

Khrushchev and Stalin

Ian D. Thatcher defends the record of Josef Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, and sees him as a forerunner of Gorbachev.

Nikita Khrushchev is famous for two key events: the Cuban Missile Crisis, where the superpowers came closest to nuclear war, and deStalinisation. The Cuban Affair, admittedly dramatic and frightening at the time, was a short-term crisis in international affairs. DeStalinisation, however, involved fundamental questions about the Bolshevik Revolution, its past, present and future. After Stalin's death in 1956 it fell to Khrushchev to try to find a justification for the continuation of the Soviet experiment whilst admitting to the past crimes of the regime against its own party and people. This was an unenviable and difficult task.

How would any leader deal with Stalin's legacy, from his personal dictatorship to his remarkable policies, including industrialisation, collectivisation, the Great Terror, and the spreading of the Soviet Empire during and after World War Two? Constructing an historical balance sheet on the Stalin era while taking the USSR into a post-Stalin period of development was quite an agenda. It was furthermore an agenda that could not be approached in a scholarly, 'objective' manner, but one that was conditioned by current politics, both domestic and foreign.

Khrushchev's answer to the Stalin problem was to address the past and the future. Looking back, he denounced Stalin's misdemeanours as flowing from the 'cult of personality', from the leader's paranoid personality that was given free rein as it broke party and state legality. For the future, Khrushchev promised genuine collective leadership, a law-based society, and a regime that would put more effort into ensuring that its citizens enjoyed something of the good life internally and security internationally. Yet despite the programme of deStalinisation – the Secret Speech of 1956 and removing Stalin from Lenin's Mausoleum in 1961 – when Khrushchev was himself ousted from office in 1964, his disgruntled comrades turned his accusations about Stalin against Khrushchev himself.

The Charges against Khrushchev

The anti-Khrushchev charges included policy failures, domestic and foreign. At home industry and agriculture were under-performing. Abroad relations had soured with China. Most importantly, these policy failings were linked to Khrushchev's misdemeanours as leader. Khrushchev, it was claimed, was bypassing the Presidium and the Central Committee. He had taken to issuing decrees in the name of the Central Committee that were in fact on his own initiative. Khrushchev had surrounded himself with sycophants and family members that formed his inner-staff. Presidium colleagues could not reach him directly but had to deal with this entourage. Khrushchev simply ignored the advice of the Politburo, assigning key duties to his private circle outside the control of the party elite. In this sense Khrushchev broke party norms and even engaged in corruption. The award of honours to his son and son-in-law was noted, as well as the use of state money to fund family excursions abroad on what was supposed to be official business.

Such irregularities, it was said, occurred because Khrushchev had concentrated power in his own hands. Moreover, he did not know how to use this power sensibly. While having little or no expertise, he considered himself an expert in agriculture, diplomacy, science, and art, and his interfering had devastating consequences. Khrushchev defended the quack geneticist Lysenko, for example, despite warnings from eminent scientists. Khrushchev was unable to control his thoughts and most importantly his mouth. He had upset prominent friends within the socialist camp, causing trouble in relations with China, Albania, Romania, and Poland. Khrushchev would make promises to foreign heads of state for which he had not received the required authority from the Presidium or Central Committee. In the USSR Khrushchev had engaged in constant reorganisations of economic and party bodies that brought only additional confusion and threatened to split the party. Yet, paradoxically, this sad story of failure and illegality was accompanied by excessive praise of Khrushchev in the media. Ignored and often insulted by the man who had turned meetings of the Presidium into 'empty formality', Khrushchev's

colleagues had to act. Khrushchev's 'petty tyranny' unlike Stalin's was not based on terror, but this did not excuse it. If anything, it was 'harder to struggle with a living cult than with a dead one. If Stalin destroyed people physically, Khrushchev destroyed them morally'.

This indictment against Khrushchev was a clever use of his own denunciation of the 'cult of personality' against Stalin. (It also borrowed from the criticism, made by Stalin much earlier, that Khrushchev was guilty of 'hare-brained' schemes!) Khrushchev now found himself portrayed as a leader out of touch with reality, as making a mess of policy, and as flouting party rules, ignoring and belittling comrades, whilst surviving in an artificial bubble of excessive praise from official propaganda and an inner coterie of toadies. It is an analysis of Khrushchev's leadership that most of his biographers share. But is it fair and has the indictment exerted an undue influence over accounts of Khrushchev and Khrushchevism? We will question to what extent Khrushchev's leadership and its policies managed to break free of Stalin and Stalinism. Particular attention will be paid to a much under-used source in accounts of Khrushchev's period in office, the memoirs he wrote in retirement.

