THE RISE OF KHRUSHCHEV

Upon the death of Stalin in March 1953, speculation centered on who would succeed him as dictator, master of the Party and the government. At first it seemed that Malenkov would manage to do so. He had been designated heir by implication at the XIX Congress, and whether or not he had fallen into Stalin's disfavor since then, he was now featured by the Soviet press ahead of all other leaders. For ten days he held both of the most crucial posts, chairman of the Council of Ministers and senior Party secretary.

The Triumvirate

It was then announced that he had yielded the latter (and historically more decisive) job to Nikita Khrushchev. Nevertheless, the triumvirate of Malenkov, Beria, and Molotov, in that order, continued to be treated in the press as the chief personalities of the Party and government.

In the Presidium as reconstituted after Stalin's death, the new roster of full members (reduced from 25 to ten) comprised, in addition to the triumvirate, Bulganin, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, Mikoyan, Khrushchev, Saburov, and Pervukhin. The Party Secretariat was reduced from ten to five: Khrushchev was assisted by Suslov, former head of the Agitprop Department of the Central Committee, Pospelov, Shatalin, Ignatiev, former head of the MGB (Ministry of State security). Voroshilov replaced Shvernik as chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet (president of the USSR) . A new Presidium of the Council of Ministers, consisting of the triumvirate plus Bulganin and Kaganovich, included the leading figures of the government proper, and, it appeared (with the exception of Khrushchev), of the Party as well. The slogan of "collective leadership" was widely used to describe the new dispensation, but the fact that the same slogan had been used in Lenin's last days and the months after his death suggested that the arrangements of March 1953 might not be permanent.

During the following months Stalin's name was mentioned in the Soviet press with sharply fluctuating frequency. At one moment it might virtually disappear, the next it might be mentioned fairly often, though still much less obtrusively than during his lifetime. The frequent use of the phrase, "the cult of personality," in an unfavorable sense, cast a reflection at least on the outward conventions of the treatment of Stalin while he lived. Even more revealing were the policy statements made by Malenkov and Beria, which implied, if not direct criticism of Stalin's acts, at least an awareness that his policies had deepened popular discontent with the regime and a hope that a "new course" might evoke a different reaction from the Soviet people.

Malenkov identified himself with a promise of a higher level of production of consumer's goods, and the phrase "two or three years," which he used to suggest when such promises might be realized, became a public byword. Beria took an even more startling tack by suggesting that mild legal changes were in order. On April 3 he announced that the "doctors' plot" which had been "exposed" during Stalin's last days had been a hoax. Fabrication of the "plot" was ascribed to Riumin, who had been deputy minister of the MGB, and he was arrested. while Ignatiev, his chief, was sharply criticized. Beria further reported that "inadmissible" methods had been used by the police in handling suspects, called for revision of the criminal code to reduce the severity of penalties for minor crimes, and even

spoke of the need for protecting the rights of Citizens guaranteed Under the Constitution.

East European satellites

These developments were reflected in various ways in the East European satellites. The precedent of the Soviet separation of Party and governmental leadership, at the time Khrushchev took over the Party secretaryship from Malenkov, was followed in several satellite regimes. The death of President Gottwald of Czechoslovakia, reportedly from pneumonia contracted at Stalin's funeral, led to his replacement as president by Zapotocky and as party chief (under the title of First Secretary) by Antonin Novotny.

In July 1953 Matyas Rakosi yielded the premiership of Hungary to Imre Nagy, who inaugurated a "New Course" patterned after Malenkov's policy of increasing consumer goods production, but also permitted peasants to leave collective farms and released a number of political prisoners including the Socialist Anna Kethly. In the early months of 1954 the separation of offices took place in other satellites, although unaccompanied by any such extensive shift of policy as in Hungary. The Bulgarian leader Viko Chervenkov and the Rumanian Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej kept their premierships and gave up their party secretaryships, while the Pole Boleslaw Bierut and the Albanian Enver Hoxha kept their party secretaryships (now everywhere the title became "First Secretary" instead of "General Secretary"--the title Stalin had used) and gave up their premierships.

