CHAPTER 18
Khrushchev and the Politics of Reform

The Thaw and Destalinization

By introducing what he called “socialist legality,” Khrushchev eased the pressure on intellectuals, party and government officials, and ordinary people. Tens of thousands of victims of Stalinism were rehabilitated, and survivors drifted back into Soviet society, as visible witnesses to an irrepressible past. Yet at the same time the complete subordination of law and the courts to the goals and interests of the Communist Party gave little protection to anyone who opposed the party openly. Though the penalties had been reduced—people were no longer shot for political crimes—those who persisted in their opposition were arrested, sent to labor camps, and subjected to physical and psychological pain. The boundaries of discussion, personal autonomy, and possible criticism of the regime had been expanded, but severe limits were maintained on public expression of political dissent.

The post-Stalin leadership was very insecure before the Soviet people. Their first message to the population warned people not to panic because of Stalin’s death. Borrowing the word from the title of Ilya Ehrenburg’s 1953 novel, they favored a cultural “thaw,” but as Khrushchev reports in his memoirs, “We were scared—really scared. We were afraid that the thaw might unleash a flood, which we wouldn’t be able to control and which could drown us... We wanted to guide the progress of the thaw so that it would stimulate only those creative forces which would contribute to the strengthening of socialism.” Intellectuals were given more freedom, though restrictions on their works were maintained, and party leaders, especially Khrushchev, felt they had an absolute right to intervene in cultural affairs and dictate style and content to artists and writers. As he put it succinctly,

The press and radio, literature, art, music, the cinema and theater are a sharp ideological weapon of our Party. And the Party sees to it that that weapon should be kept ready for action at all times and strike telling blows at our enemies.

In the stultifying atmosphere of late Stalinism the world of culture had atrophied. Writers had been compelled to write literature “without conflict” to reflect a Soviet society supposedly free of conflict. The film industry produced only eight feature films in 1951. In the first year after Stalin’s death several prominent Soviet writers raised new themes in their work. They spoke of sincerity, bureaucratic corruption, and the tensions between generations. Late in 1954 the Second Congress of Soviet Writers rejected the “theory of no conflict” and made it clear that a somewhat more tolerant period for culture had begun. The puritanism and what might be called “Soviet humanism” of Stalinist literature continued to set the tone for depicting interpersonal relations in art and literature. Kindness and feeling toward other humans, cooperation with family members and fellow workers, honesty and integrity were emphasized, whereas ambition, competitiveness, egotism, and “uncultured behavior” were condemned. The party and the official artistic establishment remained as the final arbiters of what was acceptable in terms of content and style. There was to be no return to the NEP years of contending schools and party passivity.

Khrushchev’s criticism of the “cult of personality” encouraged intellectuals to criticize the excesses of Stalinist cultural practices. Some critics boldly suggested that administrative controls over art be lifted, others that the artists themselves be the judge of artistic works. Konstantin Simonov wrote that party intervention had not improved but distorted Fadeev’s war novel, The Young Guard, by forcing the author to elevate the role of the party in the plot. Well-entrenched conservatives lashed back at those who sought liberalizing change, and the intelligentsia was divided into nostalgic Stalinists and reformers. A spate of literary rehabilitations took place beginning in 1956. The satirical novels of the popular Ilf and Petrov, the authors of The Twelve Chairs and The Golden Calf, two classics of the 1920s, were republished. Works by Isaac Babel, who perished in the purges, and Iurii Olesha, who survived by being silent, were reissued. The journal New World became the vehicle for new stories and novels that pushed the frontier of what was permissible. In 1956 it published Not by Bread Alone, a novel by Vladimir Dudintsev that exposed the corruption, immorality, and philistinism of Soviet bureaucrats. Dudintsev’s novel stimulated a vigorous debate in Soviet society, and critics soon turned their wrath on his characterization of Soviet officials. Rather than simply collapsing before his opponents, Dudintsev argued at a meeting of writers, “I think that we might be allowed, like beginning swimmers, to try to swim on our own, to take our own chances of drowning. But, alas, I always feel a halter, like the harness that children are sometimes supported by. And it keeps me from swimming.”

Younger authors, like the poets Evtushenko and Andrei Voznesenskii, appeared in print, experimenting with form and criticizing remnants of Stalinism. An idealistic search for truth and honesty was explored in Evtushenko’s early poem “Zima Station,” in which the poet proclaims, “Yes, truth is good, and happiness is better, / But still, without truth there can be no happiness.” That sentiment was spoken by the village of Zima, the metaphor for the people, to the lone intellectual who is told to “go into the world” and “love people and you will understand them.” The literary scene, particularly in Moscow and Leningrad, blossomed in the mid-1950s. Young people from around the
world came to Moscow in 1957 to attend the World Youth Festival, and Soviet young people began to more openly express their own culture and style in dress, taste, and leisure activities. Poetry readings attended by hundreds, then thousands, were held at the monument to Mayakovsky in central Moscow and later at the Luzhniki stadium. Soviet youth rebelled in their own way against the conformity imposed by adult society; some became tough rebels known as stiliagi, while others explored the new novels and films coming in from the West. Interest in jazz revived after the long, imposed drought of the Stalin years. With the heavy weight of pervasive fear of the police lifted, people indulged more in private activities and paid less attention to the demands of the officially proclaimed “Communist morality.” Whereas official doctrine required subordination of emotion to reason, individual passion to the good of the family or the larger community, more people now considered their own desires in making life choices. The divorce rate soared in the first decade of Khrushchev’s rule.

