The Khrushchev Thaw and its effect on Soviet domestic and foreign policy during the 1950s and 1960s

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Nikita Khrushchev’s early period of leadership has been widely referred to as the ‘Khrushchev Thaw’ for the way in which it broke with the oppressive reign of Joseph Stalin and implemented new reforms throughout the Soviet Union. The foundation of Khrushchev’s leadership was established in what was referred to as the ‘secret speech’ of 1956. While denouncing the nature of Stalinist rule and proposing the need to return to the structure and policies advocated by former leader Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the ‘secret speech’ also enabled Khrushchev to firmly establish himself with the liberal reformist element of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In 1958, Khrushchev had garnered the influence necessary to emerge as the unopposed leader of the Soviet Union and began initiating reforms to the domestic sphere and shifted the approach to foreign relations. Domestically, the reforms focused on rectifying inefficiencies and shortages throughout the Soviet Union in areas including industry, education and agriculture. Khrushchev also stated his intentions for a new approach to the other regimes within the Soviet Bloc, welcoming greater independence and varying forms of communist rule. For relations with the US meanwhile, he argued that coexistence was a possibility and that the Soviet Union should engage in competition on the grounds of economic growth rather than military capacities. These new reforms and approaches would come to be included under the label of the ‘Khrushchev Thaw’; however their success in achieving their targets was mixed and many only served to evidence the almost insurmountable inefficiencies in the Soviet system.

Months prior to Stalin’s death, the individuals who had comprised his inner circle within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had begun to meet and consider the next era of governance. The early meetings were dominated by the partnership between Lavrentiy Beria and Georgy Malenkov, who together commanded proceedings and devised the new structure of personnel. The early conception saw ‘Malenkov [succeeding] Stalin as Chairman of the Council of Ministers … [while] Beria, [Vyacheslav] Molotov, [Nikolai] Bulganin and
[Lazar] Kaganovich would be his first deputies.¹ Khrushchev meanwhile, would stand down from his current role as the Moscow Party Leader and take up a new position as a Secretary in the Central Committee. The manner in which Khrushchev came to overturn these established preferences can be seen very much like Stalin’s rise to power following the death of Lenin in 1924. Khrushchev identified his influence through the apparatus of the Party, manipulating it to his benefit against his rivals and creating and breaking alliances.² Khrushchev used his rivals to establish himself in positions of power within the Party and, in 1958, had secured enough influence to guarantee his own claims to the leadership. While Khrushchev was embroiled in the struggle for the leadership, he aligned himself with the liberal elements of the Party through what has become popularly known as the ‘secret speech’. The ‘secret speech’ would come to form the foundation and perception of Khrushchev’s leadership, distinguishing him from the policies and oppressiveness of Stalinist rule in the Soviet Union. The report that formed the basis of the speech was titled On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences, looking back towards the policy and direction that was advocated by Lenin and discrediting the approach and nature of Stalin’s leadership.

Throughout the speech Khrushchev used Lenin as a point of reference, attacking Stalin and noting that Lenin disliked him and detected ‘those negative characteristics which resulted later in grave consequences’.³ Many of the changes that Khrushchev outlined were policies that had existed prior to Stalin, but there were also many that evidenced a newly formed reformist approach. The main points of the speech were the need to return to Lenin’s policy of democratically elected members within the Party, allow Eastern Europe to progress with their own variants of Communist rule and move towards coexistence with the US and the West at large.⁴ The cult of personality that surrounded Stalin during his leadership was discredited as a contradiction to Communist ideology and the ideas of Lenin. As much as Khrushchev’s ideas represented long overdue reforms, they also created ‘a whole new challenge to the legitimacy of Communist Party of the Soviet Union, inviting a suspicious attitude towards the unquestioning belief that had previously been regarded as a mark of a

² ibid., p. 241.
What was fundamental, though, was the fact that the ‘secret speech’ provided the platform for Khrushchev to establish a hold on the leadership and institute the reformist agenda referred to as the ‘Khrushchev Thaw’.

