

## POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS, 1953-85

### How did the USSR develop politically between 1953 and 1985?

#### Khrushchev and de-Stalinisation



Stalin lying in state

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In early 1952, Stalin's doctor told him to take things more easily, causing the patient to fly into a rage and have him arrested. Stalin died on March 5<sup>th</sup> 1953 after suffering a massive stroke.

With no obvious successor to Stalin, a power vacuum was created which, after three years of political manoeuvring, would be filled by **Nikita Khrushchev**.

Khrushchev did not appear to be the clear choice to succeed Stalin. He was from "peasant-worker" stock and was no intellectual but was ambitious and ruthless. He had served in the Red Army during the Civil War and had risen to the rank of lieutenant general during the Great Patriotic War. This meant he had the support of the army. As Party Secretary, he was able to gain control of the party machinery by installing his followers in positions of authority and isolating political enemies just as Stalin had done previously.

Khrushchev realised that he could not make any real impact as leader unless he could find ways of undermining Stalin's achievements. This was to lead to the introduction of the policy of **de-Stalinisation**.

The Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union gathered in Moscow in February 1956, and the delegates listened in awed silence to Khrushchev's address. He launched a venomous attack, denouncing Stalin's cult of personality and the crimes he had perpetrated, including the execution, torture and imprisonment of loyal party members during the purges on trumped up charges. He ridiculed Stalin's image as a war hero, pointed out his incompetence as a strategist and criticised his policies in regard to the Eastern bloc countries.

Khrushchev was keen not to criticise the Communist Party, which was the source of his own power, but to level all the blame for the wrongs of the past on Stalin.

The press had been excluded from the meeting, but the speech was reported in the foreign media the next day and the text distributed to the party branches.

Khrushchev's policy of de-Stalinisation had three basic aims:

- to absolve himself and other leaders from their involvement with Stalin, while discrediting his opponents with guilt by association
- to justify the introduction of more progressive political and economic policies into the USSR
- to seek peaceful co-existence with the West.

### The main features of de-Stalinisation:

- Moves to end the use of terror and to rehabilitate its many victims during the Stalin era was one of the most successful features of de-Stalinisation.
- De-Stalinisation also saw the release of an estimated eight million prisoners from the gulags by the end of 1956.
- Thousands of German prisoners of war held in detention camps and Soviet citizens accused of being collaborators, often on suspect evidence, were released.
- The judicial system was partially reformed, and the powers of the secret police were reduced.
- Posthumous pardons were granted to victims of the purges.
- Khrushchev further criticised Stalin at the Twenty-second Congress, and a unanimous resolution was passed which led to Stalin's body being removed from its place next to Lenin's in the Red Square mausoleum and buried.
- Statues and portraits of Stalin were removed as part of the destruction of the "cult of Stalin".
- Khrushchev attempted to address social problems that had developed as a result of the central planning of the Stalinist system, including wage increases with a resultant rise in living standards.
- Censorship was relaxed, leading to the publication of memoirs and novels discussing the experiences of those who had been interned in prison camps, along with accounts of Stalin's crimes.
- Khrushchev encouraged technological advancements, including the launching of the satellite Sputnik in October 1957 and the first manned flight into space took place in April 1961.
- Soviet citizens were allowed more freedom of movement inside the USSR and abroad.
- Limits on cultural and sporting exchanges were relaxed.

De-Stalinisation was never going to fully liberalise Soviet society, and the measures taken would not lead to full abandonment of totalitarianism, but it represented the beginning of a thaw and was therefore important.

However, it subsided during the **Brezhnev** period and remained so until the mid-1980s, when it accelerated as a result of the policies of **perestroika** and **glasnost** under **Mikhail Gorbachev**.

### INDUSTRIAL CHANGE AGRICULTURAL REFORM

Khrushchev's attempts at industrial reform and plans to de-centralise administration were well intentioned but ultimately problematic.

An ambitious **Sixth Five-Year Plan** was launched in 1956, which was to make way for a **Seven-Year Plan** (1959-65). It focused particularly on the production of coal and oil, along with plans to electrify the rail network and expand the chemical industry in order to provide artificial fertilisers. The Seven-Year Plan offered substantial investment funding, with over 40 per cent of the total earmarked for the eastern areas of the country. During the Seven-Year Plan, industrial progress was evident, and a greater emphasis was given to the production of consumer goods and to what might be described as luxury goods, such as clothes, shoes and watches. The Soviet economy grew by almost 10 per cent a year between 1955 and 1960, and the national income increased by nearly 60 per cent (according to official statistics). Workers did, however, experience increases in **real wages**, and reductions in working hours led to a seven-hour working day becoming the norm.

The Khrushchev era saw increases in the construction of rapidly built, prefabricated apartment complexes. Though numbers fell short of initial plans, 50 million people were rehoused between 1959 and 1965.

