

THE RUSSIAN EVOLUTION

The day Khrushchev buried Stalin

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WHEN NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV died in 1971, I was still a young girl, but I remember him well. We used to visit him on the weekends on his farm at Petrovo Dalnee, about 30 miles outside of Moscow. I'd work with him among the tomatoes or at his beehives. Although to me he was just my kindly old great-grandfather, my family assured me then and later that he was a great man, a world leader, a liberator — someone I should be proud of.

But at the privileged school for the children of the party elite that I attended on Kutuzovsky Prospect, I never heard his name. As far as my teachers were concerned, there was no such man. He didn't exist. Anything that had happened in government between 1953 and 1964, when my great-grandfather led the country, was described as having been done merely by the "Communist Party of the Soviet Union." The name Khrushchev was entirely deleted from the history books.

This was the way it worked in the Soviet Union. Leaders always did away with their predecessors; anyone who came before had to be carefully controlled or deleted. Josef Stalin rewrote his relationship with Lenin. Khrushchev denounced

Stalin. Leonid Brezhnev did the same to Khrushchev, who left office under obscure charges of "subjectivism" and "voluntarism" and was banished to Petrovo Dalnee, where KGB agents monitored his visitors and his any trips off the premises.

It was only later, when I got older, that I learned about the "secret speech" my great-grandfather gave 50 years ago this week, in which he denounced the crimes committed by Stalin and the "cult of personality" that developed around him. The story of the speech is not a straightforward tale of good versus bad, of a benevolent, democratic leader replacing a tyrant. It is far more nuanced than that. Khrushchev, after all, had been one of Stalin's trusted lieutenants, who by his own admission "did what others did" — participating in the purges and repressions of the 1930s and 1940s, convinced that the total "annihilation of the enemy" had to be a communist's uppermost priority in order to ensure the shining future of international communism.

Some people saw, and still see, the 1956 speech as having been dictated by internal power politics (especially because it was Stalin alone who received the blame in it). Certainly, Khrushchev was able to use the speech to strengthen his hand.

Yet to his credit, when he denounced Stalin before the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, my great-grandfather had the courage to admit that communism (and its leaders) could make mistakes. Denouncing Stalin — and acknowledging for the first time the details of some of the murders, purges and coerced confessions — was a morally necessary act, Khrushchev said later. After his "involuntary" retirement in 1964 when he was ousted as first secretary of the party, Khrushchev confessed he had needed to tell the story in part because his own arms were "covered with blood up to the elbows."

Yes, Khrushchev helped build the despotic Soviet system, but he also called for its reform. And even though he did it by attacking the *corruption* of communism rather than communism itself, the speech served as a catalyst, sowing early disillusionment with Marxism-Leninism. It transformed the image of the Soviet Union in the minds of millions of people. It was the first crack in the monolith, and without it, it might have taken another 100 years for the socialist countries to enjoy the post-communist freedoms they have today.

I believe that the speech was the third most important event in 20th century Russia, after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the victory over Nazism in 1945. It marked the beginning of the end, when fear began to be replaced by freedom. It led to the release of some prisoners from Stalin's gulags. It opened the country to some foreign visitors and products. It helped awaken the first stirrings of the dissident movement that ultimately led to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, 20 years after my great-grandfather died.

Just as Russia sits between the East and the West geographically, Russian politics is also in between: always on a narrow line between black and white, right and wrong, reform and dictatorship. Russians have lived for generations under an essentially despotic system of government that is constantly trying to modernize itself through more (Peter the Great, Stalin) or less (Khrushchev, Mikhail Gorbachev) authoritarian means.

But even our reformers are only lesser dictators. At bottom, our people and our leaders share a belief that only authoritarian rule can protect the country from anarchy and disintegration. They support a "strong" state, in which decisions come from the top and citizens are left to tremble with respect and fear.

The most liberating events — Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign of 1956, or Boris Yeltsin's privatization of 1991 — generally end up in disillusion or disarray, suggesting that Russian society is never fast enough to digest modernization or patient enough to see the liberal changes through.

Instead, Russians look back fondly on their great victories and parades and, eventually, after short periods of thaw or *perestroika*, find themselves wanting their "strong" rulers back — the rulers who by inspiring fear provide a sense of orderly life, whose "firm hand" is associated with stability. Stalin's order was unbreakable while he lived; Vladimir Putin now promises a new order in the form of his "dictatorship of law."

There's an old saying that "every nation deserves its government." I hope that's not true. I believe my great-grandfather gave Russia its first taste of freedom over fear. And I hope that one day Russians will be able to embrace that freedom without yearning for the old days of totalitarianism and terror.