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Khrushchev's Legacy

By HARRY SCHWARTZ

Will Nikita Khrushchev's ghost haunt the Kremlin in the years ahead?

The present Soviet rulers appear to fear it may. That trepidation seems the most likely explanation for the orchestrated silence the Soviet press and radio maintained about the event for most of last weekend. Only after the cables had reported the enormous and sorrowful reaction to Khrushchev's passing in the rest of the world did a Pravda spokesman announce that this morning's paper would report the news.

For roughly thirty hours or more the only way most Soviet citizens could find out the man who ruled their country for a decade was dead was through listening to Radio Liberty and other foreign broadcasters.

There is important evidence indicating that Khrushchev's reputation among a significant number of Soviet citizens is far greater now than it was when he was purged in 1964.

Then he was connected in the popular mind with the economic hardships of the early 1960's, the price increases of 1962 and the bread shortage of 1963. He was also blamed by many for the break with China, and for spending too much money in space while urgent needs here on earth went unmet.

But the seven years Khrushchev lived in obscure disgrace were long enough to demonstrate that many of the ills for which he was blamed have also been incurable for his successors. With President Nixon scheduled soon to visit Peking, there can no longer be Soviet citizens who believe it was merely Khrushchev's tactlessness that produced Moscow-Peking enmity.

The Soviet economy has increased production since Khrushchev fell. But there are now 15 to 20 million more Soviet mouths to be fed than in 1964. And while the Soviet standard of living has risen, the rise has hardly been fast enough to satisfy an increasingly consumption-oriented society. The present unexplained delay in putting the new Ninth Five Year Plan before the Soviet legislature is only one of the straws pointing toward continuing economic difficulties.

But it is among Soviet intellectuals

—scientists, writers, teachers and the like—that the most positive re-evaluation of Khrushchev has taken place these past several years.

While he ruled, these elite groups tended to view Khrushchev as a crude, uneducated and unpredictable boor. They were grateful to him for cracking the Stalin myth, for releasing millions from the slave labor camps, for lifting the Iron Curtain, and for greatly widening the area of free speech and free press, notably by permitting the publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's classic novel, "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich."

But they were repelled by what they considered his uncultured behavior—notably his performance banging his shoe at the United Nations in 1960. They resented his support of the charlatan biologist, Trofim Lyenko. And most of all they were bitter at his recurrent tendency to regret from liberal attitudes and to denounce publicly some of the Soviet Union's most eminent intellectuals.

Seven years of the post-Khrushchev

era, however, have taught many Soviet liberals that the alternative to Khrushchev was much worse. The Brezhnev leadership has put writers and other dissidents into jail or insane asylums; Khrushchev relied on verbal chastisement. The censorship in the Soviet Union today is far tighter than it was during most of the Khrushchev era. It is now evident that Khrushchev's removal was a partial counterrevolution, a partial return to Stalinism which makes the Khrushchev era seem like the good old days.

Thus the possibility arises that in death Khrushchev may become the symbol of Soviet liberalism just as the dead Stalin has long been the symbol of Soviet reaction and obscurantism.

There may be great political importance, therefore, in the fact that this morning's Pravda front page finally announces "with sorrow" that Khrushchev is dead, and reminds the Soviet people officially that he was once head of both the Soviet Communist party and the Soviet state.

This is already a limited and partial rehabilitation, ending his status as an unperson and assuring he will not be an uncorpse. It is the first small

victory for those who would like to see the best part of the Khrushchev heritage restored and extended within the Soviet Union.

The Khrushchev legacy is also likely to be a factor in future international Communist politics. This potentiality was implicit in the warm tribute the Italian Communist party paid to Khrushchev yesterday. That tribute reflected the fact that Khrushchev was the most liberal and flexible Soviet leader since Lenin.

Foreign Communists recall that it was Khrushchev who laid down the line that there are many roads to Communism and that the Soviet experience does not have to be slavishly imitated by all nations. Moreover, he set a historic precedent in 1955 when he publicly apologized to President Tito for Stalin's excommunication of the Yugoslav Communists in 1948. And it was in Khrushchev's regime that a significant measure of autonomy was given the Eastern-European countries, thus opening the way for the considerable degree of independence won this past decade by Rumania.

The passing of Khrushchev creates a very different situation from that which evolved after the murder of Leon Trotsky. No orthodox Communist party today, not even the Chinese, pays tribute to Trotsky. By definition, all Trotskyites belong to an opposition group outside the regular Communist world.

But today's Pravda obituary of Khrushchev, despite its minimal nature, places him within the limits of permissible Communist variation. He is not considered an enemy of Marxism-Leninism, merely a bungler who failed to measure up to his high responsibilities.

The door is therefore open for others in the years ahead to use his ideas, his points of view and his prestige to help move the Communist world, including the Soviet Union, toward a more democratic and more humane form of socialism than that which now exists.

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