

Division and realignment in Europe, 1945-

1992 | Sample Answer

How successful as Soviet leader was Nikita Khrushchev? (2017)

Following the death of Stalin in 1953 a collective leadership took control of the Soviet Union, of which Khrushchev was part of. Malenkov was favourite to succeed but just as Stalin had done before, Khrushchev used his position as party secretary to undermine him and gain support from the others. His leadership marked a crucial transition in communism and established an era of reform which included de-Stalinisation and peaceful co-existence.

In 1956 KH made a famous speech to the 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party, to which he launched a process known as de-Stalinisation. He intended to remove the idea that Stalin had been an infallible leader, whose actions had always been correct. In his speech, he condemned the attacks against the Kulaks in the 1920s, revealed details of the Purges 1930s and claimed that the Red Army was badly prepared for WWII. In practice of de-Stalinisation, he removed statues and portraits of Stalin from towns, renamed the city of Stalingrad to Volgograd, limited the power of the secret police and released thousands of political prisoners from labour camps. While his speech had not been published in Eastern Europe people heard about it and saw it as a relaxation of Soviet control over the satellite states. This friendly approach of KH, while commendable, brought problems for his ruling.

Evidence of this can be seen in the strikes and riots that broke out in Poznan Poland, 1956. Poland had growing discontent over Soviet bases in their country. Food rationing had been introduced, workers income had fallen by 35%, the Catholic Church was policed tightly and

people were beginning to question where communism was going. What provoked the strike was when workers were asked to increase their productivity by 25%. The leader of Poland, Gomulka introduced a series of reforms and suggested that Poland might prefer to be independent of the Soviet Union. Khrushchev rushed to Warsaw to talk with Gomulka and they reached a compromise, Poland was not to leave the Warsaw Pact. An important point to note is that Soviet troops were still stationed in Poland since WW2, therefore the threat of force was still ever-present

Perhaps the greatest limitations of his de-Stalinisation policy can be seen in his dealings with the Hungarian Uprising. While this revolt in Poland was dealt with in a peaceful manner by Kh, this was not the same for the Hungarian Uprising October 1956. The country was displeased with their leader Rakosi and KH replaced him with Erno Gero, although this did not placate the people. On 23rd October, a group of students and workers marched the streets of Budapest attracting thousands of people along the way. On 28th, Imre Nagy was recalled to power in an attempt to calm things down although, Nagy announced on 1st November that Hungary was leaving the Warsaw Pact and KH ordered 30,000 Soviet troops into the country. The rising ended on 11th with 25,000 people killed. The manner in which the rising was crushed speaks volumes as to how far the soviet approach had been de-Stalinised.

In his foreign policy, Khrushchev began a policy of peaceful co-existence with the US. The idea that communism and capitalism could exist side by side without the need for war. It was supported by Eisenhower whom he met in Geneva. Khrushchev put a 'human face' to socialism, visiting many foreign countries which raised the reputation of the Soviet Union. This policy was shortlived and came to an abrupt end in May 1960 when an American spy plane was shot down over Russia. Eisenhower refused to apologize and a summit meeting of world leaders in Genova broke down as a result.

There was also conflict over Berlin. It annoyed Russia that the West had a part of Berlin which was in their zone. By 1961 2,500 people were leaving East Berlin each day to go to the West in search of a better life. Khrushchev met President Kennedy in Vienna and demanded US withdrawal from Berlin. Kennedy naturally refused. The decision by Walter Ulbricht, in August 1961 to build a wire fence between East and West was taken with the full backing of Khrushchev. While it was effective in stopping the mass leaving, it eliminated Khrushchev initial policy of peaceful co-existence. The wall would prove a very negative aspect of Khrushchev's legacy.

Khrushchev came into conflict again with Kennedy over the Soviet missile bases in Cuba, October 1962. An American spy plane took photographs of Russian missile sites in Cuba, Khrushchev refused to remove the missile site. Kennedy ordered a naval blockade of Cuba, Khrushchev sent Russian ships to face this. It became a game of brinksmanship- the world waited to see who would back down. Khrushchev did and both leaders agreed to set up a direct phone line between Washington and Moscow. Khrushchev faced heavy criticism at home and was seen as having given in too easily to Kennedy. Considering his short-time as leader of Russia, his foreign policy would not have been seen as a huge success.

On the domestic front, the standard of living improved. There were more houses and flats built for workers. Wages went up by 18% and more consumer goods were produced. The soviet space programme proved very successful. It equalled and surpassed the US's. They put the first satellite and first man into space. In 1954, he launched the Virgin Lands programme. Initially grain production increased by 70% but in the long run, it failed as the area was too dry and there were a series of droughts. Eventually, bread rationing was introduced. In summer 1962, food shortages drove people onto the streets in protest. Later in October KH was informed by Soviet council that he was no longer in charge and would have to step down.

Khrushchev was a persuasive leader with a strong personality, but the communist party members felt that his reforms were taking the Soviet Union backwards, instead of forward. He not only lost the support from his colleagues but also from the common people. His initial approaches for change seemed positive, but in reality, his policies didn't follow through. By the end of 1964, the Soviet Union were ready for a new, promising leader, by which Brezhnev came to light.