Upon securing the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1958, Khrushchev immediately began to introduce reforms and new approaches to both the domestic sphere and foreign policy. One of the sectors targeted by Khrushchev domestically was Soviet industry, which had been heavily affected by the shifting structure of the Soviet economy and political intervention. Stalin had overseen and governed the shift to autarky that had developed during the 1930s after the collapse of world markets and later, the new imperatives that were imposed in the first decade of the Cold War. Khrushchev, like many in the upper echelons of the Party, saw that there was an urgent need to expose the economy to international markets and establish the Soviet Union as a world economic power. The path followed would be based on the understanding that socialism, when applied appropriately, would provide the highest levels of economic growth and standard of living. It went further though for Khrushchev, who imagined the ‘global victory of socialism ... through superior living standards rather than military might’. The reforms that were put in place by Khrushchev did not target changes in the economic system, however, but were mostly concerned with the administration of industry. Khrushchev imposed a major overhaul which included the decentralization of industry and the creation of regional economic councils known as Sovnarkhozy.

The problems with Khrushchev’s approach, however, was that the administration of industry was targeted specifically rather than the deficiencies and practices that were impeding economic growth. For industry managers, the export market offered little reward and the changes implemented by Khrushchev could not shift perspectives or remove the incentives that gave preference to an inward focus. Industry was still based on production targets which meant that the chief concern was the payment of premiums for the successful

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fulfilment of quotas. This inevitably led to the continuation of the behaviours that were rampant under Stalin, including the hoarding of resources, the refusal to implement and use new technologies and the manipulation of costs and profits. Looking back on the reforms from 1963, Richman and Farmer observed that ‘while aggregate national production targets are typically fulfilled and even overfilled, much of what is produced is unneeded, unusable, or unsalable, and conditions of production are more often inefficient than not’. The Sovnarkhozy had little effect on these core problems and even came to exploit industry in the regions they oversaw. In many instances, the leaders within the Sovnarkhozy came to possess almost dictatorial power over the industry in their region. The reforms to industry under Khrushchev therefore, were plagued by the conditions that had impeded increased levels of production in the Soviet Union and offered little guidance and incentive to move in a new direction.

Under Stalin, public education in the Soviet Union had largely abolished the focus on educating young people through the combination of workplace experience and studies at polytechnical institutions. At the 13th Komosol Congress in April 1958, Khrushchev first proposed his planned reforms to public education in the Soviet Union. The theme of the reforms focused specifically on returning to Lenin’s strong link between school and the workforce and Khrushchev’s own desire to increase the amount of students working towards higher education qualifications. Workforce participation always remained a key element in the reforms though, with Khrushchev refusing to accept the notion that academic achievements could exempt students. The importance of work experience for Khrushchev and the education representatives who sought to implement the reforms was that firstly, it would make available a new, large base of tens of millions of students for recruitment for industry; secondly, it would mean that the education they were receiving would directly complement their work experience; and thirdly, it would give them the capacity to make informed decisions on employment for the future.

13 Ibid., p. 11.
Although the reforms to public education were successful in widening access to schooling and increasing the number of graduates with higher levels of education, it was also marked with numerous failures from 1958. The system was plagued by high levels of ‘drop-outs’, a declining standard of education based on a stretched system and accelerated teaching qualifications and the impracticality of burdening industry and agriculture with large numbers of young people.\textsuperscript{14} It was also damaged by criticism within the school system, some of which was based on the manner and pace that reform was implemented and the denial that it could effectively rectify skills shortages throughout the Soviet Union. A group of school directors in 1964 collectively wrote an article in Komsomolskaya Pravda that asked ‘Is it sensible to spend three years teaching trades which the more or less educated youths can assimilate in a matter of three or four months?’\textsuperscript{15} The term ‘back-watchers’ also emerged, describing the role of schoolchildren in industry and the sentiment that they were receiving very little practical work experience. The nature of polytechnical education that was advocated by Khrushchev caused continual problems for Soviet educators and for some, would come to be regarded as a complete failure.\textsuperscript{16}