Khrushchev's Leadership

In scholarly assessments of Khrushchev's leadership little regard is placed upon his memoirs. They are dismissed as being full of factual errors, produced as they were without access to archives, or for being no more than self-justification, ignoring key issues such as what he was up to during the Great Terror. Admittedly he was indeed trying to counter some of the charges laid against him: the memoirs were a substitute for the opportunities that politicians in open democracies have to defend themselves. The memoirs are, however, much more than mere self-defence. Khrushchev mentions the intention to help future generations avoid the mistakes of the past. They were also a opportunity for him to reflect upon his leadership and explain what he thought he was attempting to achieve. Certainly the memoirs contain important insights into Khrushchev as leader and how he differed fundamentally from Stalin.

First of all, Khrushchev was clearly reluctant to refer to himself as leader. The usual term is 'when I was in the leadership'. Indeed at one point he stresses that 'I never unilaterally did anything, nor could I have done anything, without permission and the decision of the government and of the party's Central Committee'. This does not mean that Khrushchev did not take the initiative over policy, for the memoirs abound with examples of cases of pride that this or that decision was 'down to me'. But there was a clear break with Stalin's leadership in that the party rules under Khrushchev reiterated the regularity of meetings, from the lower party structures through to the Central Committee and the Presidium. Comrades in the elite may not have been happy with Khrushchev's conduct, from the publication of minutes and interruption of speakers to the presence of non-members, but nevertheless Khrushchev acted as leader within the rules. Khrushchev knew this was very different from procedures at 'Stalin's court'. Little wonder that one of his outbursts of self-defence at the time of his removal was to shout 'You call this a cult?'

There is a mixture of factors explaining why Khrushchev could be more than simply 'first among equals' as leader. As he himself recognised, it was hard to break with habits developed in Stalin's time. Even though Khrushchev was not sending comrades off to the Gulag, there was an authority that came with being first secretary, head of the government and armed forces. This must have been especially so from Khrushchev's point of view, given the low esteem in which he seemingly held his colleagues. He uttered not one kind word, but quite a few unkind ones, about his closest comrades. Khrushchev had to step up to the podium because other leaders were not up to the job. From the point of view of colleagues, there must have been some subservience to the tradition of not objecting too strongly to what the leader was saying. This must have been particularly true when Khrushchev's prestige and authority rose after he saw off an early attempt in 1957 to remove him from office.

So Khrushchev was a forceful leader partly because this is what the Soviet political system demanded. The notion of collective decision-making, even on Khrushchev's reading, was still within a relatively narrow circle – the Central Committee had a membership of fewer than 150 full members.

The next factor that distinguished his leadership from Stalin's lies in the fact that if Stalin was a Marxist in theory but not in practice, Khrushchev, who could not lay any great claim to being an original theoretician of Marxism, was a master practician. Khrushchev's time as leader was a particular part of a career devoted to 'building

socialism': 'Building factories and organizing municipal services – these are the concrete expressions of the Leninist idea of building socialism.' He wrote in his memoirs that 'It is not a matter of studying theory ... I was busy forming party organizations and orienting them toward solving the tasks of socialist construction ... I became one of those who turned the resolutions adopted by those plenums into reality'.

As a leader Khrushchev had different priorities from Stalin. Most notably, there was an emphasis upon improving the people's standard of living. This may have been a consequence of a population more willing to make demands upon the leadership. It may also have been an outcome of how the war affected Khrushchev. After the sufferings and tremendous achievements of 1941-5, the people deserved to be rewarded. There should be greater consumer comforts for Soviet citizens as well as a transformed relationship between the state and its citizens. Instead of viewing the people as potential spies and enemies, the political elite should trust the people and be responsible to them. The state should be an 'all-people's state'. Next, Khrushchev as leader expanded the ambitions of the government programme quite considerably. The war years left Khrushchev with a deep commitment to Soviet security. The USSR would not be invaded on his watch. Khrushchev would confound Stalin's prediction that devoid of Stalin the USSR would fall victim to imperialism. The Cold War and the need to maintain a credible deterrent would of itself have placed tremendous strain upon the Soviet economy. Indeed Khrushchev accused the West of trying to 'bleed the USSR white' by intensifying the arms race. But as leader Khrushchev had both to meet defence requirements and improve the domestic economy to prove to Soviet people that it was worth the effort of living under socialism. ('Who is going to follow our example if we can't even satisfy the most basic needs of our people?' he asked.)