Already by June 1953 the post-Stalin changes in leadership and policy had created a public impression of indecision and weakness at the top. In the satellites as well as the USSR, several demonstrations of unrest occurred within a few weeks of each other. On June 1 there were strikes in several Czechoslovak cities, occasioned by a financial "reform" which wrought much hardship on the industrial workers. In Pilzen the strikers held a political demonstration, seized the city hall, and demanded free elections, before secret police troops intervened. On June 16 an increase of labor "norms" in East Germany provoked a protest which rapidly turned into a revolutionary general strike in Berlin and other East German cities. Soviet troops were brought in, and the strike was crushed.

Beria Arrested

On July 10 it was announced that Beria, who had identified himself most clearly with the new measures and in particular with legal as distinct from economic changes, had been arrested. His appointee as East German police chief, Wilhelm Zaisser, and many of his Soviet henchmen were also purged. Although Khrushchev later told a French Socialist visitor that Beria had been shot immediately after his arrest, it was net until December that it was publicly announced that Beria and six of his supporters had been executed without public trial--possibly because he had refused to "confess." Beria was charged with having attempted to seize power, acting as a "capitalist" agent, and so forth. It is impossible to know what his plans actually were, but the sequence of events clearly suggests that he was made the scapegoat for the East Berlin uprising.

In any event, no more was said in the USSR about legal or political changes, although Malenkov continued his policy of promising economic concessions, and the "New Course" was proclaimed in Hungary and to a lesser extent the other satellites after the Berlin uprising. In some ways the most astonishing of the first series of post-Stalin demonstrations occurred in the Soviet Union itself a few days after Beria's arrest. In the concentration camp complex of Vorkuta, in the Pechora basin of northeast European Russia, there developed a mass strike of prisoners who voiced political demands. After initial hesitation, the strike was put down with mass executions.

This was the political background to Khrushchev's ascendancy. Now let us focus on Khrushchev's rise to power itself. Nikita Khrushchev was born in Kursk, just northeast of the Ukrainian border, in 1894. He was a completely uneducated coal miner when he joined the Party in 1918. He attended a Rabfak or special worker's school and showed himself so apt in his training in Party work that in 1934 he became Kaganovich's assistant in running the Moscow Party organization and in 1935 succeeded him as its secretary. In 1938 he was placed in charge of the Ukrainian party, and except for 1946-1947 when Kaganovich replaced him briefly. He remained so until 1949.

During his last two years in that post he conducted a mass purge of officials in the Ukrainian Republic. He became a full member of the Politburo in 1939, and remained in the Presidium when it was so renamed. In 1949 he returned to Moscow to take over the Party organization there once again, and became a secretary of the Central Committee. He had gained something of a reputation in the field of agricultural policy and had authored the agrogorod proposal in 1951. Since he suffered no demotion when it was withdrawn, it was thought that the Politburo had supported the proposal and allowed him to bear the public blame for "extremism" merely to save face. After the death of Stalin he had obviously achieved a place of great power by taking over the senior secretaryship of the Party from Malenkov.

In September 1953 Khrushchev made an important statement on Soviet agriculture which indicated an increase in his power (ten days later he became first Secretary" of the Soviet Party) , and at the same time admitted more bluntly than ever before the horrifying state of the collective farms. Among other things Khrushchev reported that the total number of cattle in the USSR was lower than it had been in 1916 under Nicholas II ' The point of Khrushchev's report was of course not to indict the kolkhoz system, hut to evoke greater efforts on the "agricultural front." As a result, state-paid prices for compulsory deliveries were raised, the attempt to enforce the fixed minimums of compulsory labor (first set in 1942) by criminal prosecution was abandoned, and a good deal was said about "incentives" and "initiative."

Despite such apparent concessions to the peasantry, the regime strengthened its control over the collective farms still further. In mid-1954 the compulsory labor minimums were raised very substantially and enforced by means of greatly increased taxation on households any member of which fell short of his minimum. In addition a team of Party "instructors" was placed in each Machine-Tractor Station with powers to interfere in the collective farms which the MTS served (and which were virtually subject to its jurisdiction), and in April 1955 there was announced a mass replacement of collective farm chairmen (who had earlier been made openly subject to Party "confirmation") by urban Party workers.

Virgin Lands Policy

All these measures were identified with Khrushchev, who evidently took over agricultural policy from Malenkov in September 1953. In February 1954 Khrushchev inaugurated as dramatic and sweeping a measure as the agrogorod idea would have been: in order to increase grain output it was ordered that an area later given as around seventy million acres of "virgin and idle lands" in the fertile but arid regions of Asiatic Russia was to be plowed up and sown. Thousands of young people and Party workers were dispatched as labor and supervisory personnel to do the job. In January 1955 Khrushchev demanded that around seventy million acres be planted in corn (that is, maize) for fodder in order to increase livestock production. The resulting cornfields, on flat and hilly country, in cold and warm regions, earned him the nickname of kukuruzchik ("the corn enthusiast") .

