Khrushchev's Decline and Fall

The most important achievement of the XX Party Congress of 1956 was Krushchev's so-called "secret speech " in which he attacked and denouced the errors and brutalities of Joseph Stalin. No one had dared to do that before. It was the central most important event of the decade. It in effect made Khrushchev the father of the later Gorbachev Revolution.

I. The XXI Party Congress

The XXI Special Party Congress met against a background of successes for Nikita Khrushchev. He had consolidated his victory over the "anti-Party group" by removing Bulganin from the Presidium in September 1958; in December he had named as new chief of the KGB A. N. Shelepin. Khrushchev had other reasons for feeling confident. In 1958 the USSR had the best harvest in its history. In November 1958 his threat to hand Berlin over to the East Germans within six months had spread alarm in all Western capitals - though he did not carry through the threat. In January 1959 Fidel Castro had seized Cuba with strong Communist support, and thereafter identified himself with Communism and the USSR.

There had also been several significant domestic innovations of Khrushchev's. In April 1958. just as the American clamor for imitation of Soviet schools was reaching its height, he severely criticized the educational system for failing to meet the needs of socialist construction and called for greater emphasis on physical labor and actual part-time work in factories as part of the curricular pattern; such a program was enacted in December. Actually the program was soon a dead letter, except for the limitation of compulsory schooling to eight years and in its consequence the abandonment of the 1956 decision to extend full secondary education to all. Another important step in agriculture was taken by the abolition of the Machine Tractor Stations, which act the kolkhozy welcomed because it turned over farm machinery to them, but the results were dubious because they had to assume the great financial burden of paying for it and because complex equipment could not be properly maintained on most collective farms.

At the same time a number of collective farms were being converted into state farms called sovkhozy . In 1957 sovkhozy embraced over 25% of the land as against 10% in 1952. A Central Committee warning in February 1958 warned that conversion should not be too hasty. The old Khrushchev notion of the agrogorod, which he discussed again in a speech in his native Village in October 1958, remained on the Soviet agenda as a distant objective. Such developments in the Soviet countryside, pointing in the same direction as the Chinese "people's communes," suggested that the dispute between Khrushchev and Mao was less about goals than about whether the USSR was to be recognized as leading the way there.

The XXI Congress, meeting in January-February 1959, represented Khrushchev's attempt to reassert this claim against Mao's challenge. Ostensibly its task was merely to adopt an ambitious Seven-Year Plan, to run from 1959 to 1965, replacing the last two years of the Sixth Five-Year Plan which had more modest targets. Actually the aim was to demonstrate Khrushchev's supremacy in the USSR and the USSR's primacy in the international Communist Movement. Speech after speech attacked Bulganin, Pervukhin, and Saburov as members of the "anti-Party group" and lauded the leadership of Comrade

Nikita Sergeevich. Nevertheless the remaining limitations on Khrushchev's power were shown by the fact that Voroshilov remained a full member and Pervukhin a candidate member of the Presidium.

Perhaps the most significant event at the Congress was Chou En-lai's speech. in which he renewed the same kind of acknowledgment of Soviet primacy as the Chinese had made at the 1957 meeting of Communist parties, without hinting that in the meantime Mao .had challenged the Soviet position unsuccessfully. Doubtless Chou found the speech somewhat easier to give in consequence of a new Soviet grant of 5 billion rubles' worth of aid to China, announced just after the Congress.

Khrushchev's sixty-fifth birthday was commemorated in the Soviet press in April 1959, but so was Stalin's eightieth anniversary in December - for the first time in years. The new History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, published in 1959, contained criticism of Stalin, but of a much milder kind than was to be found in the "secret speech." One noteworthy development of 1959 was the extension of extra judicial methods of compulsion and punishment. In April 1956 the Soviet worker had been relieved of some of the direst penalties of the Stalin era: prosecutions for absenteeism were stopped; compulsory transfer of workers from one plant to another was ended; the prohibition of unauthorized change of job was repealed. To be sure, the plant manager still had at his disposition all sorts of instruments to keep workers working: the labor book and passport still recorded the circumstances of change of job, and various economic privileges could still be denied the laggard.

In 1959 a device long intermittently used was energetically revived: the comrades' courts, in which one's neighbors and fellow workers might mete out certain punishments for social delinquency. New Volunteer squads called druzhiny were also encouraged to form and act as guardians of public order and good conduct, hauling suspicious persons out of public places for questioning and combating "hooliganism." Labor discipline was the direct concern of a new series of judicial enactments, the "anti-parasite" laws passed in several republics in the late 1950's and in the RSFSR in May 1961. Their vague provisions made it difficult for a dissident or critic. if charged under such laws, to show he was not a "parasite."