Khrushchev tried to rein in the liberalization in the arts in the late summer of 1957. He warned that “we support writers who maintain the correct position in literature, who write about what is positive in life.” He was prepared to forgive those writers, even Dudintsev, who mended their ways with the help of the party. The boundaries of the permissible were demonstrated most vividly in the famous “Pasternak affair.” In 1955 the renowned Soviet poet Boris Pasternak submitted his novel Doctor Zhivago to three Soviet publishers, all of whom after a year declined to publish the work, which viewed the revolution as an ambivalent, unheroic event. Khrushchev read only selected excerpts of the novel and, relying on the judgments of others, agreed to ban the work. After the novel appeared in foreign editions, Pasternak was awarded the 1958 Nobel Prize for literature. Two days later a Soviet campaign against the novel and the Nobel Prize began. Under enormous pressure at home, Pasternak wrote to the Swedish Academy: “In view of the meaning given to your award by the society to which I belong, I must renounce this undeserved distinction which has been conferred upon me. Please do not take my voluntary renunciation amiss.” The media outside the Soviet bloc attacked Soviet censorship, and by its harsh policy toward critical literature the Soviet Union embarrassed itself internationally. Khrushchev himself later regretted the whole affair and proposed that Pasternak be readmitted to the Writers’ Union, from which he had been expelled. But he never challenged the notion that there ought to be an orthodox Soviet literature or that the party ought to play a role in determining the limits of expression. His contribution was to broaden but not to abolish what could and could not be written, painted, or said. The party, he told the writers attending the Third Congress of Soviet Writers in May 1959, had deprived them not only of the right to write badly “but above all of the right to write wrongly.”

Cultural policy remained inconsistent and variable throughout the Khrushchev years. Khrushchev reduced the role of Stalin in history and promoted what he considered to be a “return to Leninism.” But when historians tried to open up discussion on critical aspects of the party’s history, censors hit them hard. The freeze of 1957–59 gave way to a second thaw in cultural affairs, which lasted until about 1962. Young poets again emerged with sharply critical verses. In 1961 the flamboyantEvtushenko wrote his attack on covert anti-Semitism, “Babi Yar,” which was followed the next year by his powerful poem “Heirs of Stalin,” which appeared in Pravda. In 1962, after a personal intervention by Khrushchev, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s short novel One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, which told the gripping story of a simple, persevering prisoner in a Siberian labor camp, was published.

The early 1960s was a time when intellectuals still possessed a faith in the socialist project and the possibility of fundamental eradication of the Stalinist legacy. In his novels The First Circle and Cancer Ward, Solzhenitsyn elaborated an intellectual’s vision of a humanistic socialism. But this second thaw was already threatened in December 1962 when Khrushchev visited the Manege, the large exhibition hall by the Kremlin, to view the works of contemporary artists. There he fumed against the abstract experimentation, using foul language and bare-knuckled threats. Still, in his last year in power the experimental theater On the Taganka opened in Moscow and soon introduced stirring productions of Bertold Brecht to the Soviet public.

In many ways Khrushchev was an idealistic Communist. At the Twenty-First Party Congress early in 1959 he announced that the USSR was entering a new stage of history, “the period of the full-scale building of communism,” a period in which state regulation of society would decrease and the role of public organizations, like the soviets, trade unions, komsomols, would increase. Communist morality, rather than state authority, would regulate the relations between people. Two years later his supporters drafted a new party program, the first since 1919. The new program declared that the USSR was no longer a dictatorship of the proletariat but now was to be considered “a state of the whole people.” The program made the bold claim that the Soviet Union would surpass the United States in per-capita output by 1971 and in other economic spheres by the 1980s. Under communism, which was now being built, the state would wither away, though not the party.

Farm, Factory, and School

Khrushchev’s political fate was tied intimately to his successes and failures in agriculture. Since the early 1930s agriculture had been the poor cousin in the Soviet economy. In 1958 almost fifteen times more investment capital was made available per industrial worker than per able-bodied collective farmer. Khrushchev increased investment in the countryside, raised procurement prices, replaced the system of compulsory deliveries with planned state purchases, and brought collective farmers into the social security system. He constantly fought conservatives, who wanted to maintain greater state control over the farms, and gave the collective farms greater autonomy. Between 1953 and 1958 farm output increased 8.5 percent annually and 51 percent overall. This was due largely to the opening of new lands and the introduction of incentives. By 1958 collective farmers received double the retail price value that they had received in 1953, and they gained greater mobility when they received the
internal passports that all other Soviet citizens had had since the mid-1930s. Overall, Khrushchev’s agricultural reforms resulted in an increase in agricultural output of 74 percent, in ruble terms, from 1953 to 1964. At the same time, the number of farmers declined by 10 percent. But far too many people were still engaged in agriculture, and the per-capita productivity of farm labor remained low. By the end of the 1950s, agriculture began to suffer. In 1959 the harvest in Kazakhstan fell 17 million tons short of its grain target, the first notable failure of the Virgin Lands program.

When Khrushchev tried to introduce new, more sweeping reforms in December 1959, the Central Committee resisted. Two years later international tensions between the West and the Soviet Union aided the military–industrial group within the party to defend the traditional investment policies in heavy industry and the military. Farm management was put under more bureaucratic control, as ministries of production and procurement were set up in the union republics. Bad weather devastated the 1963 harvest. The long-term consequences of underinvestment in agriculture, the lack of infrastructure such as proper storage facilities and adequate roads to take goods to market, and the chronic low productivity and colossal waste on the collective farms all testified to a permanent crisis in the rural economy. The overexploitation of the Virgin Lands, where spring wheat was planted, eroded soil and promoted weeds. Those lands, which were dry plains appropriate for grazing but not necessarily planting, demanded expensive irrigation and fertilization, which was an enormous burden on the Soviet economy. Here as in much smokestack industry pell-mell productivism was leading to an impending ecological disaster.