The legacy of Stalin’s approach to agriculture and the need for quick and effective reforms made it one of Khrushchev’s more immediate concerns. Under Stalin, agricultural production was based on a centralized administrative system that had established procurement quotas to guarantee a steady flow of produce regardless of agricultural conditions.\textsuperscript{17} In his experience with the agricultural sector prior to Stalin’s death, Khrushchev had recognized the urgent need for greater investment and reforms to directly confront the problems within the agricultural sector. Khrushchev directly attacked Stalin’s approach to agriculture and his knowledge of the problems that existed in the ‘secret speech’, claiming that “he knew the country and agriculture only from films … and those films had dressed up and beautified the existing situation in agriculture”.\textsuperscript{18} The Khrushchev administration from the outset wanted to drastically increase the levels of agricultural production and close the gaps that had emerged between other production sectors.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 75.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 75.
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 97.
accelerated and concentrated investment in manufacturing industries under Stalin had opened an immense gap between agricultural production, especially in livestock and manufactured goods. Khrushchev’s solution to these problems included the creation of bigger collective farms, an expansion of state controlled farms, sponsored Machine and Tractor Stations and the abolishing of the centralized agricultural administrations in favour of agencies based at the collective farms.

The immediate results of the reforms and investment were largely positive. From 1958 to 1963, Soviet agricultural output had been ‘increasing at a very slight rate, a little more than enough to keep pace with the population expansion’. Yet it still contained the vulnerabilities that had defined agriculture under Stalin. In 1963, however, a drought greatly reduced agricultural output and forced Khrushchev to import ten million tons of grain to avoid food shortages. The simpler access to technology and the new administrations that oversaw production increased output for a short period but didn’t fully address the inefficiencies that lay at the heart of agriculture in the Soviet Union. These problems are made obvious by comparisons with the US where production outstripped the Soviet Union in the early 1960s despite the fact that ‘less than 5 million American and farm workers were cultivating about three-fourths as many hectares as ... 39 million Soviet citizens’. The early success of the agricultural reforms and the fact that they would be utilized as a framework by succeeding Soviet leaders was a testament to Khrushchev’s vision for agriculture; however, it was still plagued by the many of the problems experienced both before and after his leadership.

Khrushchev’s stated intention of welcoming distinct and, to a certain extent, independent communist regimes within Eastern Europe gathered momentum with the visit of Yugoslavian communist leader Josip Broz Tito in 1956. Welcomed by large crowds in Moscow and accompanied throughout by Khrushchev himself, the visit served as an example of a new openness to regimes in the Soviet Bloc and the mending of relations after

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20 Ibid., p. 21.
22 Ibid., p. 64.
23 Ibid., p. 67.
the divisive and oppressive stance under Stalin. Tito completed his trip with the signing of two statements that contained his desires for a reopening of cultural and economic partnerships between Russia and Yugoslavia and new levels of communication between the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Yugoslav League of Communists.\(^{24}\)

Attempting to cope with Stalin’s dysfunctional legacy, Khrushchev strove to remove the policy of direct supervision and intervention in regimes in the Soviet Bloc through the creation of a ‘socialist commonwealth’. Unity in the Soviet Bloc would be gained “through ideological incentives, the institutionalized forms of which were the Warsaw Pact (WTO) and a revived Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA)”.\(^{25}\)

The reconciliation with Tito and Khrushchev’s new approach to the Soviet bloc had widespread effects throughout Europe. However, the most significant cases occurred in Eastern Europe, which saw the regimes in Hungary and Poland come close to the point of collapse and the legitimacy of the Soviet authority challenged. In June 1956 workers in Poland engaged in large demonstrations, taking advantage of the struggle amongst communist elites that followed the death of Stalinist leader Boleslaw Beirut. The protests expanded and in October, Soviet leaders throughout Eastern Europe met to consider how to confront and respond to the discontent in Poland. The result of this was the selection of Wladyslaw Gomulka as First Secretary of the Polish United Workers Party because of his popularity and the perception that he could serve as a reformer.\(^{26}\)

Occurring almost simultaneously in Hungary, a university demonstration in support of the events in Poland took on a revolutionary fervour that targeted the Hungarian Communist Party and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The ‘soft’ approach that was taken towards the discontent in Poland would not be repeated in Hungary, however. For Soviet leaders, the possibility of Hungary leaving the WTO would have a disruptive effect in Eastern Europe and challenge the accepted idea that every society naturally progressed towards communism.\(^{27}\)

The chaos that developed in Eastern Europe exposed Khrushchev to criticism from

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conservative elements within the Communist Party and cast doubt on the idea that a more open approach to the regimes in the Soviet Bloc could maintain unity.

