

"WE SHALL NOT soon see his like again" is the epithaph for Nikita Khrushchev. For his historic achievement was to move Russia from one-man rule to a form of government by group.

Leadership in the Soviet Union has now been institutionalized. There is not freedom, but blocs and lobbies count for something when it comes to making decisions.

Not so long ago it was very different. In his day Stalin made foreign policy, determined military strategy, set rates for economic growth, and established standards of excellence in art and science. Everything depended on the "all-powerful father of the people," and those who opposed him, or even doubted him, were made to pay a terrible price.

To a degree Khrushchev worked within the Stalinist tradition. As the Cuba missile crisis showed, he chopped and changed on a dizzying scale. More than any leader of the post war era, he identified himself in a personal way with the big developments of his time.

THE SECRET speech he gave to the 20th party congress in 1956 became the cornerstone of de-Stalinization in the Communist world. His visit to the United States in 1959 symbolized coexistence among the super powers.

His rapprochement with Tito set the tone for polycentrism in the Communist world. His relations with Col. Nasser marked Russia's emergence as a power in the eastern Mediterranean.

His repeated trips to Germany tracked the ups and downs of the Berlin crisis. His performance at the 22d party congress in 1961 formalized the split with Communist China. Far more than any cosmonaut, he and his bragging exemplified Russia's entry into the space age.

On top of all that, he embodied the virgin lands campaign, the Russian effort that moved from manpower to missiles in the military field, and a check on the "metal-eaters" of heavy industry in order to make life better for consumers. It

even took a nod from Khrushchev for Alexander Solzhenitsyn to be published in the Soviet Union.

But even as he dominated the scene, Khrushchev prepared the stage for others. He ruled by marshalling support in the Politburo, the Central Committee and wider circles. He attacked Stalin for crimes against fellow Communists. Except for Beria, his own rivals were demoted, not shot.

IN THE SAME vein, the apparatus of terror was placed under committee control. Against the random use of arbitrary force there was asserted the principle of "Soviet legality." And in these conditions, though opposition and factionalism were checked, interest groups asserted themselves.

There are the party ideologists, the military, the captains of heavy industry, the regional bosses, the technicians and efficiency experts. Decision-making in the Soviet Union is a process of touching base with all these different groups.

Khrushchev was ousted in 1964 in large measure because he did not touch base, because he acted in a rash and relaxations dominate recent decisions have all borne the mark of committee work.

There was obvious backing and filling over a long period before the march on Czechoslovakia in August 1968. Periodic crackdowns and relaxations dominate the attitude of the regime toward dissident intellectuals and nationalities. The establishment of basic priorities for a new five-year plan seems still not to be thrashed out. And in dealings with the United States, Communist China and the rest of the world the Russians now move step by step, making decisions slowly and only in the margin.

ONE OBVIOUS result of decision by group is a break for the consumer. No leader is strong enough to resist the pent-up demand for better goods and better hous-

ing. Ordinary Russians have never had it so good, and the great fact in the Soviet Union today is the fact of getting and spending.

This is not to be confused with freedom. A very small number of people run Russia. There is no legitimate means for the expression of political opposition, and the great mass of Russians seem far more bent on material achievement than on self-government.

But the institutionalization of rule in Russia makes the world a less surprising and, to that extent, a safer place. Bold moves are not very likely, nor sweeping changes. Indeed, it probably doesn't make much difference whether Brezhnev rules in Russia or Kosygin or Podgorny or somebody else.

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After Khrushchev