Just as he had improved the lot of the collective farmer, Khrushchev raised the standard of living of industrial workers. Average wages increased from 67 rubles a month for workers and employees in 1952 to 91 rubles in 1964. The government repealed the harsh labor laws of the Stalin period and reduced the work week from 48 hours to 46 in 1956 and to 41 in 1960. Yet at the same time Khrushchev was capable of ruthlessly exercising physical force to maintain the system in which he believed. People in the North Caucasian town of Novocherkassk were experiencing shortages of meat and butter in early June 1962, when unexpectedly the government raised prices for meat and dairy. Workers at the local locomotive plant went on strike and demanded that their complaints be conveyed to the government. They organized a march to the party headquarters for the next morning, which was to feature red banners and Lenin’s portrait, but before they could act, the leaders of the protest were arrested, and troops moved into town. Tanks appeared, and machine-guns fired into a crowd gathered at the city party committee to demand the release of those arrested. Over twenty people were killed and thirty wounded. The victims were secretly buried, and seven leaders of the strike were executed. A few concessions were made to the strikers, and local food stores were restocked, but no news of the events appeared in the press for nearly thirty years.

Soviet socialism offered the promise that life would improve over time, and the promise of continued growth was widely believed, not only in the USSR but in the West as well. The Soviet leader’s boast that “we will bury you” was taken seriously by commentators in the United States, who were impressed by Soviet rates of economic growth and achievements in education, rocketry, and science. When the Soviet Union launched the first space satellite, called Sputnik (fellow traveler), on October 4, 1957, a shock passed through the Western nations. When that success was followed by a rocket orbiting the Earth, carrying the dog Laika and later (April 1961) the first human in space, Yuri Gagarin, a deep panic spurred American and West Europeans to invest in rockets and scientific education. In the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s rocket launches were a major spectator sport in the United States, but the public was dismayed by American failures and Soviet successes. Though the Soviets did not televise their launches, their leadership in the “space race” generated enormous pride and support for the system. The Soviets touted any achievement by the Soviet Union, whether in rocket science or Olympic sports, as evidence of the superiority of Soviet socialism.

In the 1950s the Soviet gross national product grew at an annual rate of 7.1 percent, compared to the American rate of growth of 2.9 percent. But because the economic base from which the United States grew was so much larger, the Soviets still lagged far behind. From 1958, however, the Soviet rate of growth slowed down to 5.3 percent per year, where it remained until 1964, the year of Khrushchev’s fall. The USSR’s rate of economic growth had peaked and would slow down throughout the next several decades. Labor productivity, as well as the productivity of capital, also declined. Inefficiency and waste were rampant in the system, and reformers like Khrushchev (and later Gorbachev) were unable to reverse the slowdown.

Soviet economists tried to find solutions to the chronic problems of the economy. In 1962 Evsei Liberman proposed an innovative approach calling for more autonomy for enterprises, new material rewards for increasing productivity, profit (revenues over costs) as the indicator of economic success, and prices set by the market rather than by planners. The Liberman Plan was widely discussed, as economists tried to reconcile their new enthusiasm for market mechanisms with the Soviet dedication to planning. The bolder thinkers supported the idea of eliminating price-setting by the state and recognizing that markets, albeit “socialist markets,” were indispensable. But conservatives in the party leadership blocked these more radical reforms, and managers of enterprises worked around them. Few were implemented before Khrushchev’s fall.

Khrushchev was a simple man, even crude at times, and he remained committed to the egalitarianism inherent in Marxist theory and to the special role of workers. As a product of the working class himself, Khrushchev worried about the condescension of intellectuals and professionals toward manual labor. In an effort both to restore prestige and value to ordinary labor and to increase the skill levels of Soviet workers, he introduced a sweeping educational reform in 1958, which attempted to combine academic learning with vocational training. All students were to go through eight years of compulsory schooling, after which they would either go to work, to a special technical school, or to a school that also offered vocational training. Every student was to do some work in a factory or on a farm, and the total number of required school years was raised from ten to eleven. Though the number of elite “magnet” schools for mathematics, languages, and the arts was increased, most Soviet students were
to go through general education with three years of vocational training. Special efforts were also made to recruit workers and peasants into the educational system.

A second thrust of the educational reform was to elevate the knowledge of Russian among non-Russians. Though all students had been obliged to learn Russian as a second language since 1938, Khrushchev increased emphasis on Russian-language teaching and allowed those living in non-Russian republics who did not wish to study the local language to choose not to. Thus, a double standard for language learning was enforced: everyone had to learn some Russian but Russian-speakers did not have to learn another Soviet language, even if they lived in a non-Russian republic.

