Krushchev's Secret Speech

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This short piece by the brothers Medvedev, prominent Marxist Soviet dissidents, examines the circumstances and impact of the Krushchev Secret Speech to the 20th Congress of the CPSU. It was especially commissioned by Spokesman Books (Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation) for their edition of the Krushchev Speech printed to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Speech. It is reprinted here from that edition, with the permission of the publishers.

The Twenty-fifth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union opened in Moscow on February 24, 1976. This was a significant date, an anniversary; but none of the participants of the Congress openly mentioned this fact, though many of them remembered in what circumstances, two decades before, on February 24, 1956, the Twentieth Congress, the first after Stalin's death, was officially declared closed. That Congress was in session for nearly ten days, February 14 to 24, and ended after the election of the new Plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU.

Traditionally, the Plenum of the Central Committee begins by electing the First Secretary of the Party who then proposes for election the members of the new Presidium. On February 24, 1956, Nikita S. Khrushchev became the First Secretary. For a very short spell of a few hours, before the new Presidium is formed, the First Secretary has practically unlimited powers. The whole scenario for the election of the new Presidium as well as the list of its members has been decided earlier, before the beginning of the Congress. The First Secretary's duty is to wind up proceedings according to the previously prepared plan.

However, quite unexpectedly, Khrushchev announced that the Congress would continue in a fresh closed session, from which foreign
delegations and foreign guests were to be excluded. It was nearly midnight, but Khrushchev could not put off the session till the next day as this might have upset his plans: many delegates were to leave Moscow on the morning of February 25 and return to their respective regions. A special summons - to gather in the Kremlin for a closed night session of Congress - was issued to all delegates. Most of them were staying in hotels in the vicinity: so within 25 or 30 minutes the hall of the Congress was nearly full. Nikita S. Khrushchev stepped onto the podium greeted by applause and, without announcing any agenda for the closed session, began his four-hour long speech, which by now has entered history, about Stalin's crimes towards the Party and the whole nation.

We shall not repeat here the burden of Khrushchev's speech. The speech could not, of course, have been kept secret; and Khrushchev himself did not even try to keep it secret. A few days later, in accordance with the decision of the new Secretariat of the Central Committee dominated by Khrushchev's nominees, the text of the speech was printed and despatched to regional Party Committees so that the activists should become acquainted with it. Those responsible party workers, whose names were on the official register, were called into offices and handed a red booklet containing Khrushchev's speech, which was to be read on the spot. The booklet could not be taken out of the room, and there was always an instructor present to see that the readers did not make any excerpts. Two weeks later the booklets were also sent to district committees, to be read, again in confidence, by activists at the district level. After that all registered party members were called into the offices of the district committees and the text was distributed in the party cells of factories, of scientific institutes and other large party organisations. The process of the reading of the "secret" speech was acquiring the character of a chain reaction. At the end of March 1956, there followed a new directive: Khrushchev's speech was to be read at meetings in all establishments, in factories, in kolkhozes, at universities, in educational institutions, and even in the upper forms of schools to pupils over 14-15 years old. Everybody was to be acquainted with it, party members as well as non-party citizens. In a short time, the "secret" speech delivered at the "closed" session of the Congress, became known to tens of millions of people, to the majority of the adult population of the Soviet Union. Copies of the speech were sent to the leaderships of all Communist Parties abroad, and the foreign press soon got hold of the text. Although it was never actually published in the Soviet Union, beyond its frontiers the speech was translated into all the main languages including Russian.

