio, 1986: 97). Khrushchev delivered this speech in February 1956, on the day the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party was held. Indeed, this 'secret speech' "was a very incomplete exposure of Stalin's criminal activities... and blamed Stalin's shortcomings and criminal mistakes largely on personality defects..." (Churchward, 1987: 141). The speech allowed reforms into every aspect of a Soviet citizen's life, and was also considered a huge step forward in the period of the 'Khrushchev Thaw'. Nevertheless, whether Khrushchev's aims and policies were implemented successfully is crucial to consider as there were too many limitations. Indeed, due to these limitations the Soviet system did not encounter wholesome changes, but rather the Stalinist regime still had an influence in the Soviet Union during Khrushchev's rule.

It is essential we acknowledge the aims that were established in this process of de-Stalinisation, if we are to analyse how successful the policy was. With the death of Stalin, it was important to establish a system that would undermine the effects of the Stalinist regime. Khrushchev had stated that "Stalin abandoned the Leninist method of convincing and educating for one of administrative violence, mass repression and terror.' Hence it was necessary 'to eradicate the cult of the individual as alien to Marxism-Leninism'." (Lee, 2001: 323). Thus, it was necessary to return to the Leninist principles as it "had been a feature of every Soviet general secretary's attempts to consolidate power... Khrushchev... claimed to restore Leninist principles of "collective leadership" to the Soviet system..." (Valdez, 1993: 156). By returning to the Leninist principles, de-Stalinisation would attempt to move away from Stalin's tyrannical rule and aim to establish the authority of the Communist party.

However, if we refer to these Leninist principles, we can see that there were defaults which undermined the fundamental aspects of de-Stalinisation, and in essence, Khrushchev's aims. One of the limitations of de-Stalinisation was the system of Leninism itself as it had a link with Stalinism. "Stalinism was only Leninism written in large. Stalin set out in no new directions but, as soon as he was able, pushed Russia farther along the road... Stalin had completed the transformations that had been implicit in Lenin's revolution." (Wesson, 1978: 119). This demonstrates that Stalin's image and policies were impossible in being completely eradicated from the Soviet system, as were seen in his reforms. "Khrushchev's reforms were, in the main, limited to the adjusting of the system established by his predecessor. The basic structures and the apparatus forged by Stalin continued to rule..." (Chubarov, 2001: 141). Indeed, this was a sign of the failing nature of Khrushchev's aims.

Indeed, if we refer back to the quote by L.G Churchward, where he quoted the secret speech to be an 'incomplete exposure' of Stalin, we can see how Khrushchev himself was as much to blame for the political purges of 1930s. "Khrushchev's decision in 1956 to denounce Stalin... prompted as much by his desire to distance himself personally from the era of Stalin... Historian Dmitri Volkogonov reported that Khrushchev ensured that

any incriminating lists of those to be sentenced to prison or execution bearing Khrushchev's signature were quietly removed from the archives." (Rappaport, 1999: 147). This shows how Khrushchev, along with the other members of Stalin's Politburo, was linked to the repressions by Stalin, thus, Khrushchev limited himself in trying to wipe out the impact of Stalinism from the Soviet system, during his tenure. Furthermore, Khrushchev failed to relate to the "suffering of the country as a whole and deliberately avoided being critical of such issues as collectivisation, which were a fundamental part of the Soviet system..." (Rappaport, 1999: 147). This once again portrays the influential nature of Stalinism on the system.

Despite the process of de-Stalinisation ultimately failing to overhaul the Soviet system, there were positives to take out from the policy. Indeed, there were a number of successes and the speech in its own right was one of the achievements. The speech sparked an attempt on transition from Stalin's regime, with the concept of collective leadership a feature of the change. "Collective leadership did, however, get one memorable mention from Omsk party chief Kolushchinskii: 'Nobody will forget the enormous merits of and efforts of the indomitable Leninist... Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, in restoring Leninist collective leadership.'" (Tompson, 1995: 203). The notion of collective leadership was demonstrated by the fact that there was collective decision making, with the establishment of several meetings within the Politburo (Political Bureau) which was made up of top associates of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The fact that there was an 'anti-party group' in 1957, led by Malenkov, Molotov, Voroshilov and Kaganovich who were all top officials, which attempted to overthrow Khrushchev but failed, highlighted "the fact that they were allowed to survive was highly significant... indicating that Khrushchev wished to avoid a return to Stalinist terror." (Chubarov, 2001: 138). Khrushchev himself opposed political terror and despite the occurrence of political conflicts and opposition against him which eventually led to his retirement, "Khrushchev agreed to retire without a fuss. He in effect became a part of his own legacy when his successors brought no political or criminal charges against him..." (Combs, 2008: 165), thus he retired quite peacefully.