Khrushchev attempted to deal with some of the more glaring problems of the non-Russian nationalities. He ended the exile of those small peoples of the North Caucasus, such as the Chechens, Ingush, and Balkars, and allowed them to return to their homelands. But he did not restore the autonomous district of the Volga Germans or permit the Crimean Tatars to return to Crimea. He did not take the borders between Soviet republics seriously and in 1954 casually transferred the Russian-populated Crimea from the Russian Federation to Ukraine. By decentralizing power in the USSR and giving greater authority to local and republic leaders, Khrushchev aided the process of rooting many of the non-Russian nationalities in their own homelands, and in so doing consolidated their ethnic and cultural identities, and strengthened the national intelligentsias and Communist elites on the peripheries. Though occasionally he would remove a Communist leader who appeared to be too close to his own people, Khrushchev was not overly concerned about nationality issues. He firmly believed that ultimately the various peoples of the USSR would grow closer together culturally until they blended into a single nation. He promoted Russian language and culture, particularly in the Baltics, Ukraine, and Belarus, where Russian in-migration diluted the local national culture to some degree, but in the south the major nationalities in the Central Asian and Transcaucasian republics increasingly became dominant in their home republics.

The Arms Race

Despite Soviet successes in rocketry, the strategic balance of power heavily favored the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the aftermath of the Hungarian Revolution and the simultaneous Suez crisis, the United States announced its intention to place medium-range nuclear weapons, targeted at the Soviet Union, in Turkey, Iran, Japan, and West Germany. Later that year the Americans and West Germans rejected a Soviet plan to create a nuclear-free zone in central Europe. In 1957 the United States had two thousand nuclear bombs to the Soviet Union's several hundred. The Americans were able to humiliate the Soviets by flying high-speed spy planes over Soviet territory with impunity (until the U-2 incident of 1960) and used "spy satellites" beginning in 1960.

Though the Soviets developed the first intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) in 1957, their missiles were highly unreliable, and few in number. Between 1959 and 1965, the USSR had 750 medium-range missiles deployed against Europe, but only 4 that could reach the United States. Their bombers were inferior to the Americans' B-52s. Soviet bombers were able to reach the United States but not to return home. Yet ambitious American politicians claimed that Russia had a much greater bomber force than the United States and that large expenditures were needed to bridge the so-called "bomber gap." In 1960 the United States launched its first Polaris submarine, and by the next year it had procured missiles that allowed the government to state publicly that it could attack the USSR without the Soviets being able to retaliate effectively. At the same time the issue of an alleged "missile gap" with the Soviet Union was featured in the 1960 presidential contest between Nixon and Senator John F. Kennedy.

Rift with China

Faced with a nuclear menace in the West, a rearming West Germany, and unruly satellites in the Soviet bloc, the Soviet Union also had to contend late in the 1950s with growing tensions with the Chinese Communist leaders. In the years 1957-61 the two most powerful Communist parties drifted apart. The post-Stalin leadership was anxious to maintain good relations with China. Khrushchev's first trip abroad, in September 1954, was to China. The Chinese
leaders wanted to receive more material and military aid from the Soviet Union and have Soviet troops leave the Chinese ports of Dairen and Port Arthur, where they had been stationed since 1945. Khrushchev thought the Chinese requests excessive but agreed to increase aid, evacuate the Soviet bases, and invite thousands of Chinese students to be educated in the USSR.

China was a mammoth state with its own geopolitical and strategic interests. The Chinese leadership developed its own ties with other Asian and African powers at the Bandung Conference in the spring of 1955, emphasizing its willingness to develop peaceful relations with its neighbors. But Mao Zedong was appalled by Khrushchev’s denunciations of Stalin, his rapprochement with the West and Yugoslavia, and the growing disunity in the international Communist movement. In an important statement late in 1956, the Chinese Politburo declared, “In our opinion Stalin’s mistakes take second place to his achievements.” The declaration recognized the USSR as “the center of international proletarian solidarity” but warned against “big power chauvinism.” While the Soviet leaders advocated “peaceful coexistence,” discouraged local wars that could escalate into larger ones, and claimed that Soviet power was the principal deterrent to the imperialists making war, the Chinese leadership argued that local wars against imperialism should be encouraged and that the imperialists were plotting new wars. More militantly revolutionary than the Soviets, the Chinese believed that Communists should support revolutionary movements around the world. Khrushchev, however, wished to avoid provocations that would antagonize the United States. Mao wanted nuclear technology from the USSR, but Khrushchev was more interested in preventing the United States from spreading nuclear weapons to its allies, particularly West Germany, than in spreading them to his allies, particularly the Chinese. The Soviet Union gave aid worth several billion dollars to China and helped the initial industrialization of the country, but ultimately the Soviet Union reneged on its promise to help the Chinese build atomic weapons. China’s only ally among Communist states was Albania, where the Stalin cult lived on under the rule of Enver Hoxha. Hostile to Yugoslavia and critical of the policy of détente, the Albanian leaders joined the Chinese in the view that a world war would lead to the destruction of international imperialism. For Mao Zedong, Western imperialism was a “paper tiger” not to be feared, but Khrushchev feared such a tiger with atomic weapons.

By the summer of 1960 the Sino-Soviet split had divided the international Communist movement into two camps. In Bucharest, Rumania, Khrushchev denounced the hard-line, anti-Western Chinese and Albanian leaders as dogmatic “Left adventurists” willing to unleash war. The Chinese considered the Soviets to be “revisionists,” a serious accusation in the Marxist-Leninist lexicon. A month later, in July, the Soviet Central Committee recalled all Soviet experts in China. That fall eighty-one Communist parties met in Moscow to patch up the divisions in their movement. Most parties backed the Soviet position, but the Chinese and the Albanians refused to capitulate. Relations between the USSR and China continued to worsen in the next several years. As the Soviet Union attempted to improve its relations with the United States and restrict nuclear proliferation, China felt threatened by American nuclear power and humiliated by Soviet condescension, and became determined to become a fully sovereign atomic power dependent on no other country.