When one analyses Khrushchev's speech now, it becomes obvious that it was prepared with a certain haste, without careful selection and analysis of the material. It was very far from containing all the grave truths about Stalin's offences; supplementary information given five years later, at the Twenty-second Congress in 1961, startled and shocked the listeners anew. But we cannot blame Khrushchev for what was missing from his first statement. Before 1956, before the Congress, he could not yet prepare his speech officially and openly, he could not yet tell the whole truth; even so he had exposed himself to very great personal risk: Malenkov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, Molotov and Saburov, all people closely connected with the many acts of violence and repression committed by Stalin were still strongly entrenched in the Presidium of the Central Committee and they would have undoubtedly done everything possible to remove Khrushchev from the leadership of the party, even before he had a chance to step on the podium on the night of February 24, 1956. In the summer of 1957, they were capable of preparing a plot against Khrushchev, but that plot proved abortive. Dismissed after three days of discussions in the Presidium, Khrushchev nevertheless managed to carry out a counter-coup and, with the support of the majority of the Plenum and the leadership of the army and the KGB, to remove from the Central Committee the bulk of the members of the so-called "anti-party" group.

The unexpectedness of Khrushchev's speech created many problems which presently split the communist movement, provoking bewilderment in many foreign parties, especially in the countries of the Soviet bloc which, until then, had only been imitating the policies of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The leaders of these countries had for a long time instituted the cult of their own personalities using terror and mass repressions to silence all dissent. Khrushchev had no choice - he could make his
move either unexpectedly or he could not make it at all, continuing to conceal Stalin's misdeeds from the world, leaving to others, to bourgeois propagandists and historians the opportunity to "unmask" communism and socialism and to identify the internal policy of socialist countries with oppression and arbitrariness.

The reason for Khrushchev's decision to come forward with such determination at the Twentieth Congress were no doubt complex and contradictory. This was a considered political move, but there was also much in it that was impulsive and emotional. Placed at the head of the party after Stalin's death, Khrushchev had already in the first months to contend with the conspiracy of Beria who had been preparing to seize power in 1953. After Stalin died, Beria held in his hands the whole centralised machinery of repression: the Ministry of State Security combined with the Ministry of Interior. And this joint apparatus was already, in Stalin's time, autonomous: it was subject to the Party leadership neither at the centre nor in the provinces. Several divisions of the MVD (Ministry of the Interior) brought to Moscow to supervise Stalin's funeral, were left there on Beria's directive "to keep order". Beria was also responsible for the security of the Kremlin and all Governmental and Party establishments. At that same time Khrushchev was preparing a counter action, supported by the majority of the members of the Presidium who, just like him, realised what was in store for them in the event that Beria and the so-called "Mafia of the Caucasus" around him were able to seize power. The decisive role in the liquidation of Beria and his group was played by the leadership of the army (Marshals Zhukov, Koniev and others). On the day of Beria's arrest, army detachments speedily detained all the security guards of the Kremlin and occupied government buildings in Moscow. The central building of the MGB/MVD in Moscow was occupied by army units; many high officials who resisted arrest were shot in their own offices. Their bodies were later removed and buried in an unknown place.

All the establishments of state security in the Republics and in the provinces were dismantled, and in a day or two, the whole enormous machinery of repression had been liquidated. Only several months later the KGB came into existence, but this was an organisation which was completely subordinate to the party leadership.

The investigation and inquiry into the activities of Beria and his closest associates revealed before the whole leadership of the Party the enormity of the crimes not only of Beria but also of Stalin, the details of which many party leaders had perceived only very dimly. The investigation inevitably set in motion the process of rehabilitation of many party leaders who had been imprisoned or murdered by Stalin, in the first instance of those imprisoned in the last years of Stalin's life, whose innocence was obvious to all. (N. Voznessensky, A. Voznessensky, the leadership of the Leningrad region, the leaders of the Council of Ministers of the RSFSR and many others imprisoned in 1949-50 during the so-called "Leningrad affair"). A limited process of rehabilitation (in the majority of cases posthumously) affected also a number of the most prominent party members who perished in 1937-1938.