With the absence or move away from terror slowly becoming prominent, the living standard for a Soviet was changing for the best. The movement away from terror was becoming increasingly evident with the continuous denunciation of Stalin, as was evident at the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party. This eventually led to Stalin's body being removed from the mausoleum, as well as Stalingrad being renamed to Volgograd. "The removal of Stalinist symbolism was consistent... the removal of Stalin's body from the mausoleum on Red Square, the renaming of everything that had been named after Stalin... an attempt to absolve the party of any responsibility for the negative aspects... by placing the blame directly on Stalin personally." (Gill, 1998: 70). Furthermore, de-Stalinisation was clearly coming into effect as many prisoners were being released as "12-13 million people had ended up in camps, 4,000 people were released in 1953, 12,000 in 1954-5, and 7-8 million in 1956-7... Medvedev's most recent estimation comes down to a total number of 20 million rehabilitated persons." (van Goudoever, 1986: 45). This once again reinforces the effect of de-Stalinisation and Khrushchev's determination to completely move away from terror. The reversal of repression was more than likely considering Khrushchev condemned Stalin for using "force instead of persuasion... and that Stalin began "mass repressions." (Smith, 1996, 25).

This notion of leniency towards individuals within the Soviet Union continued with the loosening of censorships that were apparent during Stalin's rule, for example, censorships that were on arts, culture and science. This was evident as "Khrushchev also argued that the cult fostered *lakirovka*, or whitewashing, of reality in literature, the media, and the social sciences..." (Smith, 1996: 26). Indeed, the loosening of censorships, as well as the leniency towards prisoners, was known as the 'Khrushchev Thaw'. An example of the enforcement of the 'thaw' and indeed de-Stalinisation was the fact that Khrushchev allowed the publication of 'One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich'.

This was a novel written by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and it portrayed the devastating conditions suffered by citizens in the labour camps. Aleksandr himself had served in a labour camp, thus reflecting on his experience upon his release in 1957. Even though the publication criticised some top officials, it reinforced the thought that Khrushchev was indeed conforming to the idea of loosening censorship. Moreover, the idea of leniency towards science was evident during Khrushchev's era. "The post-Stalin years saw a new development in Soviet science... Medvedev points out several trends that developed during Khrushchev's tenure: 1. Attempts to copy foreign scientific and technological advances... 2... The most significant development in terms of Science was that the Academy of Sciences once again became concerned primarily with theoretical research..." (Rezun, 1996: 12). With this in mind, we can see why the Soviets had "dramatically overtaken the USA in the prestigious space race." (Pearson, 2002: 66).

Furthermore, Khrushchev sought to change the economical aspect and the foreign policy of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was undergoing economical difficulties in the areas of agriculture and industry. With the West entering an era of scientific and technological progresses, there was a demand of the Soviet economy to do likewise. However, "overcentralization, the absence of competition, and a lack of self-interest, motivation and material incentives... were the main impediments to technological progress." (Chubarov, 2001: 130). Nonetheless, resources were continuously being added to industrial sector. This led to major consequences for the agricultural aspect as "Soviet agriculture, light and food industries, and the services sector were severely underfunded." (Chubarov, 2001: 131). The way in which Khrushchev attempted to mend the problems were through radical reforms, with the consistent example of Stalin as the reason for the plight of the Soviets and the reason for the need of reforms. Moreover, Khrushchev sought changes within the foreign policy of the Soviet Union. In order "to defuse popular tensions in Eastern Europe... the new Soviet leadership introduced a number of reforms and... set out to restructure the USSR's relations with Eastern Europe in an attempt to forge a more cohesive... viable system of Soviet rule." (Laird and Hoffmann, 1986: 535), as well as "peaceful cooperation with the NATO countries." (Zubok, 2007: 102). Indeed, Khrushchev was "responding to the attitudes from within the Communist party, including the desire... to protect themselves from any repetitions of Stalin's atrocities." (Chubarov, 2001: 135).