The approach to foreign policy that Khrushchev advocated was based on the understanding that the ‘peaceful coexistence’ of the Soviet Union and the US was possible. Closer relations was proposed as an imperative, however, with Khrushchev arguing that the ‘very survival of the Soviet Union and ... socialism did not depend on petty satraps in Eastern Europe or even on Mao Zedong, but on the USA’. 28 The pursuit of coexistence enabled Khrushchev to decrease the focus on military conflicts and arms production and attempt to establish the Soviet Union as an economic power in international markets. The nature of Khrushchev’s new approach was emphasized by the relationship he had with US President Dwight Eisenhower and the manner in which he handled the escalating tensions after the shooting down of an American U-2 Reconnaissance plane in May 1960. Immediately following the incident, Khrushchev repeatedly vouched for Eisenhower and claimed that he would not have had any knowledge of the plane’s presence in Soviet airspace. The defence of Eisenhower continued even after China criticized Khrushchev directly and resounding demands from leaders in the Communist Party for an increase in military spending in response. 29 Although relations between the two leaders deteriorated following meetings which confirmed Eisenhower’s knowledge of the plane, it provides an example of Khrushchev’s desire to avoid direct confrontations with the US.

Hopes for coexistence and limited conflicts between the two superpowers suffered a blow when the administration of John Fitzgerald Kennedy took office in 1961. From the beginning of his term, Kennedy regarded the capacities of the Soviet Union by the frequent bluffs of Khrushchev and immediately responded with the implementation of a massive ‘crash missile-building program and [the introduction of] a strategic doctrine (“flexible response”) that improved the US capacity to fight limited foreign wars’. 30 Realizing that his bluffs had been called, Khrushchev immediately searched for the means to counter the growing missile superiority of the US. The solution would form the basis of the Cuban Missile Crisis, as

30 Kenez, A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End, p. 15.
Khrushchev established a base for nuclear weapons in Cuba to counterbalance the growing superiority of American Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles.\(^\text{31}\) In the negotiations that followed, Khrushchev attempted to intimidate Kennedy until they finally reached a compromise, with Khrushchev withdrawing the missiles from Cuba in return for Kennedy removing those in Italy and Turkey. It had enormous effects within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, damaging Khrushchev’s advocacy of ‘peaceful coexistence’ but also forcing him ‘to repeal his massive troop cut and [increase] defence spending in order to counter the Kennedy defence build-up’.\(^\text{32}\)

Although the ‘Khrushchev Thaw’ represented a new potential for the Soviet Union and its place in the world, it was continually plagued by ineffective reforms to fundamental problems and the contradictions that increasingly emerged between Khrushchev’s stated intentions and his responses. In the case of industry and agriculture, Khrushchev’s reforms could not overcome the fundamental problems of inbuilt inefficiencies and established approaches. In public education, reforms provided wider education and greater access to higher education but it was hampered by the pace, scale and ambition of the changes that Khrushchev implemented. In relations with the Soviet bloc, Khrushchev was forced to move against his previous statements concerning a more welcoming response to variation when discontent in Poland and Hungary represented a challenge to unity in the Soviet Union. The failings of the doctrine of ‘peaceful coexistence’ with the United States, which first faltered with Eisenhower before being dismantled by Kennedy, meant that Khrushchev needed to accept the cost of military build-up to balance the competition. It cannot be forgotten however that Khrushchev had inherited an empire that was close to dysfunctional and required an immediate response to demands for reforms after Stalin. The direction that Khrushchev wanted to move the Soviet Union represented the possibility for a new era, but imperatives such as unity in the Soviet Bloc, the need to effectively challenge the United States and the structure of production could not be overcome.


Bibliography