#### Comparison of the percentage of consumer goods in Soviet households in 1955 and 1966

	1955	1966
Radios	6.5	17
Cars	0.2	0.5
Televisions	0.4	8.2
Fridges	0.4	4
Washing machines	0.1	7.7
Sewing machines	3	15

In 1957, in a politically motivated move to weaken the central state bureaucracy, Khrushchev did away with the industrial ministries in Moscow, replacing them with 105 **Regional Economic Councils**, or **sovnarkhozy**, which were established to run the economy at a local level. They inevitably focused more on local needs and interests, and planning lacked coherence. By 1960, Khrushchev had accepted that the system was not working and in an attempt to streamline it, reduced the number of *sovarkhozy* to 47 and appointed overseers to supervise the work. The moves served to increase the lack of clarity and coordination.

A new Party Programme published in 1961 (the first since 1919) predicted that the Soviet Union would overtake the economy of the USA by 1970 and that by 1980, all Soviet citizens would be living in "easy circumstances".

Production targets planned for 1965 were overly ambitious and some were even raised in October 1961, but fulfilment was not achieved in many areas. Targets for mineral fertilisers, synthetic fibres, and the grain harvest fell short, which can be partly explained by the strain of increased military spending along with a hugely expensive space programme.

### Agricultural reform

A combination of factors had resulted in low agricultural output in the USSR by 1953:

- Agricultural output and livestock numbers were far too low.
- Farmers' incomes were too low as a result of the low State procurement prices.
- The party had been deliberately misled by the use of 'biological yields'.
- High taxation on farmers was a disincentive to progress.

Khrushchev set out to make sweeping reforms. He focused initially on pricing, which he regarded as fundamentally important. On average, procurement prices rose by about 25 per cent between 1953 and 1956. Many of the debts owed by the *kolkhozy* were reduced or cancelled, and transportation costs and the cost of hiring equipment from the **Motor Tractor Stations** were cut. The MTS were later abolished altogether, and the machinery was sold off to the farms. Repair stations were set up instead for whose services *kolkhozy* had to pay.

Peasant taxation was also reorganised so that it was based on plot-size rather than on fruit trees, and livestock and peasants without livestock were not expected to provide meat. Khrushchev also aimed to invest heavily in farm machinery and new fertilisers.



Virgin land poster

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These measures, however, would take time to show rewards, so Khrushchev then launched his ambitious **Virgin Lands Scheme**. Between 1954 and 1956, the areas of Kazakhstan, Siberia and the Urals were ploughed up and cultivated. By 1956, an extra 40 million hectares of land were cultivated, equal to the total cultivated area of Canada. Khrushchev was convinced that the USSR's persistent lack of food production would finally be solved. To achieve this, a great political campaign was launched. **Komsomol** members and army conscripts flocked to help in this huge experiment. Workers had to endure difficult living and working conditions, but the drought year of 1955 was followed by a good harvest in 1956.

Other reforms followed as Kolkhozy were allowed to set their own production targets and given more freedom to decide how to use their land. They were told only what they had to deliver to the State. However, the move to amalgamate smaller collectives into larger, more viable units had little effect and resulted in disorganisation.

At the 21st Party Congress, Khrushchev boasted that the USSR would soon overtake the USA in its production of meat and butter. However, soil erosion and hurricanes combined to devastate the harvest of 1963, and Khrushchev had to suffer the humiliation of importing grain from the capitalist west. Khrushchev turned to more basic solutions and urged farmers to grow more maize to provide fodder to improve the quality of Soviet livestock. Eighty-five million acres were planted, but only about one-sixth was harvested ripe, a massive waste of both manpower and land. He later began a campaign to increase fertiliser production by 700 percent in order to boost yields from existing fields rather than to convert more marginal land to production. The targets set proved to be unattainable.

Shortages caused the government to raise the prices of meat and dairy products suddenly in June 1962. This caused protests in **Novocherkassk**, which resulted in Red Army troops firing on rioters who broke into the city's soviet headquarters. In all, 26 were killed and 87 wounded, though a news blackout stopped this becoming public knowledge for thirty years.

## THE BREZHNEV YEARS



Leonid Brezhnev

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Khrushchev's erratic leadership along with his policy failures, especially in agriculture and his mishandling of the Cuban Crisis, lost him the support of the Party, whose members favoured a more stable, collective leadership. On October 14<sup>th</sup> 1964, after a palace coup orchestrated by his "loyal" protégé and deputy, **Leonid Brezhnev**, the Central Committee forced Khrushchev to retire because of his "advanced age and poor health".

As was the case following Stalin's death, several individuals, including **Aleksei Kosygin**, **Nikolai Podgorny**, and **Leonid Brezhnev**, contended for power behind a facade of unity. Kosygin accepted the position of prime minister (which he held until his retirement in 1980), and Brezhnev received the post of first secretary.

Brezhnev built up an inner circle of followers whom he manoeuvred into powerful positions, while demoting or isolating possible rivals for his office. In December 1965, he elevated Podgorny to the position of chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, thus eliminating him as a rival. Brezhnev's rise, however, was gradual, and it was only by 1971 that it became clear

that he was the most influential figure in the collective leadership. Brezhnev assumed the chairmanship of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet in 1977, confirming his primacy in both party and state.