At the XXI Congress Krushchev had claimed that no "political prisoners" were left in the USSR. However, only weeks before, in December 1958, a law had extended the death penalty as a maximum punishment for a variety of "crimes against the state," and in May 1961 such provisions were further broadened. Under such legislation several hundred people were executed and many more sent to detention, often for "economic crimes." The prominence of priests, Jews, and medium-rank Party officials among the victims, however, suggested that the laws were being used as political weapons. An especially clear example was the arrest of Olga Ivinskaia, close friend of Boris Pasternak, within weeks of the latter's death, nominally for financial misconduct.

II. Cultural Policy, 1956-1964

In the aftermath of the "secret speech," a few Soviet writers (and publishers) began to take risks by bringing out novels about Soviet society as it was, not as it was ideally supposed to be currently or to become in the future. Vladimir Dudintsev's book Not by Bread Alone, for example, was sharply attacked by official spokesmen in a public discussion held in May 1957, but his defenders bluntly retorted, and no punishment was inflicted on him.

Boris Pasternak's great novel, ***Doctor Zhivago***, was a quite different sort of work. Published in Italy in November 1957 despite reversal of an earlier Soviet decision to publish simultaneously in the USSR, it rapidly earned world-wide admiration. In the book Pasternak depicted a man who comes from the intelligentsia, is caught up in the Revolution, Civil War, and the building of the Soviet system, but retains his own system of human values and is destroyed because of them. Rather than an attempted depiction of Soviet reality, the work is a prose poem about the meaning of life: "Reshaping life! People

who can say that have never understood a thing about life . . life is never a material, a substance to be molded . . . it is constantly renewing and remaking and changing and transfiguring itself, it is infinitely beyond your or my obtuse theories about it." Although Zhivago dies, his spirit triumphs.

The Christian that Pasternak had become shows in the last stanza of the poems with which this thoroughly poetic work closes:

> I shall descend into my grave,
> And on the third clay rise again.
> And, even as rafts float down a river,
> So shall the centuries drift, trailing like a caravan,
> Coming for judgment, out of the dark. to me.

After Zhivago's death, his beloved Lara disappears into a concentration camp; the Soviet regime faithfully fulfilled this prophecy by arresting Ivinskaia. Only in 1958 did the novel enter public discussion in the USSR when Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize and Khrushchev compelled him to refuse it in exchange for being allowed to remain in the soviet Union, where he died in 1960.

The post-Hungary freeze during which Zhivago had been condemned was followed by a mild thaw in 1959. Eugene Evtushenko, one of the more popular young dissident poets, published "Babii Yar," a poem referring to a mass murder of Jews by the Nazis near Kiev as a means of striking at Soviet anti-Semitism. In November 1962 the boldest novel yet to be published in the USSR appeared: Alexander Solzhenitsyn's One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich., which was a narrative of life in one of Stalin's concentration camps. Reportedly it was published on the authority of Khrushchev himself. Later in the same month, however, someone persuaded the First Secretary to visit two exhibitions of modern art in Moscow, and he reacted with gutter language and brutal threats delivered on the spot to artists accompanying him.

At a closed meeting in the Kremlin in March 1963, Khrushchev denounced abstract art and literary experimentation in the strongest terms, sharply criticized Ehrenburg and Evtushenko, and declared that "the moldy idea of absolute freedom" would never find a place in Soviet life. In a few cases, dissident writers such as Valery Tarsis and Alexander Esenin-Volpin (son of the peasant poet of the twenties) were seized and confined on the grounds of "mental instability," thus recalling Nicholas I's treatment of Peter Chaadaev in 1836. A few others, such as Joseph Brodsky, were exiled under the "anti-parasite laws". For the most part, however, Khrushchev's regime confined itself to verbal warnings and refusals to publish or exhibit, and the limits of the permissible, though fluctuating, were certainly broader than before Stalin's death.

Some of the dissident writers and artists--notably Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn--had religious convictions, and there was enough of a revival of interest in religion among Soviet youth to provoke a campaign of repression beginning in 1959. During the next five years perhaps half of the remaining 20,000 Orthodox churches and all of the monasteries except for perhaps fifteen were closed. In June 1960 the first show trial of an Orthodox clergyman since 1927 was held: the defendant, the archbishop of Kazan, was sentenced to prison. Apparently because he refused to cooperate in the new crackdown, Metropolitan Nicholas Krutitsy, the long-time mainstay of church collaboration with the regime, fell from favor, was deprived of his offices in 1960, and died mysteriously the following year.