Khrushchev's Achievements

Khrushchev attempted to succeed in various ways, chiefly by doing things on the cheap and quickly. He was aware that the heritage from the Stalin period was not good. The leadership had not been trained in the practice of good governance, the collective farms were depressed and starved of investment, and the economy was full of distortions and imbalances (hidden inflation, statistical inaccuracies, poor labour discipline etc.). His trips abroad, especially to the West, gave Khrushchev numerous examples of comparative Soviet inefficiency and lagging behind, whether it was washing machines in Austria, levels of milk yield in Scandinavia, or the quality of concrete mix on French runways. It was therefore natural that Khrushchev was always on the look out for 'new and progressive methods that would be more economical'. He takes most pride in his achievements in housing construction and in the virgin lands programme in which vast areas of previously unused land were brought under cultivation in true Soviet campaigning style. These are policies that are either criticised or ridiculed in modern secondary literature. Yet Khrushchev explains how, despite difficulties and flaws, including poor quality construction and investment shortfalls, they were the best possible response to the demands to provide people with housing and food.

It is bordering on the nonsensical to say of Khrushchev, as W. Taubman, his award-winning biographer, does, that 'all too often Khrushchev hadn't taken the time to do things right. Instead of thinking things through, he could rarely sit still.' Time is the one thing that Khrushchev had in very short supply. Here he was no different from the tsarist prime minister Peter Stolypin who was not granted the 20 years of peace that he sought, nor from the USSR's final leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who famously once asked for 'time, time, time'. It is also fairly meaningless to criticise the Khrushchev leadership for seeking administrative solutions to the problems of post-Stalin economic development rather than more fundamental structural reform.

As leader Khrushchev tried to boost Soviet economic performance by depending upon expertise. The memoirs are full of fond memories not of his political allies, but of specialists, particularly engineers, designers, and scientists. Here Khrushchev was drawing upon his experience of working on the Moscow metro or on immediate post-war reconstruction when he set about any task by forming a team of specialists. In the context of the building programme, Khrushchev recalls the construction engineer Lagutenko: 'this remarkable innovator, who skilfully promoted mechanization in the production of prefabricated building components of reinforced concrete. I had always searched for people like him'. Khrushchev describes his various reforms, from the decentralization of economic councils to the division of the party into sections for industry and for agriculture, as attempts to ensure that the correct level of knowledge was being applied at an appropriate level of command, with the appropriate

safeguards for responsibility and accountability.

Over the period 1956-1964 Khrushchev learnt some harsh facts about the reality of being head of the USSR. One of the most important was the relative independence of the *nomenklatura* (the Soviet party and state officials) who could subvert the leader's policies in a number of ways. It could put on a show during a visit to create a false impression; it could nod its agreement and then simply ignore any instructions; it could take an encouragement (e.g. to plant corn) to extremes and compromise a policy by applying it to areas for which it was not intended. Khrushchev admits that in his time in office he was 'unable to find the appropriate lever that would enable us to move things forward'. He admired the profit motive in capitalism and how it helped make his favourite US farmer, Garst, an incredibly good agriculturalist. Retaining a belief in the superiority of the Soviet economic system over capitalism, Khrushchev thought that one could produce a host of Russian Garsts by 'selecting cadres and training them'. If Khrushchev had remained in office the search for the correct administrative form would no doubt have continued. The memoirs suggest that this would have been 'an agency that can supervise and manage production and monitor the economy'.

