Khrushchev’s ‘Secret Speech’

Fifty years after Khrushchev’s famous denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, John Etty examines what was at stake.

Collective Leaderless

After the death of Joseph Stalin on 5th March 1953, the USSR finally achieved the kind of collective leadership which its people had always been entitled to expect. Since Lenin, the Soviet state’s totalitarian control had created terror in the population, but over time a worse fear and mistrust had evolved in the party leadership, and by 1953 it was beginning to consume Stalin’s successors.

Stalin’s subordinates had been selected on the basis of personal loyalty, and indeed Stalin had deliberately employed aides whose personalities conflicted in order to maintain overall control and avoid the possibility of a coup. Since 1946 Stalin had redefined the roles of all of his old associates, removing them from their positions of direct authority and appointing them to indistinct ‘deputy’ posts. It is therefore not surprising that a power struggle should develop between these men, now left leaderless, malevolent and each as vaguely qualified as any other, to form a collective leadership. They did manage to work collectively at first, agreeing to reduce the number of positions of power. The first redistribution of portfolios made Georgy Malenkov Chairman of the Council of Ministers (a post which he held concurrently with his role as Party Secretary); Beria became the Minister of the Interior; and Voroshilov became President of the USSR. Molotov returned to the Foreign Ministry, Mikoyan was Deputy Premier and Trade Minister, and Bulganin was Defence Minister, with Zhukov and Vasilevsky as his popular deputies. Khrushchev’s new role, as one of eight Central Committee secretaries, gave him a secure base of influence within the party, but not a high profile role within the government.

Nikita's Road to Power

Ironically, at a time when hearts were full of faith in collective leadership, it was classic Stalinist manoeuvring which brought Nikita Khrushchev to the head of the leadership by 1956. Khrushchev plotted to remove the hated Beria in June 1953, and bitterly denounced him at his ‘trial’ before leaping into action to stop Beria reaching for a gun after hearing he was about to be arrested. Not even Stalin was so directly and heroically involved in the arrest and trial of enemies of the people.

Khrushchev’s armoury also included more subtle methods. He was made Chairman of the Commission for the Organisation of Stalin’s funeral, a job which allowed him the opportunity to begin manipulating the memory of the former vozhd, much as Stalin had begun to manipulate the memory of Lenin at his funeral in 1924. Khrushchev’s public importance increased in September 1953 when he was promoted to First Secretary. As Stalin had done, Khrushchev was able to mobilise the party machinery to his own personal advantage and, like Stalin, he did this at first almost unnoticed by unsuspecting colleagues.

Just as Stalin had been underestimated, and thought hard-working but crude and unintelligent, so Khrushchev was regarded by many as unthreateningly brash, clumsy and foolish. Nevertheless, Khrushchev emulated his benefactor by stealthily appointing his own men as local party bosses. These appointments strengthened Khrushchev’s personal authority within the party to a point where, with Beria gone, Malenkov and Khrushchev were the dominant pair in the collective leadership.

Together they began to tackle what both considered the major obstacle to progress in the USSR. Stalin’s spectre still haunted the Soviet Union and both men faced the challenge of how to exorcise the ghost without erasing their own legitimacy in the process. In August 1953 Malenkov’s progressive reforms promised tax cuts, higher agricultural prices and greater individual peasant freedom, as well as concessions for the intelligentsia, but these gentle moves towards ‘De-Stalinisation’ seemed vague and circuitous when compared with Khrushchev’s direct advances towards his own individual leadership. Khrushchev’s first agricultural reforms in September 1953 went
only slightly further down the same lines as Malenkov’s proposals, but subsequently his almost Stalinist Virgin Lands scheme allowed him the opportunity to overshadow Malenkov.

Khrushchev took the leadership from Malenkov. Gradually, through 1954, all of Malenkov’s authority, symbolic and practical, was removed until, at a February meeting of the Supreme Soviet, he was publicly attacked and demoted. Molotov found himself briefly in alliance with Khrushchev after Malenkov’s fall, but by July 1955 Khrushchev had effectively deconstructed the collective leadership and rebuilt a system reminiscent of Stalin’s own.

Khrushchev and the Speech

At 10 a.m. on February 14th 1956, 1355 voting and 81 non-voting delegates met at the Great Kremlin Palace in Moscow for the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Delegates must have felt a mixture of sadness, since this was the first Congress to be held since the death of Joseph Stalin, and interest in expectation of the new directions. They were amazed, then, when Khrushchev opened the Congress by asking the delegates to stand in memory of the Communist leaders (plural) who had died since the last Congress: Joseph Stalin was mentioned in the same breath as Klement Gottwald and Kyuchí Toduka, Czech and Japanese leaders. Over the next ten days Khrushchev gave further hints about the new official line on Stalin. Those listening carefully to the details and the phrasing of the speeches would initially have been confused about the precise points being made, and shocked to realise that Khrushchev was denouncing Stalin.

