

## To what extent did Nikita Khrushchev succeed in his policy of de-Stalinisation?

In the years following Stalin's death in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev emerged as the dominant figure in the collective leadership of the USSR and, by early 1955, had consolidated his position to become the most prominent member of said leadership and de facto leader of the Soviet Union (Tompson 1997: p.142). Having secured his position, Khrushchev launched a policy known as 'de-Stalinisation'—beginning with what Taubman (2003: p.271-2) describes as "a devastating attack on Stalin" in the 'Secret Speech' delivered on February 25<sup>th</sup> 1956, the final day of the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party. In order to assess the extent to which Khrushchev succeeded in this policy of de-Stalinisation, it is necessary to contrast Khrushchev's intentions in launching the policy, what he hoped de-Stalinisation would achieve, with its outcomes.

Although the 'Secret Speech' in 1956 set off the public policy of de-Stalinisation (Van Goudoever 1986: p.4), it had been clear to Stalin's successors from the moment of his death that the new leadership would need to find a new course. De-Stalinisation in its most basic form was an attempt by Stalin's successors to find a way of moving beyond "the cruel absurdities of the Stalinist years, without discrediting themselves in the process" (Westwood 2002: p.402-3). In this respect, Khrushchev's criticisms of Stalin were fraught with contradictions from the outset, since Khrushchev, his allies and opponents had all come to prominence during the Stalinist era and therefore could never completely denounce their predecessor without also calling their own positions into question (McCauley 1987: p.3). However, this provided Khrushchev with an opportunity to tar his rivals with guilt by association as the 'Secret Speech' discredited Stalin's actions against the Communist Party after 1934, identifying Khrushchev's most significant rivals (such as Malenkov, Kaganovich, Molotov and Voroshilov) "obliquely but unambiguously" with Stalin's mistakes and crimes (Crankshaw 1966: p.228-9).

Whilst a key aim of Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation was to present himself as a reformer breaking away from the Stalinist era whilst simultaneously undermining his rivals, this was not his sole motivation (Chubarov 2011). He also wished to reform the nature of the Soviet leadership—narrowing the gap between the leaders and the masses—end the reliance on terror that had characterised the Stalinist system and advocate changes of policy in other areas such as the economy and foreign affairs (McCauley 1987: p.3-4).

The attempt to end the use of terror in public and political life and to rehabilitate the many victims of said terror during the Stalin era was one of the most successful facets of de-Stalinisation. In the power struggle instigated by Stalin's death, Lavrentiy Beria was denounced, arrested and ultimately executed on 25<sup>th</sup> December 1953 as a result of a conspiracy orchestrated by his rivals (including Khrushchev) who feared that he held too much power (Medvedev & Medvedev 1977: p.10-12). This stands in sharp contrasts to the way in which the Anti-Party Group—led by Molotov, Koganovich, Voroshilov and Shepilov—were treated after staging a failed coup attempt in 1957 (Taubman 2003: p.310-14). They were not subjected to the "grim punishments that would have been their lot in the old days" (Medvedev & Medvedev 1977: p.78). Rather than being secretly executed or interned in prison camps, the four leaders of the group were reassigned to unimportant positions, which showed that terror was no longer necessary to run the country or the Party (Medvedev & Medvedev 1977: p.10-12).

Indeed, this aspect of de-Stalinisation ultimately benefitted Khrushchev as, after his fall from power in 1964, he was allowed to live out his retirement peacefully until his death in 1971 (Medvedev 1982: p.257). Frankland (1966: p.206) suggests that the fact Khrushchev was removed from power by a simple vote is a testament to his achievements in overturning the system of political terror and repression he inherited as Stalin's eventual successor. Khrushchev also succeeded in moving away from the 'cult of personality' style of leadership that Stalin had cultivated, towards a collective form of leadership—he criticised elitism amongst Soviet officials and sought a more populist approach to authority within the Soviet Union (Breslaur 1980: p.51-2).

Khrushchev recognised that the relationship between the Soviet leadership and the masses could no longer be based upon exploitation and also sought to integrate the scientific and technical intelligentsia

into the political community, aiming to encourage co-operative decision-making and collective leadership (Breslaur 1980: p.53-4). By highlighting the cruelty and arbitrariness present in the actions of the party elite during Stalin's era, Khrushchev modified Party rules as part of his programme of political reform. However, these structural changes weakened Khrushchev's own position and lost him support amongst the Central Committee when some proved incompatible with the one-party Soviet system and deprived long-term office holders of jobs that had previously been life tenure positions (Medvedev & Medvedev 1977: p.151-2).

As well as ending political terror, de-Stalinisation also saw the release of an estimated five million prisoners from the Gulags in the aftermath of the 'Secret Speech' (Chubarov 2011). By the end of 1956, a total of around eight million prisoners had been released compared to an estimated 4,000 in 1953 and approximately 12,000 between 1954 and 1955 (Medvedev & Medvedev 1977: p.19-20). Additionally, thousands of German prisoners of war held in detention camps and Soviet citizens accused of collaboration with occupying forces on suspect evidence were released in 1955 (Medvedev & Medvedev 1977: p.21).

This process of rehabilitation also extended to millions of those not fortunate enough to survive Stalin's purges or the harsh conditions of the forced labour camps. Van Goudoever (1986: p.14) suggests that, as Khrushchev had implicated his opponents in the terror tactics used in the thirties and forties, he then used posthumous rehabilitations as a *political-tactical* move to ensure his political survival and strengthen his position by further undermining Stalin's legacy. Perhaps the high point of Khrushchev's attack on Stalin's legacy came in 1961 when, at the Twenty-second Party Congress, Khrushchev criticised Stalin and his accomplices in a "relentless, harshly worded speech" delivered to an open session (Medvedev 1980: p.41-2). Stalin's reputation was so severely criticised and derided at the Twenty-second Congress that a unanimous resolution was passed on the second to last day which led to Stalin's body being removed from its place next to Lenin's in the Red Square mausoleum under cover of darkness and buried (Taubman 2000: p.514-15).