Yet, despite de-Stalinisation attempting to improve matters in these two sectors, de-Stalinisation had made little impact on changing the economic front and on the issue of foreign policy. With regards to foreign policy, "Stalin's foreign policy has never been subjected to extensive criticism... even during the height of the domestic de-Stalinisation campaign... He was not accused of excessive aggressiveness or adventurism, nor did his successors ever promise to de-Stalinize Soviet foreign policy and indeed place it on new foundations." (Hoffmann and Fleron, 1980: 646). Indeed, this reinforces the notion of limitation of de-Stalinisation in the foreign policy sector. An example of the limitation of de-Stalinisation is evident through the uprising in Hungary. The uprising and revolts of 1956 was because of the opposition to the Hungarian government at the time and their Soviet-imposed policies. The Hungarian revolution was "castigated by Khrushchev as a counter-revolution inspired by the West... and the countries of the Warsaw Pact were put on notice that, under Khrushchev as under Stalin, no challenge to the Kremlin's dominance would be tolerated", (Service, 1997: 343) therefore "the prestige of Khrushchev, who had been hailed around the world as the hero of the Twentieth Party Congress, tumbled..." (Service, 1997: 344).

As well as Khrushchev failing to implement his own ideas into the Soviet foreign policy successfully, the same went for the economic factor. The Virgin Lands Campaign was an example of these economic failures. "I can clearly recall this grandiose but poorly organised Virgin land' era, the stupid decisions, and the ill-conceived strategies that cancelled out many successes..." (Sakwa, 1999: 305). The source goes on further to talk about how poor the equipment was, "equipment brought down to the new territories

from all over the country began to break down. Thousands of people worked themselves ragged but failed to gather in the gigantic harvest. The crops rotted in the fields, and there was no place to store grain... (Sakwa, 1999: 305). This damning account further reinforces Khrushchev's failure to improve the economic sector.

What was even more damaging to Khrushchev's tenure was the fact that "the period immediately following 1956 thereby featured... an historical record combining instinctive re-Stalinisation and calculating neo-Stalinisation... a return to Stalinist priorities through post-Stalinist techniques and institutions. (Pearson, 2002: 67). This notion of 're-Stalinisation' demonstrates the unstable nature of the system that Khrushchev tried to establish. On one side he would denounce Stalin, but on the other he would refer back to Stalinist principles. This is further evident when Khrushchev had quoted "in our opinion Stalinism, like Stalin himself, is inseparable from Communism...God Grant, as the saying goes, that every Communist may fight as Stalin fought..." (Crankshaw, 1971: 243). The idea of re-Stalinisation became increasingly evident as Khrushchev, even though he lifted the censorship on literature and art, once again referred back to Stalin's principle of censorship. "Khrushchev's efforts to scale back decades of repressions and censorship... posed unpredictable and potentially dangerous results. "We were scared-really scared... We were afraid the thaw might unleash a flood, which we wouldn't be able to control and which would drown us." (Radetsky, 2007: 153). Indeed, this was one of many examples of how some of Stalin's principles were being slowly proclaimed. This in turn demonstrates how de-Stalinisation was losing its validity, due to the constant reference to Stalinist principles when situations were becoming difficult to handle.

In essence, by analysing the positives and negatives, we can see that de-Stalinisation and the reforms that were established within the process, was overall unsuccessful. There were too many limitations in trying to thwart the influence of Stalin and the cult of his personality. Indeed, some of Khrushchev's motives behind certain policies were linked with Stalinist principles itself, thus making de-Stalinisation very difficult to implement successfully. This was furthered by the strong link between Leninism and Stalinism, and with Khrushchev aiming to follow Leninist principles; it made matters more difficult with regards to de-Stalinisation and the aspect of progressing towards a 'socialist democracy'. "This process was doomed to failure, because the system's inherent instability meant that radical changes, whether in the planning system, political life, or the process of production, would always threaten to burst through the system's fragile integument and bring about its total collapse." (Filtzer, 2002: 9). Although the failures, de-Stalinisation did hinder terror towards the Soviet people, as well having an influence on future leaders for example Gorbachev. Nevertheless, the fact that "inertial forces, and not the reformers, were better placed to guarantee the system's short-term survival..." (Filtzer, 2002: 9), it reinforces "Khrushchev's failure, the longevity of the Brezhnevite reaction, and the ultimate collapse of Gorbachev's... perestroika." (Filtzer, 2002, 9).

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