The beginning of resistance to religious repression appeared in 1961 in the formation of the Initiative Group (Initsiativniki) within the Baptist-Evangelical Christian Council. Repeated statements by high Party officials reminded their hearers that to be a Communist was to be an atheist, but even some of the rank-and-file showed disturbing hesitation on that apparently obvious point.

III. The XXII Party Congress

Khrushchev had tried to follow up Chinese submission at the XXI Congress with action. Indications are that in July 1959 Marshal P'eng Teh-huai and others, with Soviet backing, tried to remove Mao as chairman of the Chinese party. They failed, and P'eng was purged. But the Chinese internal offensive had brought the economy near collapse, and Mao was unable to press a counterattack. His regime faced a full-scale revolution in Tibet in March 1959 that required months to put down. Though neither the U.N. nor any of the Western powers could be persuaded to take perceptible interest in the Tibetan blood bath, the result was unfavorable publicity abroad and intensive domestic precautions lest an echo of the rising appear within China proper.

The Chinese were enraged when Khrushchev, after test visits by Mikoyan and then Kozlov, visited President Eisenhower, and became the first head of any Russian government to set foot in the United States. Talks at the President's mountain hideaway produced the "Camp David spirit," which served chiefly to pave the way for a planned summit meeting in the spring of 1960. It never took place. Khrushchev announced that an American high-flying reconnaissance plane, or U-2, had been brought down over the USSR; arriving in Paris for the summit, he demanded an apology. Eisenhower, ignoring the ancient precedent, that spies are not acknowledged when caught by the enemy, first denied the flight and then admitted it, but refused to apologize. The summit meeting was promptly called off. In September Khrushchev appeared at a U.N. General Assembly meeting, making news by a fraternal meeting with Fidel Castro and by the astonishing act of taking off his shoe and pounding the table with it to show disapproval of a U.N. speaker.

Returning from these travels, the Soviet leader convened a meeting of eighty-one Communist parties in Moscow in November-December 1960. In April Mao had put into a manifesto entitled "Long Live Leninism!" his objections to the Soviet line of detente with the West. In June at the Bucharest congress of the Rumanian party--the first such conclave in the Communist world for over thirty years to witness serious debate-Khrushchev had spoken of the Chinese as "madmen" who were ready "to unleash war," and in July had withdrawn all Soviet economic and military technicians and advisers from China. Soviet trade with China was plummeting.

At the Moscow meeting Peking's delegates yielded to such pressure and signed the conference manifesto stating that the Soviet Communist Party was the "universally recognized vanguard" of the international movement. The Chinese did manage one minor achievement: they detached Enver Hoxha's Albania from the Soviet camp. For a time it was tacitly agreed that when Peking attacked "revisionism" it mentioned Yugoslavia and not the USSR; when Moscow attacked "despotism," it gave Albania and not China as its example. The Sino-Soviet dispute would still publicly observe a few amenities.

During the next few months Khrushchev did not press further toward detente with the West. Despite Soviet approval of the cease-fire in Laos in May 1961 and subsequent agreement at Geneva to reconfirm Laotian neutrality, Khrushchev, had used brutal language in his message to President Kennedy over the ill-fated attempt to overthrow Castro at the Bay of Pigs in April. At the meeting of the two leaders in Vienna in June he convinced the new President that he was ready to provoke a new US.-USSR confrontation, and followed up tough talk with the erection of the Berlin Wall and resumption of nuclear testing.

Khrushchev was riding high. He sought to buttress the Soviet claim to be "vanguard" and did so by preparing for the "transition to communism." In July 1961 a new Party program and a new set of Party rules were published. The program envisaged completion of the "transition" by 1980, opening the way to the building of full communism thereafter. Among the delights that Soviet citizens were promised by 1980 were separate apartments for every urban family, "including newlyweds" and "conveniences," that is, indoor toilets for most peasant families. The earthly paradise was therefore still somewhat remote.

Against such a background the XXII Congress met in October. It had been preceded by a large-scale shake-up of Party cadres. Of the 9,746,000 members and candidates, more than one-third had joined since the XX Congress (1956): of the 4,813 delegates to the Congress, 19% had joined since then and over 41% since World War II. One full member was added to the Presidium: G. I. Voronov, who had been credited with increasing agricultural production in the RSFSR. Four were removed: Aristov, Furtseva, Ignatov, and Mukhitdinov. In the smallest Presidium since 1953, eleven remained.

The keynote of the Congress was further de-Stalinization. The ancient Madame Lazurkina, a party member since 1902, told of communing with Lenin's shade: "It was if he stood alive before me, and he said: 'it is unpleasant for me to lie side by side with Stalin, who brought so much harm to the party.'" Following this spiritualist report to the materialist Congress, Stalin's body was removed from the mausoleum in Red Square. though not before Chou En-lai managed to place a wreath there in his memory.