**Crises in the West**

In the late 1950s and early 1960s the major source of Soviet-American tension was in central Europe. West Germany was experiencing an “economic miracle,” rapidly becoming one of the richest countries in the world, and its government was determined to have nuclear weapons and be a full partner in the Western alliance. East Germany was also developing rapidly, trading primarily with West Germany, and achieved a standard of living higher than the Soviet Union. But its economy lagged far behind West Germany. Convinced that the United States was determined to give Germany nuclear weapons and strengthen its bases around the USSR, Khrushchev persuaded the Presidium that the Soviet Union should act decisively where the West was most vulnerable. On November 27, 1958, Khrushchev held the first formal press conference in the Kremlin and stunned reporters by declaring, “West Berlin has become a kind of malignant tumor” and surgery is required. If the West did not sign a treaty with Germany, the Soviet Union would do so unilaterally and the East Germans would be free to close access to Berlin. That same day an official note was sent to the Western powers and the two Germanys calling for the demilitarization of Berlin and its conversion to a free city. The West was given six months to respond.

Khrushchev’s ultimatum was a dangerous bluff. He did not really want to shut off the GDR from the West German economy or sign a separate treaty with the East Germans, which would only have consolidated the division of Europe. But he did want to prevent the rearmament of West Germany. Senator Hubert Humphrey met Khrushchev in the Kremlin, and the Soviet leader, who had little idea what he would do if the West did not respond positively to his demand, boasted that Soviet missiles could hit any place on earth. “What is your home town, Senator?” he asked. Humphrey told him he was from Minneapolis. Khrushchev drew a blue circle around Minneapolis on his wall map: “I will have to remember to have that city spared when the missiles start flying.” Humphrey then asked what Khrushchev’s home town was. When the Soviet leader answered “Moscow,” the senator said that he was sorry but that they would not be able to spare Moscow. Everyone laughed.

Eisenhower reluctantly invited Khrushchev to visit the United States. In September 1959 the Soviet Union’s most enthusiastic tourist traveled from Washington to New York from California to the corn fields of Iowa. His final meeting with Eisenhower took place at the presidential retreat at Camp David, and there Eisenhower convinced Khrushchev to lift his ultimatum. The president agreed to attend a summit conference and to visit the USSR. The first Berlin crisis had passed, and, despite the suspicions on both sides, the Camp David meeting promised a greater degree of negotiation and agreement in the future. Khrushchev returned home euphoric, and a few months later, “in the spirit of Camp David,” he proposed to the Supreme Soviet that Soviet armed forces be reduced by one-third within the next two years.
As preparations for the summit conference in Paris neared completion, Khrushchev remained uneasy about Western plans to give nuclear weapons to West Germany. He was gambling for a better relationship with the United States, while at the same time losing China as a close ally. Suddenly, the international order was jolted by the unexpected. As Soviet leaders set out to celebrate May Day 1960, the Soviet military intercepted and shot down a U-2 spy plane near the city of Sverdlovsk in the Urals. The flight had been personally authorized by Eisenhower, who understood that such overflights were a violation of international law and a serious provocation. The interception placed the upcoming summit in jeopardy. The United States officially announced that one of its meteorological research planes was missing. Khrushchev, whose conciliatory line toward the West had strong opponents within the Presidium, announced that a plane had been downed but deliberately did not mention publicly that the pilot had been captured. The United States continued with its cover story until Khrushchev revealed that they had the pilot. The State Department then admitted that the plane had been spying and defended its action: “The necessity for such activities as measure of legitimate national defense is enhanced by the excessive secrecy practiced by the Soviet Union in contrast to the Free World.”

As angry as he was, Khrushchev wanted to absolve Eisenhower of any responsibility in the incident in order to continue with the summit, but the president decided to admit that he had authorized the overflights. He told the National Security Council, “Of course, one had to expect that the thing would fail at one time or another. But that it had to be such a bo-boo-and that we would be caught with our pants down was rather painful.” The American public was disturbed by Eisenhower’s admission that the government had publicly lied to the people. On May 16 Khrushchev met with Eisenhower, Charles de Gaulle, and Harold Macmillan in Paris. Eisenhower had hoped that the Soviets would agree to his plans for disarmament, beginning with a limited nuclear test ban treaty. But Khrushchev demanded that the United States officially repudiate such acts of espionage and apologize for the overflight. Eisenhower indicated that the flights had been suspended, but he stopped short of an apology. Khrushchev stormed out of the conference. The fragile spirit of Camp David quickly dissipated, and the brief first period of Soviet-American détente ended.

Khrushchev suffered from his close identification with Eisenhower, never regaining the degree of authority over foreign policy he had enjoyed before the U-2 incident. Those in the Kremlin who believed that a tougher line toward the West was required, gained influence. Khrushchev also suffered from his crude public behavior, his outbursts and rude language. The Soviet people were used to more distant, cool, dignified leaders, and Khrushchev’s common touch often degenerated into vulgarity. Those closest to Khrushchev increasingly deferred to him and hesitated to correct him, allowing his mistakes to compound. In September Khrushchev went to New York for the opening of the UN General Assembly. He stayed for a month, needling the Americans, playing to the galleries as friend of the newly independent African and Asian nations, and, most memorably, banging his shoe on the table at the United Nations to protest a speech by Macmillan. The United States was engaged in its presidential campaign, and all talk was about Soviet aggressiveness and the purported missile gap. Cold War rhetoric was used by both Nixon and Kennedy, as each tried to outdo the other as the most dedicated foe of communism.