Any doubts about Khrushchev’s intentions were emphatically dismissed on February 25th, when the Congress was due to end. At late notice, an unscheduled secret session had been called for Soviet delegates. Khrushchev had pressed to be allowed to deliver a speech denouncing Stalin (he was given permission the day before the Congress opened). He had commissioned three drafts and had personally selected passages from each before dictating the speech to a stenographer late on the night of the 24th.

Khrushchev spoke for almost four hours, beginning, rather vaguely, by referring to the ‘harmful consequences’ of elevating one person so high that he is believed to possess ‘supernatural characteristics, akin to those of a god’. Such a mistake, he admitted, had been made about Stalin. Even Khrushchev himself, he implied, had been guilty of worshipping the ‘cult of personality’. Nevertheless, he was drawing attention to the error in order that it should not be made again. He quoted from Marx, Engels and Lenin on the evils of a cult of any individual. He then referred to three documents, copies of which he had issued to delegates before his speech, which proved that Lenin had disapproved of Stalin’s rudeness shortly before his death in 1924. Skilfully, then, Khrushchev used the greatest communist figureheads (around whom, incidentally, massive cults of personality had developed in the Soviet Union) to denounce Stalin. Next he shattered delegates’ illusions of the comradely bond between Lenin and Stalin by highlighting the dispute between them, and drew a direct link between that argument and the later ‘grave abuse of power by Stalin’.

Khrushchev went on to give examples of those unfortunates who suffered when Stalin ‘undermined … revolutionary legality’. Even Sergei Kirov’s murder, he implied, could be linked with Stalin’s personal crimes. Khrushchev then detailed several particular examples of men who had been tried and convicted under Stalin, but whose cases had been re-examined since the autumn of 1955. He explained Stalin’s personal role in these crimes against the Soviet people (mentioning that he had approved 383 lists of names of those to be executed in 1937-38).

Here Khrushchev changed direction. He praised the strength of the Party and its ability to withstand the negative effects of these mass punishments for imaginary crimes. The Party was no longer guilty of supporting Stalin’s cult of personality; it was more the victim of Stalin’s personal crimes. Furthermore, Stalin’s personality flaws were the cause of Soviet military reverses during the Great Patriotic War, which Stalin’s brilliant strategy was supposed to have won. Khrushchev, apparently enjoying himself, threw in a personal anecdote about Stalin’s using a globe to plan military operations.

When he included another personal story, however, the effect was different. He told of an occasion when he tried to contact Stalin by telephone from the Kharkov front. Malenkov answered the phone, and acted as intermediary
when Stalin refused to come to the phone. How Malenkov must have squirmed when he heard Khrushchev using this account to humiliate him.

The ebullient Khrushchev continued. It was not Stalin, but the Party, the government, the army, the people of the Soviet Union – these were the ones who really won the war. Khrushchev sustained his attack on Stalin, questioning his credentials as a communist leader, and pointing out that he had written his own ‘self-praising appraisals’. He even accused him of ‘slander of Lenin’. Mercifully, Khrushchev avoided completely killing off Stalin’s reputation, acknowledging that at least he had acted in the belief that he was defending the interests of the workers. Khrushchev finished by calling on the Party to eradicate the cult of the individual and to return to ‘the revolutionary fight for the transformation of society’.

### Khrushchev’s Motives

Khrushchev detailed the methods Stalin developed to secure the guilt and punishment of the enemies of the people, contrasting his despotism with Lenin’s enlightened leadership. Lenin had used ‘severe means’ against ‘enemies of the Revolution’ but only ‘against actual class enemies’, Khrushchev noted. Thus he allied himself with Lenin, as Stalin had once done, in order to denounce a rival. This time, however, the rival was dead and could not defend himself. Had Stalin been able to do so, perhaps he might have highlighted some apparent hypocrisies in Khrushchev’s speech. Khrushchev contrasted Stalin’s style of government with Lenin’s. Stalin, he said, ‘trampled on the Leninist principle of collective Party leadership’, yet Lenin had only advocated collective leadership in his own Political Testament just before his death. It was only the arrogant belief that no other single person besides himself could rule the USSR that led Lenin to advocate collective Party leadership. In addition, if Khrushchev was so fervently in favour of Leninist collective leadership, why had he gone to such lengths to manoeuvre his way to the top of the USSR’s leadership since 1953? Khrushchev had done his fair share of trampling in the previous three years. Herein, perhaps, lies one of Khrushchev’s primary motives for giving the speech.