But this process was slow and at the time of the Twentieth Congress only a few thousand people, out of millions of innocents still languishing in prisons and camps, had been rehabilitated. The release of these people became possible only after February 1956. To speed up the process, on Khrushchev's directive over a hundred special commissions were set up, many headed by former inmates of the camps who had themselves been released between 1953 and 1955. These commissions, endowed with wide powers, left Moscow for the "islands" of the "Gulag Archipelago". Until the Twentieth Congress the cases of political prisoners could be reviewed only by the Supreme Court of the USSR or its Military Collegium. After the Congress, the commissions despatched to camps were given the authority to revise these cases and to grant rehabilitation on the spot. Very often it was enough to become quickly acquainted with the documents of the case, to have a talk with the prisoner, and to learn about his political and party past, to rehabilitate him. Already by the summer of 1956, over five million political prisoners had been released from camps. Also released were those few Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks imprisoned between 1928 and 1930 who had survived 26 or 28 years in camps and jails. Only by a miracle could one survive
such long terms: even of those who were arrested and sentenced in 1936-38 there remained alive in 1956 only 100,000: which is to say, only 5 per cent of those who had been engulfed by the cruellest terror. The bulk of the camp population in 1956 consisted of the victims of the war years and of the post-war repression.

The return of millions of ex-prisoners and the posthumous rehabilitation of many millions more, were the most weighty consequences of the Twentieth Congress for the internal life of the USSR. More important even than the revelations of Stalin’s misdeeds. The direct indictment of Stalin in 1956 was not full enough and not consistent enough. In party histories he was still treated as a prominent leader and a classical marxist, guilty only of some abuse of power and of having introduced the “cult of personality” of which many became the innocent victims. Dozens of cities still bore Stalin’s name; his busts and monuments still decorated all towns and official buildings, his portraits still hung on the walls of party offices; his embalmed body was still on display next to Lenin’s in the Mausoleum near the Kremlin. The final demolition of the Stalin “cult” took place in 1961 during the Twentysecond Congress, when - again unexpectedly - Khrushchev came forward with a new and long indictment, this time not at a “closed” meeting but at an open session of the Congress. Then Khrushchev also openly and clearly posed the problem of Stalin’s accomplices.

This sharp turn in the proceedings of the Congress brought confusion into the ranks of the leaders; but it became impossible to avoid the examination of Stalin’s crimes any longer. Main speakers set out quickly to re-write their speeches, so that they should include details of Stalin’s detrimental acts towards the Party and the nation and also of the harmful activities of the “anti-party group”. At the open sessions of the Congress crimes on a mass scale were revealed which by far surpassed all that had been learned from Khrushchev’s own speeches of 1956 and 1961. This discredited Stalin and Stalinism finally and irrevocably. Before the end of the Congress on the night of October 31, 1961, Stalin’s body was removed from the Mausoleum. Not far away from the Kremlin an excavator dug out a deep pit and into it Stalin’s coffin was lowered. So that the body should not be dug up again, the pit was covered, not with earth but with concrete. On top a granite slab was placed on which, only later, the name was engraved: “J.V. Stalin”. A wave of destruction of Stalin’s monuments swept over towns and villages; streets, kolkhozes, plants, settlements and cities were all renamed.

Khrushchev committed many mistakes and misjudgments during the time of his political leadership. Nor was he innocent of violations of the law in Stalin’s time. He was not well equipped to run the economy and agriculture of the country competently; he was unable to create conditions for a genuine inner-party democracy, let alone a democratic way of life of the whole country. Yet all these mistakes and shortcomings of his leadership were only transitory. His main merit so far as the whole of mankind is concerned consists in the fact that he was able to overcome inertia and indecision, to mount the platform of the Twentieth Congress on the night of February 24, 1956 and to place before the whole communist movement the choice between a humanist and a totalitarian socialism. “Socialism with a human face” cannot come about too early; totalitarianism does not vanish after one speech: in changed forms it has continued for a long time. The ferment which Khrushchev engendered in 1956 still continues: it is a long historical process. And although Khrushchev’s name is consigned to oblivion in the USSR and is unceasingly slandered in China and other communist countries, the process which began with his “secret” speech in 1956 cannot fail to bring nearer the advent of a humanist and open socialism, in which the rights of every individual will be defended, respected and firmly guaranteed.