**Kennedy and Khrushchev**

In 1961 the United States had a new president, the suave, Harvard-educated scion of a wealthy New England family, John Fitzgerald Kennedy. As much a committed anti-Communist as Nixon, he had spoken of the Cold War as a “struggle for supremacy between two conflicting ideologies: freedom under God versus ruthless godless tyranny.” Thanks to his personal charm, the efforts of his aides, and a cooperative press, the Kennedy image of vigor, energy, toughness with grace, gentility, culture, and civility captured the American and foreign publics, among them the Soviets. But Khrushchev’s first impression of the new President, formed after the dismal failure of the American-sponsored invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961, was that he was incompetent and weak politically. When he met Kennedy two months later in Vienna, he “found Kennedy a pleasant and reasonable man, . . . a flexible President and, unlike Eisenhower, he was his own boss in foreign policy.” Khrushchev insisted that the international status quo should be maintained and that there be no violation of existing borders. But Kennedy went further; he proposed that the internal social and political systems of the nations of the world be preserved and challenged Khrushchev to agree to prevent “subversion.”

Khrushchev, however, refused to be drawn into any “holy alliance” against revolution. The two men failed to agree on Berlin. Kennedy argued that West Berlin should be considered part of West Germany, but Khrushchev suggested that it be made a free city. Khrushchev returned to Moscow with a sense that the new president was inexperienced and inferior to Eisenhower.

The East German economy needed greater assistance as educated and talented people fled across the border to the West. German party chief Walter Ulbricht suggested to Khrushchev that the Soviets build a wall in Berlin to prevent flight to the West. At first Khrushchev was opposed, but then he decided to renew pressure on the United States over Berlin. As he put it in his memoirs, “To put it crudely, the American foot in Europe had a sore blister on it. That was West Berlin. Anytime we wanted to step on the Americans’ foot and make them feel the pain, all we had to do was obstruct Western communications with the city across the territory of the German Democratic Republic.” On August 13, 1961, Soviet troops occupied positions along the West Berlin boundary, and workers began constructing a wall to seal off that part of the city for the next twenty-eight years. The West protested angrily but decided not to risk war. The fait accompli of building the Berlin Wall was briefly a triumph for Khrushchev—it stopped the flow of educated East Germans to the West—but the wall soon became the most potent symbol in the Cold War of the repression and isolation of the Soviet Bloc. Kennedy made a dramatic trip to the wall and identified himself with the people of the besieged city in his famous phrase “Ich bin ein Berliner.”
Khrushchev's Gamble: The Cuban Missile Crisis

The Soviet-American confrontation entered a particularly dangerous phase in 1962. That year the Soviet Union began to deploy ICBMs aimed at the United States, and in response President Kennedy launched a program of rapid buildup of American strategic forces. The United States was still far ahead of the USSR in nuclear warpower, with warheads and nuclear bombs numbering four thousand, more than eight times the number held by the USSR. The Soviets would not reach four thousand warheads and bombs until the late 1970s, when the USA would again have more than doubled its number. Because of the Kennedy buildup, the USSR was surpassed by the United States in missile development and production by 1965. By that time it also faced new nuclear arsenals in France and Great Britain. Khrushchev decided to try to redress the strategic balance of power by placing short-range missiles on the island of Cuba. As a result the world came closer to nuclear war than at any other time during the Cold War.

Fidel Castro had come to power in Cuba in 1959 after leading a successful guerrilla movement against an American-backed dictator. Fidel Castro was not then a Communist, though his brother Raul and his lieutenant, Che Guevara, probably were. But when Castro nationalized American companies, the United States ordered an economic blockade of the island and broke off relations, as the CIA secretly began planning for an invasion of the island by anti-Castro Cuban exiles. The Soviets began to send oil, arms, and other supplies to Cuba, along with military instructors. In April 1961 the exiles launched an invasion at the Bay of Pigs, but President Kennedy, who had agreed to the operation, refused to offer the Cuban exiles the air support they had anticipated. Castro won a decisive victory and humiliated the United States.

Khrushchev's decision to place missiles in Cuba had less to do with the defense of Cuba than with a transformation of the balance of military power between the USSR and the USA. The actual decision came about during a visit to Bulgaria. As Fedor Burlatsky tells it,

Khrushchev and R. Malinovskii, who was then the Soviet Defense Minister, were strolling along the Black Sea coast. Malinovskii pointed out to sea and said that on the other shore in Turkey there was an American nuclear missile base. In a matter of six or seven minutes missiles launched from that base could devastate major centers in the Ukraine and southern Russia such as Kiev, Kharkov, Chernigov and Krasnodar, not to mention Sevastopol—an important naval base. Khrushchev asked Malinovskii why the Soviet Union should not have the right to do the same as America. Why, for example, should it not deploy missiles in Cuba? America had surrounded the USSR with bases and was holding it between its claws, whereas the Soviet Union's missiles and atom bombs were deployed only on Soviet territory. This was a double inequality of forces: inequality in quantity and in delivery times.

Khrushchev obtained the approval of the Presidium of the party to place missiles in Cuba, and Castro and the Cuban leadership enthusiastically supported the deployment.