A number of speakers publicly eulogized Khrushchev, added details of Stalin's crimes to those given in the 1956 "secret speech," and made an effort to associate the "anti-Party group" with Stalin's offenses. After the Congress, Stalino was renamed Donetsk; Stalinabad, Diushambe (its original name); and most traumatic of all, Stalingrad, Volgograd. A Soviet quip had it that the dead leader sent message to the Congress acknowledging the correctness of all its decisions, signing it "Joseph Vissarionovich Volgin."

Anti-Stalinist developments in foreign affairs came when relations were broken with Albania in December 1961 and when amity was restored in Soviet-Yugoslav relations in the fall of 1962. Khrushchev's de-Stalinization line and his personal ascendancy, however, were still not completely secure; for example, not one of those denounced as criminals during the Congress was thereafter brought to trial for his alleged crimes.

VI. Khrushchev's Last Days in Power

Apparently misjudging both Kennedy and the United States, Khrushchev installed Soviet missiles in Cuba, while offering bland assurances that he was not doing so. He was apparently surprised and certainly alarmed when President Kennedy, in October 1962, responded with a virtual ultimatum, to which the First Secretary yielded by withdrawing the missiles. Probably the world had not been so close to war since 1945. Soviet technology was certainly advancing in a spectacular way; Yuri Gagarin orbited the earth in April 1961, while John Glenn matched this feat only in February 1962. But the Soviets did not wish nuclear war, however advanced their technology.

In fact Khrushchev did his best to convert his diplomatic humiliation over Cuba into a victory, and aside from his boast that he had preserved peace, he had gains to show: the United States, by being brought to confine its objective to the withdrawal of Soviet missiles, scrapped the Monroe Doctrine, and Cuba remained both free from the threat of invasion and intact as a base for Communist subversion throughout the Western Hemisphere. Khrushchev's newly pacific posture (or resumption of the policy of detente, if one prefers) was reinforced in August 1963 by the installation of a Washington-Moscow "hot line" and by the signing of a treaty among the USSR, Britain. and the U.S.A. (to which many countries later added their signatures), banning further nuclear tests except under ground.

As a result of the Cuban crisis Soviet relations with Communist China worsened. The Soviets implied disapproval of the Chinese offensive against India that had just been launched when Kennedy made his dramatic speech to Americans on the missiles in Cuba. During the Cuban crisis, Peking supported the Soviets, but once it was over, there were ample taunts about both the adventurist unwisdom of placing the missiles in Cuba to begin with and the capitulationism involved in withdrawing them. The Chinese denounced the nuclear test-ban treaty, and polemics on both sides became overt, no longer

using the surrogate targets of Yugoslavia and Albania.

When the U.N. General Assembly convened in the fall, for the first time Albania, not the USSR, presented the perennial demand for the seating of Communist China in place of the Nationalist Government, Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated still further. Mao told some Japanese socialist visitors in August 1964 that the USSR was an imperialist state, that "the Russians took everything they could" in Eastern Europe and in Northeastern Asia, and that the Kurile islands should be returned immediately to Japan. The previous month the Soviets had laid plans for an international Communist conclave to condemn China.

If foreign affairs were not going well, neither were domestic affairs. In November 1962 a division of the party was announced into industrial and agricultural sections, but no one knew how to make this work, especially after the sovnarkhozy were made much larger by being reduced in number to forty-seven early in 1963. Agriculture was not doing well, and a bad harvest in 1963 resulted in the humiliation of having to import grain. Restrictions on the private plots, decline of private livestock holdings, and conversions of kolkhozy into sovkhozy produced agrarian stagnation. Corn, "virgin lands," and other expedients had not worked. A better idea, if still no panacea, was being bruited by Khrushchev at the very end: large-scale increase of fertilizer production. But his colleagues had lost patience. He returned from a vacation in the Crimea to be greeted on October 14, 1964, with the news that his resignation had been accepted.

The next day Pravda reported the news and denounced "hare-brained schemes; half-baked conclusions and hasty decisions and actions, divorced from reality; bragging and bluster; attraction to rule by fiat; unwillingness to take into account what science and practical experience have already discovered .... " Thus ran the political obituary of the colorful and crude little man who had brought the world to the very verge of war and yet tried to further "peaceful co-existence" with the West, who had been brutal enough in his time though he had steadily pushed "de-Stalinization" and who had tightened the screws on the Soviet peasant while at the same time he offered the Soviet consumer visions of "goulash Communism." Overnight Khrushchev disappeared into retirement, and the world gasped in astonishment.

Source: Donald Treadgold, Twentieth Century Russia.

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