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For what reasons and with what results, did Khrushchev pursue a policy of destalinisation?

When on February 25th, 1956, in morning of the final day of the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party Nikita Khrushchev started delivering his famous “Secret Speech” to the Soviet delegates, it was met in silence. Khrushchev would later recall in his memoirs that it was “all so sudden and unexpected” that “you could hear a pin drop”. In his 4-hour speech, which was actually a 20, 000-word report entitled “On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences”, Khrushchev accused Stalin of committing crimes against the Communist party, state, and people. He totally ruined Stalin’s reputation and condemned his politics for 1) excessive terror and brutality; 2) abuse of political power within the party; 3) unprecedented cult of personality; 4) erroneous conduct of the World War 2. That was the start of what Khrushchev is remembered for till these days – the policy of destalinization. This paper discusses the underlying reasons behind Khrushchev’s focus on destalinization and the effects the latter had on the Soviet society. Firstly though, the nature of destalinization will be examined to provide the further basis for the discussion.

Destalinization sought to liberalize the society through dismantling the Stalinist system and his police state. The censorship was eased, efforts were made to bring new life into Soviet economy, very harsh laws were transformed, as was the court of justice in the Soviet Union, etc. In the economic sphere, destalinization attempted, although with little success, to shift focus from heavy industry to production of consumer goods and new ways of leading agriculture. It was the legal system that underwent the major change. Specifically, destalinization saw abolition of MVD’s prosecuting departments as well as special courts. Instead, all criminal investigation

had to be conducted in regular courts under the governmental control. Civilian population could no longer be convicted by the military tribunals, but were subject to properly set courts; no longer could they be convicted on the ground of their being “enemy to the people or state”; neither could they be convicted without evidence (Wood). Further, destalinization made absenteeism and work quitting no longer criminal (yet, due to the Parasite Law, people who were living on the so-called non-labor income, e.g. priests, could be sacked by the Government).

Overall, the major positive results of destalinization were removal of the personality cult, transformation of the legal system, amnesty to millions of Gulag concentration camps prisoners, elimination of previously used terror as the focal point of social life, turning to collective party leadership instead of dictatorship, less rigorous foreign policy, “thaw” in intellectual life through easing the censorship and allowing different forms of cultural expression, getting rid of Stalin’s legacy through removing his name from whatever had its name in it: names of cities, streets, etc (for example, Stalingrad was named Volgograd) and through disposing of his statues, portraits, busts, and writings that had been previously available in the public libraries. By the way, the corpse of Stalin was removed from the Mausoleum in 1962 and buried under the Kremlin wall (Wood).

At the same time, there remained many things that did not undergo the radical change during destalinization. In particular, Khrushchev did not completely repudiate Stalin’s legacy and destalinization was successful only to a certain extent. Of course, the biggest evils of Stalinist era were overcome, but Khrushchev was often inconsistent in his dismantling of Stalin’s political reputation, for example, he was heard calling himself a proud Stalinist who took part in the fight against imperialism the same year that he delivered his ‘Secret Speech’ (1956) (Wood). Despite the policy of destalinization that dangerously cut into the Communist system, it did not aim to alter the very essence of the state with the rule of a single party, neither did it make attempts to refuse from the Communist ideology (Kort 294). Besides, Khrushchev was unable to

alter the command economy inherited from Stalin. Despite the short-term improvement in the economy for ordinary citizens, his economic initiatives were largely unsuccessful (Wood). Other failures included deterioration of the relations between the USSR leadership and its communist allies in East Europe and China, and the failure to carry out the operation in Cuba (Thackeray 183).

Having analysed the nature and the outcomes of Khrushchev's policy of destalinization, let us now focus on the reasons that lay behind that revealing speech and the start of removing the legacy of the late Stalin. While it may appear at the first glimpse that Khrushchev's sole aim was to initiate the liberalization of the society and finally grant some basic rights to Soviet citizens, this idea is hardly valid. The analysis of numerous sources reveals that Khrushchev pursued above all the aim of getting power in his hands and putting his political rivals aside. By condemning Stalin and by referring to his numerous crimes, he made it clear that Stalin's helpers also took part in those horrible actions against the Soviet people and the party. Molotov, Kaganovich, and Malenkov, who were all candidates for the position of the First Secretary of the Communist party, saw their reputation spoilt by their close relationship with Stalin (Kort 294). By proclaiming the end of repressions and terror, Khrushchev distanced himself from other party members, presented himself as a reformer who had broken with the era of Stalin, and won the people's support (Wood). That, however, was not his sole purpose. His second purpose was to reform the essence of Soviet leadership. In particular, he wanted to narrow the gap that existed between the Communist leaders and the rest of Soviet people. Thirdly, he wanted to carry out some economic initiatives (e.g. the Virgin Lands policy) and lead the foreign policy based on the idea of peaceful co-existence (Wood; Thackeray 182).

Overall, destalinization was a success as it achieved the major aims of the policy. It dismantled Stalinist society without leading the USSR to the collapse. It helped Khrushchev in his

power struggle with his opponents as he gained the majorities support by promising reforms and a better welfare for the USSR citizens.



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