Using aerial reconnaissance photographs, American intelligence soon discovered the sudden increase in Soviet ships going to Cuba and the careful unloading by Soviet personnel. By the time of the "missile crisis," the Soviets had delivered almost everything that they intended to Cuba. "We had installed enough missiles already," writes Khrushchev, "to destroy New York, Chicago, and the other huge industrial cities, not to mention a little village like Washington. I don't think America had ever faced such a real threat of destruction as at that moment." Kennedy increased the number of marines at the Guantanamo Naval Base, evacuated families, and ordered a vast military buildup in Florida. The Soviets continued to deny that they had placed offensive weapons in Cuba. On October 22 President Kennedy spoke to the nation on television. He revealed the Soviet buildup in Cuba and announced that the United States was "quarantining" the island. He said that the armed forces are being prepared for any eventuality and that any nuclear attack from Cuba would bring a full retaliatory response on the USSR. The world stood on the brink of nuclear war. Later Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara would confess that he and the president had underestimated the danger of nuclear war at the time. They had not known that Cubans had been given control of the missiles. Soviet ICBMs were fueled for the first time and ready to be launched. Kennedy had given the USSR an ultimatum—withdraw your missiles from Cuba or face nuclear war—without any prior effort to resolve the issue diplomatically.

On October 24, with the Strategic Air Command of the United States on its highest state of alert, flying with hydrogen bombs in their planes, Soviet ships stopped dead in the water. Secretary of State Dean Rusk said, "We've been eyeball to eyeball, and someone just blinked." Khrushchev called the American actions "outright banditry," but he decided not to risk war. On October 25 Kennedy wrote to Khrushchev, accusing him of giving the United States false assurances that there were no offensive weapons on Cuba. As letters were exchanged, the American Navy boarded a Soviet ship to inspect it and found only paper products. Khrushchev agreed to remove the missiles if there was a promise of no invasion of Cuba. In one letter, which the Americans simply ignored, he asked for removal of American missiles in Turkey. On October 27, the same day that an American U-2 pilot was shot down over Cuba, the only casualty of the crisis, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, the president's brother, visited the Soviet Embassy and came to an agreement with the Soviets. The next day Khrushchev publicly announced the dismantling of missiles in Cuba. Though humiliated and forced to back down, the Soviet Union really had no other choice given the overall strategic advantage of the United States. "Imperialism today is no longer what it used to be," Khrushchev told the Supreme Soviet a few weeks later, but it would be a mistake to consider it a paper tiger. "This paper tiger has atomic teeth. It can use them, and it must not be treated lightly."

In the last Kennedy years, both sides in the Cold War made some moves toward a less confrontational policy. Khrushchev backed away from trying to muscle the Americans into agreeing to détente, and Kennedy talked about the common interests of Americans and Soviets: "We all breathe the same air. We
all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal." In Ann Arbor, Michigan, McNamara announced the "no-cities doctrine"; nuclear attacks would avoid cities and target military and industrial targets as much as possible. It was assumed that the "assured destruction" of one-fourth to one-third of the USSR's population was sufficient to deter war. Soon afterwards the United States replaced the doctrine of "massive retaliation" with "flexible response," the use of a variety of weapons and troops in different situations. The newly formed Special Forces, or Green Berets, were to be used against revolutionary insurgencies, conventional weapons would be used in limited wars, and improved missiles were to be built in case of an all-out nuclear confrontation. And on August 5, 1963, the United States and the USSR signed the Limited Test Ban Treaty in Moscow. Khrushchev sensed he could work with Kennedy and was genuinely shaken when he heard of the young president's assassination in November.

The Fall of Khrushchev

By the early 1960s the conservative forces in the party leadership were inhibiting further reforms and tying Khrushchev's hands in foreign policy. Khrushchev's policy of destalinization receded after the Twenty-Second Party Congress in October 1961 decided to remove Stalin's body from Lenin's mausoleum. The Congress dropped some of Khrushchev's supporters from the Presidium of the party, among them Minister of Culture Elena Furtseva, the bland woman who had risen higher in state politics than any woman in Soviet history. The new Presidium was divided between those who backed Khrushchev most often (Mikoyan, Brezhnev, Kuusinen, Polianski, Shvernik), those who often held out against him (Suslov, Kozlov), and those who wavered (Voroshilov, Kosygin, Podgorny). Still firmly supported in the Central Committee, Khrushchev flourished for a few more years. A cult of Khrushchev, complete with huge editions of his published works, ubiquitous portraits, and laudatory articles in the press, became widespread through the Soviet Union.

Khrushchev improved his position in 1962 by briefly reviving the destalinization drive. Once again he liberalized cultural policy and tried to reduce the power and privileges of the ruling elite. Though he abolished the monthly bonuses that officials routinely received, he failed to get his comrades to agree to term limits on politicians. In September 1962 he pressured the Presidium to approve his plan of dividing the party into agricultural and industrial sectors, a measure that was very unpopular with party officials. But after the Soviet defeat and humiliation in the Cuban missile crisis, Khrushchev suffered politically and personally. The party rejected the Lieberman proposals and once again took a harder line against artists and writers. Seriously weakened by the disastrous harvest of 1963, Khrushchev was unable early in 1964 to convince the Central Committee to invest heavily in chemicals and fertilizers for agriculture and lost out to the "steel-eaters," who favored heavy industry.

Khrushchev might have bowed out gracefully had he voluntarily retired after his seventieth birthday in April 1964. But he was still vigorous and en-gaged in reshaping Soviet society. He traveled constantly. In the first eight months of 1964, he was out of Moscow more than half the time. Though he knew there were plots to remove him, he did not take them seriously. From the spring of the year Leonid Brezhnev and Podgorny initiated discussions with other members of the Presidium. When asked whether he would join, Aleksei Kosygin asked, "Who is the KGB with?" When told that their support had been secured, he answered, "I agree."