During Khrushchev's era, many ordinary Soviet families saw their living standards rise. This was in part due to the delayed benefits of rapid industrialisation, but Khrushchev was the first Soviet leader to attempt to address many of the pressing social problems that had developed as a result of the central planning of the Stalinist system (McAuley 1987: p.138). Khrushchev's view of communism was, in many ways, a naive and idealistic one, but it led him to encourage and support many changes in social policy between 1955 and 1964, including the first post-war reform of the wage and salary system, leading to increased wages for state employees and a reduction in inequality (McAuley 1987: p.144-5).

A rise in living standards came coupled with some degree of liberalisation. The judicial system was partially reformed, weakening the powers of the secret police to convict without trial and replacing labour camps with labour colonies (Westwood 2002: p.417-18). Censorship was relaxed from 1954 onwards, leading to the publication of certain memoirs and novels discussing the experiences of those who had been interned in prison camps and accounts of Stalin's crimes. The most prominent such novel, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, was approved for publication in 1962, the same year that Pravda published 'The Heirs of Stalin', a poem critical of Stalin's legacy and those who would attempt re-Stalinisation (Taubman 2000: p.525-28). Khrushchev presided over many important technological advancements made possible by pursuing a non-Stalinist direction. For example, the USSR launched the satellite Sputnik into space in October 1957 and the first manned flight into space took place in April 1961 (Chubarov 2011) (Westwood 2002: p.416).

Although de-Stalinisation clearly succeeded, either partially or completely, in many respects it was not an all-encompassing success. Hoffman (1980: p.74) argues that Khrushchev was "not very successful in attaining his objectives" and proved "less effective in achieving his chief goals than Stalin was in achieving his". Khrushchev's leadership style has been described as erratic with little thought given to the relationship between means and ends (Hoffman 1980: p.75-6), which can account for the negative impact of Stalinisation on Soviet foreign policy. Denouncing Stalin deteriorated the Soviet Union's relationship with Mao's China and Eastern Europe, leading to uprisings in Poland & Hungary and causing Mao to challenge the Soviet leadership of the world communist movement (Chubarov 2001: p.140).

Attempts to reform the Stalinist command economy were very limited. Early in his tenure as leader, Khrushchev desired economic decentralisation to weaken the power bases his Presidium opponents had in central government ministries (McCauley 1987: p.14). His major economic reform introduced in 1957 was the elimination of most central industrial ministries in an attempt to localise economic

planning. This scheme to create 105 economic regions with their own economic councils (sovnarkhoz) was largely unsuccessful and was abandoned once Khrushchev was ousted (Westwood 2002: p.414). Khrushchev experienced further economic setbacks from the 1950s onwards as the economy failed to meet his goals, the virgin lands agricultural reforms proved of little value and his attempts at restructuring the economy met with hostility amongst his colleagues who sought to maintain their privilege and authority (Chubarov 2001: p.139-40). In this respect, the policy of de-Stalinisation was not successful in making significant alterations to the Stalinist economy, since Khrushchev was hamstrung by a lack of support and a track record of failed economic initiatives (Chubarov 2011).

As previously stated, Khrushchev could never completely repudiate Stalin's legacy, and instead he attempted to create what Crankshaw (1966: p.234-5) describes as "Stalinism without tears". Many of Khrushchev's policies in this respect were inconsistent and contradictory, managing to do away with some of the strongest tenets of the Stalinist system (e.g. the use of political terror), whilst preserving the weakest (Crankshaw 1966: p.235-6). His attempts at de-Stalinisation and denouncing Stalin's legacy were often undermined by subsequent statements given tacitly supporting Stalinism. For instance, in 1956 (the same year as the 'Secret Speech'), Khrushchev described himself as a proud Stalinist in the fight against imperialism and described Stalinism as *inseparable* from Communism (Crankshaw 1966: p.242-3).

Khrushchev's drive to create "socialism with a human face" did not create conditions for genuine democracy in the Soviet Union, nor did they erect any barriers against a future Stalinist revival (Chubarov 2001: p.141). In fact, in the years following Khrushchev's removal, several of his institutional changes were reversed and a reconsideration of the Twentieth and Twenty-second Congresses—amounting to a partial rehabilitation of Stalin—was debated by a group of leading ideologists, military figures and writers in the first months of 1965 (Medvedev 1980: p.44-5).

Upon examining Khrushchev's policy of de-Stalinisation in detail, it becomes clear that it was neither an overriding success nor a complete failure. Its successes included the removal of political terror, the replacement of forced labour camps, restrictions on the powers of the secret police, a short-term renewal of Soviet economic fortunes accompanied by technological advances and a guarantee of basic freedoms to Soviet citizens (Chubarov 2001: p.142). However, its failures included a lack of significant or successful economic reform, a deterioration in relations between the Soviet leadership, East Europe and China and an inconsistent commitment to actually denouncing Stalin's legacy for fear of undermining the legitimacy of the entire Communist system. De-Stalinisation did not succeed at its most basic level, since the Stalinist legacy received a selective rehabilitation after Khrushchev's era (Cohen 1980: p.24), but it did usher in a new type of style of Soviet politics and enlighten the lives of many citizens as well as paving the way for future attempts at reform (Westwood 2002: p.430).

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