It seems almost certain that the 1956 ‘Secret Speech’ was simply another way for Nikita Khrushchev to further his political career. The mining engineer who had worked in Yuzovka in the Ukraine since the age of 15 had received swift promotions under Stalin and had perhaps only survived the purges himself because of his friendship with Stalin’s first wife, Nadezhda Alliluyeva. Whatever his personal views on the purges at the time, he certainly benefited as potential rivals were removed from office, clearing the way for his own progress. Perhaps he had yearned to denounce Stalin, but feared for his own survival if he was brave enough to do it. Now, though, he knew he would survive and took the opportunity to reveal Stalin’s crimes.

Khrushchev was clever enough, in his speech, to see other possibilities too. His speech was constructed in such a way that he dissociated himself from the crimes of the Stalin era. Another speaker could have given countless examples which would have made Khrushchev seem as guilty as any other of Stalin’s associates. Khrushchev asked the reasonable question why other Party members had not tried to stop Stalin, and answered, rather unconvincingly, that they had not known what he was doing in their name. Yet Khrushchev repeatedly turned to accuse his Presidium colleagues of involvement. To Voroshilov, for example, he said ‘Hey, you, Klim, cut out the lying. You should have done it long ago … You’re old and decrepit by now. Can’t you find the courage and conscience to tell the truth about what you saw with your own eyes?’ Khrushchev, it was implied, was the only innocent among a collective leadership rotten with guilt. Stalin himself had set the precedent for unloading guilt onto others. How many of the purged had been punished for the crimes of others? Khrushchev had learned much of his political skill from Stalin, and now saw the chance to improve his own position at the expense of his colleagues, dead and living.

Just as Stalin had needed to mythologise his relationship with Lenin after 1924, so Khrushchev needed, if he was to maintain his position at the head of the Party and the government, to legitimise his own position. He had possessed similar links with Stalin as all the other ‘heirs’. What the speech enabled him to do was to remove the credibility of his colleagues by denouncing Stalin, at the same time as improving his own standing by highlighting his true Leninist principles in exposing these criminals. Khrushchev was conducting his own anti-Party enemies’ trial – turning Stalinist justice back on its former protagonists and receiving the same benefits that the survivors had always received.
It would be simplistic to ascribe a single motive for Khrushchev's speech. In reality, the speech was part of a much wider policy of De-Stalinisation. This wide-spectrum strategy had begun soon after Stalin's death. Essentially, in his speech, Khrushchev was using stories of the past to manipulate the Party's feelings about the future, just as Stalin had done before him. This time, however, Khrushchev was predominantly using the truth, whereas Stalin had fictionalised history in order to maintain his primacy.

Conceivably, Khrushchev genuinely wished to avoid the development of any cult of personality in the future. More probably, though, it was simply Stalin's cult of personality that he wanted to demolish. As Bertram Wolfe argues, the size of the Stalin cult made the job of governing the Soviet Union impossible for any successor. Any achievements would seem paltry by comparison with Stalin's, and the Stalin cult would hinder any heir. Khrushchev realised that the huge figure of Stalin had to be cut down in size. He had an extremely delicate renovation to perform. His succession had been built on the foundations of the Stalin cult. Now those foundations had to be demolished without jeopardising the new regime.

The Impact of the Speech

Khrushchev had originally wanted news of his speech to spread, but even he became concerned by the nature of the repercussions. That the speech resonated louder and longer than anyone had anticipated says more about the Presidium's unrealistic expectations than about the content of the speech. As Khrushchev had claimed at the beginning of the 20th Congress, the Party was more monolithic than ever before. After Lenin's ban on factions in 1921, and especially after Stalin's punishment of any 'deviationists', the party was unused to critical analysis, and unwilling to express disagreement with official policy. This had helped Khrushchev when he delivered the speech, but the new atmosphere of questioning generated a De-Stalinising movement which Khrushchev struggled to control.

In April 1956 the KGB reported that portraits and busts of Stalin had been removed or defaced (exactly as Tsarist symbols had been attacked in 1917), and that meetings had demanded Stalin's body be removed from Lenin's mausoleum. Some even called Stalin an enemy of the people. Younger, better-educated citizens were pleased with Khrushchev's speech, perhaps too pleased.

Some older people, however, refused to believe Khrushchev's evidence, and others, while they did not question the proof, saw no reason to regret what had been done. In fact, many people remained loyal to Stalin's memory (as some still do today), and in Tbilisi four days of protests broke out against Khrushchev's speech. In the end, Soviet troops were used to put down the disturbances. Twenty were killed and a further 60 were injured. Khrushchev promised, 'We won't be caught off guard' and began to retreat. On June 30th 1956 the 'Secret Speech' was re-drafted. This time Stalin was said to be guilty simply of no more than 'serious errors'.