Khrushchev was vacationing in Pitsunda on the Black Sea in October when the members of the Presidium met at Brezhnev's apartment and decided to call him back to Moscow. He flew back to Moscow with Mikoyan, one of his closest friends, and was driven directly to the Kremlin. For two days the Presidium debated. Khrushchev did not vigorously defend himself. He said that he was suffering but that he was also happy, because a time has arrived when members of the presidium of the Central Committee have begun to control the activity of the First Secretary of the Central Committee and speak with full voice. . . . Today's meeting of the Presidium of the Central Committee is a victory for the party. I thought that it is time for me to go. But life is quarrelsome. I see myself that I am not handling matters well, that I do not meet with any of you. I have cut myself off from you. You have criticized me well today for that, and I have suffered from that. . . . I ask you, write me a declaration and I will sign it. I am ready to do everything in the name of the party's interests.

Once again the Central Committee made the decision. Brezhnev chaired the meeting, and Suslov made the major address against Khrushchev, declaring, "The man has lost all humility; he has lost his conscience." With Khrushchev sitting uncharacteristically passive, his comrades decided to "retire" him and replace him with Brezhnev as first secretary of the party and Kosygin as prime minister. Besides the two top leaders, the new Presidium was made up of powerful career bureaucrats—Podgorny, Suslov, Kirilenko, Mikoyan, Polianski, Shvernik, and Voronov—who had risen steadily through party ranks until they edged ever closer to the summit of power.

Though himself a product of Stalinism and a successful party bureaucrat, Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev made the most far-reaching attempt in Soviet history to dismantle the worst institutions of Stalinism and reform the conservative, entrenched bureaucracy. He was genuinely interested in shifting investment from industry to agriculture, in decentralizing the economy and lessening social stratification. He tried to bridge the chasm between the leaders and the led in the Soviet population. But his reforms were largely superficial and never touched the fundamental social relations and power structure of the Soviet system. He succeeded in making bureaucrats uneasy and wary of losing their positions and privileges, but he never attempted full democratization of the political order. He did achieve a less repressive society and open the USSR to the West. Once his agricultural policies were proven to have failed, he was vulnerable to those in the elite whom his reforms threatened. In retirement he lived as a privileged pensioner outside Moscow. There he secretly dictated his memoirs onto a tape recorder, assisted by his son. On September
11, 1971, Khrushchev died of a heart attack. He was buried, not in the Krem­
lin wall along with the most honored Soviet heroes, but in Novodevichii
Monastery. Above his grave is a black-and-white marble stone,
symbolizing
the ambiguous legacy he left. It was made by the artist Ernst Neizvestnyi, an
avant-garde sculptor whom Khrushchev had once denounced.

Suggestions for Further Reading

For the Khrushchev period after 1956, particularly interesting works include Roy A.
Medvedev and Zhores A. Medvedev, Khrushchev: The Years in Power (New York, 1975);
Alexander Yanov, The Drama of the Soviet 1960s: A Lost Reform (Berkeley, Calif., 1984);
Carl A. Lindern, Khrushchev and the Soviet Leadership, 1957–1964 (Baltimore, 1966); Mar­
tin McCauley (ed.), Khrushchev and Khrushchevism (Bloomington, Ind., 1987); Michel
Tatu, Power in the Kremlin from Khrushchev to Kosygin (New York, 1960); and R. F. Miller
and F. Feher (eds.), Khrushchev and the Communist World (London and Totowa, N.J.,
1984).

On foreign policy, see Michael R. Beschloss, Mayday: Eisenhower, Khrushchev, and
(New York, 1991); James G. Blight, On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the
Cuban Missile Crisis, 2nd ed. (New York, 1990); and James G. Blight, B. J. Allyn, and
D. A. Welch, Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse (New
York, 1993).

The Leadership

Leonid Brezhnev was head of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and
the most powerful politician in the USSR from October 1964 until his death in
November 1982. His reign, which later would be considered a period of stag­
nation, was one of deep paradoxes. Brezhnev presided over a highly stable po­
litical regime, but one that proved to be the prelude to political instability and
the collapse of the system. The society Brezhnev oversaw was at one and the
same time highly dynamic and slowly decaying. An articulate and mobile so­
ciety developed within a political order that was becoming arthritic. The early
years of Brezhnev’s government were a time of economic growth, but after a
decade the Soviet economy underwent a slowdown and eventually stagnated.
Destalinization slowed down, and the party leaders pursued a cautious ap­
proach to social change with little emphasis on the Communist future. Cul­
tural policies turned more conservative, and the contraction of the universe of
permissible expression left thousands of intellectuals outside the law as dissi­
dents. A Russophilic nationalism eliminated all but a few vestiges of interna­
tionalism. The restraints placed on an emerging and articulate society by the
aging, immovable bureaucratic state and party became increasingly insup­
portable.

The internal decline was disguised by the external flexing of Soviet mus­
cle, through the most massive buildup of the Soviet military since World War
II and the expansion of Soviet influence into Africa, the Mediterranean, and
Southeast Asia, as well as the sending of Soviet troops into neighboring
Afghanistan. But the distance and disharmony between the stolid, pragmatic
policies, on the one hand, and the rhetoric, pomp, and formal display of rev­
olutionary enthusiasm, on the other, grew greater and greater. Any resem­
blance between the Brezhnev regime and the revolutionary utopia of the Bol­
sheviks of the revolutionary years was purely coincidental. In the words of
Moshe Lewin, Soviet history had come full circle: “It all began with the bulk
of society being composed of a rather primitive, not very dynamic peasantry,