It is not clear that this agency would have been the Communist party and it would certainly not have involved a repetition of Stalin's Terror. Khrushchev seems to have invited specialists to attend meetings of the Central Committee and Presidium because he thought that there was more sense to be gained from listening to specialists than to party comrades. When the Presidium discussed the issue of missile technology, Khrushchev insisted that the specialist Chelomei give a report. Khrushchev comments: 'Presidium members had poor knowledge of questions having to do with weapons, and so no one expressed great enthusiasm, but there were also no objections'. If specialists had been barred from the Presidium, Khrushchev might have taken to Trotsky's habit of reading French novels rather than listening to his uninformed colleagues! He was not much more impressed by how local party secretaries gave insufficient care and attention to rational and profitable production. Party chiefs 'on the ground' wanted an 'easy life', and were more concerned with filling in forms to make themselves look good on paper than having a serious attitude towards work. In the midst of a discussion of opposition to his proposal to follow good practice in the US and establish agricultural colleges in the countryside so that graduates could have theoretical and practical knowledge, for example, Khrushchev despaired at officials who agreed but were not willing to put in the effort to make the suggestion happen:

Alas, one man can't do everything, even if great power and influence is allotted to him. The most dangerous form of resistance is when they 'yes you to death', nodding their heads and agreeing. This is a tactic that has been assimilated by many in Soviet society, and it is widely used ... In comparing the American system and our own in agricultural education ... their system is more progressive. Capitalists know how to approach matters from a rational point of view. The remorseless law of profit is in operation there. But in our country not every government official has a highly principled understanding of the cause; often he displays philistine indifference, looking out solely for his own comfort.

It may not be the case that Khrushchev had a penchant for hare-brained schemes but that he was continually looking for the best way to ensure expertise and accountability. In their absence, his policies could be harmful not out of a personal failing (in Taubman's estimation he 'made a bad situation worse'), but because they became subject to the irrationalities of the Soviet system, both political and economic. Khrushchev's removal was a sign of how frightened the party *nomenklatura* had become by the leader's determination to bring it to account. In its self-interest it may have acted just in time. A conservative bureaucracy was out-of-tune with a leader who was becoming more and more radical in his thought, evident above all in Khrushchev's reflections on the link between a Leninist party organisation and a dictatorship of Stalin's type.

Khrushchev pondered the fact that a dictator had established personal control with very negative consequences not only in the history of the Russian Revolution but more recently in China and in Albania. Indeed, any communist party as then constituted could, he reckoned, fall hostage to a dictator. This was because the organisational system of a 'centralized, disciplined party welded together by a single aspiration ... [can] allow a single individual to use it for the sake of his own personal power'. Khrushchev recounts Lenin's attempt to deal with corruption

through bureaucratic agencies such as the Central Control Commission, but these in turn became corrupt. His conclusion is that 'more effective means of control from below over the leaders is necessary – that is, genuine democracy is needed'. This sounds very close to Gorbachev's starting-point – and we all now know where that led

Conclusion

Khrushchev differed greatly from Stalin who had dominated Soviet and world politics. DeStalinisation was no soundbite or empty phrase. After Khrushchev it was impossible to deny the Great Terror, and historians such as Robert Conquest and Roy Medvedev would be unthinkable without Khrushchev. Khrushchev's rule was not rooted in a view of the leader as a great theoretician: there would be no Marxism-Leninism- Stalinism-Khrushchevism! Much more important for Khrushchev was what could be achieved in the 'real world'. He was constantly intrigued by real world solutions to real world problems; and he toured the world like no Soviet leader before him. He was willing to look at what worked and to try to learn from it. If only specialists could have the right input to the Soviet system it could overcome its distortions to out-produce and defeat capitalism. In this quest Khrushchev was more and more willing and motivated to think outside the Stalinist framework. He did not have to physically annihilate 'wreckers'; they could be sacked or demoted or, if it came to it, face the popular vote. If he had continued as leader Soviet socialism could have unravelled 30 years before its eventual demise.

In retirement, in the memoirs, Khrushchev was thinking of economic, political, and international relations in a way very similar to the Gorbachev period . Khrushchev had to grapple with Stalin and Stalinism in a personal and in a political sense, in power and out of power. He regretted the elements of Stalinist thought and behaviour patterns that remained with him as leader. As a pensioner he was called into party offices and encouraged to stop recording his memoirs. He shouted at the interrogators: 'I was also infected by Stalin. I have freed myself of Stalin, but you haven't done so'. Perhaps by the end of his life Khrushchev had finally laid Stalin to rest.

Further reading:

- Nikita Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev*, 3 vols (University Park, PA, 2004-2007)
- Martin McCauley, *The Khrushchev Era 1953-1964* (London, 1995)
- William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (London, 2003) William Tompson, *Khrushchev: A Political Life* (London, 1997)

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