The rehabilitation of Stalin's victims continued after the speech, and thousands of gulag inmates were released. Khrushchev wanted to broaden and extend his policy of De-Stalinisation, but his position seemed weaker after his speech than before it. In June 1957 Malenkov led Kaganovich, Molotov, Voroshilov and Bulganin in an attempted coup. Khrushchev dealt calmly with the situation and used his knowledge of the Party rules and his huge support base to win the deciding vote. He remained in control, but his own slightly shaky grasp of party control was reflected by the USSR's wavering hold over its satellite states. It seems Khrushchev had hoped to receive the plaudits of a grateful empire for his speech, and he reacted spitefully and violently when he heard of the real reaction.

In the short term, the speech seemed to threaten the stability of communism in the Soviet states. Criticism of Stalin was tantamount to attacking the communist idea for those who had only lived under enforced Stalinist-style communism. In Poland and Hungary, the speech was met with violence. (The Polish leader, Boleslaw Bierut, had a heart attack when he read the speech. He was in hospital with pneumonia at the time, and he died two weeks later.) Neither Poland nor Hungary would have chosen communist government, if they had been given a choice at the end of the Second World War, and Khrushchev's speech seemed to provide the chance to rebel against foreign domination.

Khrushchev's policies had created the problem, but using force to repress demonstrations would further discredit
his new direction. Unrest was seen in Romania, while Poland, Czechoslovakia and East Germany all seemed at risk of social disorder, to say nothing of the increasingly frequent reports of protest inside Russia.

In Hungary in 1956 Khrushchev resorted to military force, at the cost of some 20,000 Hungarian and 1,500 Soviet casualties. Khrushchev had vacillated and felt horribly guilty at reaching this solution, but inevitably his final decision was the same as Stalin’s would have been. Indeed, on New Year’s Eve he announced that he was a Stalinist in his fight against the class enemy, and three weeks later he repeated that being a communist was ‘inseparable from being a Stalinist’.

Apparently trying to distract domestic attention, Khrushchev turned to a world stage. De-Stalinisation in foreign policy meant discarding the notion of world revolution, and concentrating instead on peaceful but competitive co-existence. In May 1957 Khrushchev boasted that the USSR would catch up and overtake the USA in production of meat, butter and milk by 1960. This in itself was in contrast with Stalin’s approach, but Khrushchev exhibited a far greater interest in the outside world than Stalin ever had. He visited foreign countries and revelled in the international attention which his trips afforded. It is easy to see why people began to expect a change when Khrushchev came to power. Anyone who anticipated a change in the nature of the Soviet Union, however, had missed the point.

Conclusion

The ‘Secret Speech’ was a red herring. Khrushchev’s personality and political style were unquestionably different from Stalin’s, but Khrushchev was no less a convinced communist than Stalin. Indeed, Khrushchev’s comments about being a Stalinist are revealing, as is the fact that a portrait of the dictator still hung in Khrushchev’s office long after the vitriol of his 1956 speech had died away.

Khrushchev’s policies undoubtedly created a more lenient and open society. Neither Stalin nor Khrushchev’s immediate successors, for instance, would have allowed the publication of One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, by Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Yet the speech indirectly confirmed the essential character of the Soviet system.

Khrushchev’s hypocrisy was not seen at first. His speech and his policies raised the hopes of people all over the world that the crimes of the Stalin era, together with the totalitarian, repressive nature of the communist state, were caused solely by the nature of the man in control. This indeed is what Khrushchev had hoped people would understand from his speech; and the USSR under Khrushchev seemed at first to have changed. However, what people in Russia, Hungary, Poland, East Germany, and of course the West, gradually came to realise was that the essence of the Soviet state had not altered. Stalin might have been to blame for the degree of the repression, but not for its occurrence in the first place.

In the medium term, Khrushchev’s speech seemed to suggest that the Cold War was thawing. The West grew more confident in dealing with the USSR, believing (mistakenly) that they could more reliably judge Khrushchev than they had been able to anticipate Stalin. They expected him to act with his customary bluster, but they did not realise that, when he felt vulnerable, he would threaten to lead the world to war on several occasions. Typically, although Khrushchev intended to De-Stalinise at home and abroad, his policies brought domestic repression and violence, and created the hottest moments of the Cold War, in Berlin and Cuba.

In the long term, Khrushchev’s new directions led directly to his own downfall in 1964, as well as foreshadowing Gorbachev’s reforms of the 1980s. Khrushchev helped to release within the USSR a force kept under control by Stalin which, though checked successfully at various times after Khrushchev, could not be completely suppressed again. This, then, is the major impact of the ‘Secret Speech’ and the wider policy of De-Stalinisation.

Issues to Debate

- Why did Khrushchev make his 1956 speech attacking Stalin?
- What impact did the speech have inside and outside the Soviet Union?
- Did Khrushchev’ De-Stalinisation measures fundamentally alter the nature of the Soviet Union?
Further reading:

- N. Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers* (Andre Deutsch, 1971) and *Last Testament* (Andre Deutsch, 1974)

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