Khrushchev's agricultural report and his elevation to the first secretaryship of the Soviet Party were the prelude to a number of personnel changes in the Party machinery which were reminiscent of the

removals and appointments which Stalin had authored in the mid-twenties with a view to solidifying his own control of the Party. The fall of Beria was followed by a purge of the Georgian and Azerbaijani organizations in which Beria's influence had been especially strong. In November Andrianev, the Leningrad party secretary, was removed and about the same period the chiefs of the Moscow and other regional organizations were replaced. Apparently few of these men suffered execution, hitherto the usual fate of purged Party leaders. However, in 1954 two prominent men were shot' Riumin, who died in July, thus surviving his original accuser, Beria, by a few months, and in December Victor Abakumov, former head of the MGB, who was charged with framing the defendants in the so-called "Leningrad case" . Since this case involved the purging of Zhdanov's supporters, and thus presumably had the approval of Zhdanov's apparent rival, Malenkov, Abakumov's execution suggested that Malenkov's position had been seriously undermined.

Khrushchev's ascendancy became plainer month by month. In November and December his signature appeared alone on certain decrees, and he made speeches and granted interviews on a Variety of subjects. In December 1954 and January 1955 the Malenkov-Khrushchev conflict erupted in public print in a fashion unfamiliar in the USSR for a quarter of a century. Whereas Izvestiia, the government organ and thus presumably controlled by Malenkov, emphasized again the need for consumer's goods, Pravda, the organ of the Party and thus, it seemed, the voice of Khrushchev, attacked unidentified persons who wanted to encourage light industry as guilty of "a belching of the Rightist deviation views which Rykov, Bukharin, and their ilk once preached." This was a clear declaration of war on Malenkov.

On February 8, 1955, Georgy Malenkov resigned as chairman of the Council of Ministers, making an unprecedented statement in which he referred to his "inexperience," took on himself the "guilt" for what was admitted to be "the unsatisfactory state of affairs in agriculture" (which had according to all indications been managed by Khrushchev, not Malenkov, for the past year and all half), and declared that the policy of founding the economy on heavy industry was the "only correct" one. On Khrushchev's motion, the Supreme Soviet which heard the announcement of Malenkov's resignation promptly elected Bulganin as the new Prime Minister. Marshal Zhukov replaced Bulganin as minister of defense.

At that time the Party Presidium underwent no change, but at all Central Committee meeting in July 1955, two new full members were added: Kirichenko, first secretary of the Ukrainian party, and Suslov, one of the Party secretaries. The total was now eleven, the whole Presidium of March 1953 having been carried over except for the dead Beria. Three new men were named to the Secretariat: Shepilov, editor of Pravda; Aristov, party secretary of Khabarovsk province, who now became Khrushchev's chief assistant for Party affairs; and Beliaev, party secretary of the Altai province--the latter two appointments apparently reflecting Khrushchev's concern with the affairs of Soviet Asia. Shatalin, reputedly all Malenkov supporter, disappeared from the list of secretaries.

At the July Central Committee meeting it was also announced that the next Party Congress would be held the following February. As all result of the February and July reorganizations, apparently the single most important figure in the regime was Khrushchev, with Bulganin second.

Khrushchev and Bulganin

The leadership of Khrushchev and Bulganin, however, was as yet far from secure. One known rival, Malenkov, regained sufficient power that he was not removed from be Presidium, and there might have been others. The satellites had shown restlessness, and certain satellite leaders had evidently had close ties with Malenkov.

In the background the specter of Stalin hovered over the Soviet leaders--for the Soviet people, an image associated with repression, terror, and want; for foreign Communists, still an unbroken ikon; for the Western governments, a repugnant symbol but one which at the same time represented certainty about who could speak for the Soviet regime, a certainty which had been thrown into grave doubt.

The first essentials seemed to be for Khrushchev and Bulganin to establish clearly their authority over the East European satellites, remove the continuing danger for the Soviet orbit produced by the independence of Tito, and achieve recognition in international affairs. They attempted to postpone the more difficult problem of Stalin's ghost.

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