During his time in power, Brezhnev presided over a period of **stagnation**. He encouraged a “personality cult” of himself and resurrected Stalin as a hero and role model. Like Stalin, he was intolerant to criticism and opposition and allowed little room for individual expression. The Soviet economy continued to stutter, although in foreign affairs, he presided over a period of **détente** with the West, while at the same time building up Soviet military strength. Brezhnev showed little interest in domestic issues, preferring to devote his energies to foreign affairs. Prime Minister Kosygin began an economic reform programme from September 1965, which involved dispensing with Khrushchev’s regional economic councils and replacing them with the central industrial ministries of the Stalin era, but opposition caused the plans to be shelved, and planning remained centralised on Stalinist models.

In industry, plans stressed the heavy and defence-related branches at the expense of consumer goods and by the 1970s, the USSR found it increasingly difficult to maintain the high rates of growth in the industrial sector that it had enjoyed in earlier years. The targets of the five-year plans of the 1970s had been scaled down and remained largely unmet.

Agricultural development continued to fall behind. Despite steadily higher investments in agriculture, droughts throughout the 1970s forced the Soviet Union to import large quantities of grain from Western countries, including the United States. Brezhnev continued the trend of converting collective farms into state farms and raised the incomes of all farmworkers. Peasants, however, still devoted much of their efforts to their private plots.

Corruption became entrenched in the Communist Party, and shortages of consumer goods encouraged pilferage of government property and the growth of the black market. Members of Brezhnev’s own family were involved in giving and accepting bribes, but it was difficult to pursue investigations while he was in office.

Brezhnev introduced a series of campaigns against alcoholism, but there was little evidence that they had much effect. Indeed, Brezhnev was known to be a very heavy drinker.

The economy declined even though it was rich in mineral resources, and when huge deposits of oil and gas were discovered, the USSR, as an exporter, benefitted from rising prices in the 1970s.

As part of the rolling back of Khrushchev’s reforms and in opposition to the policy of de-Stalinisation, Brezhnev expanded the powers of the KGB. **Andropov** was appointed KGB chairman, and he launched a campaign to crush dissent within the USSR. This dismayed many people as it came at the time of the signing of the **Helsinki Agreements** (1975) where the USSR, the USA and 33 other nations agreed to respect human rights and basic freedoms such as thought, speech and religion.

**Dissidents** spoke out against injustices, held meetings, gathered secret petitions, met with foreign visitors and copied and printed banned books. They suffered from repression at the hands of the KGB. They were sent to labour camps and psychiatric institutions or forced into exile. The well-known dissidents often gained security because of the strength of world opinion and support.

Nuclear physicist **Andrei Sakharov**, the “father of the Soviet hydrogen bomb”, became fearful of the monster that he had created and spoke out against nuclear arms production. The KGB held over 500 separate files on him, and he became active in the field of human rights.

Upon the publication of *The Gulag Archipelago*, which graphically described conditions in the labour camps in 1973, **Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn** was charged with treason and exiled from the Soviet Union, eventually settling in the USA.

Other well-known dissident intellectuals, such as **Vladimir Bukosky**, campaigned against the abuse of psychiatry in hospitals, and **Natan Sharansky**, who was exiled by the KGB and left the Soviet Union as part of a "spy-for-dissident" swap, later returned to Russia as Israel's trade minister.

Many prominent dissidents were Jews who wished to leave and settle in Israel but were often denied exit on the grounds that their skills and expertise were needed in the USSR.

Brezhnev's health declined in 1979, after which he was rarely seen in public. He died on November 10th, 1982. At the time of his death, the average age of Politburo members was 69; the men that followed him were old and would die off in quick succession.

## LEADERSHIP CHANGES, 1982-85



Yuri Andropov

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**Yuri Andropov**, the former KGB chief and member of the Politburo since 1973, was chosen by the Central Committee to succeed Brezhnev as General Secretary. He had served previously as ambassador to Hungary, where he helped to put down the democratic Hungarian Revolution in 1956 and later headed the KGB. In June 1983, he assumed the post of chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet and so became the ceremonial head of state – a post that had taken Brezhnev thirteen years to acquire. During his short 15 month rule, Andropov replaced more than 20 per cent of the Soviet ministers and regional party first secretaries, along with 35 per cent of the department heads within the Central Committee apparatus.

He brought some economic change and freed up industrial and regionally based plant managers from restrictive central planners, which led to a 4 per cent growth in the economy in 1982. He aimed also to boost labour discipline. Throughout the country, police stopped and questioned people in parks, shops and other public places during working hours in an effort to reduce the rate of absenteeism.

After 1982, action against the abuse of alcohol was initiated by Andropov under the general heading of reducing anti-social behaviour.

As head of the KGB, Andropov had encouraged repression at home and abroad and led a cruel campaign against dissidents, nonconformists and others. He tightened up the Soviet borders to prevent 'unwanted and unwelcomed' persons from entering the country. He launched an anti-corruption drive that reached high into the government and party ranks, which included Brezhnev's son-in-law, who was imprisoned. Some bureaucrats were convicted of corruption and were executed by firing squads.

In foreign affairs, Andropov continued Brezhnev's policy of projecting Soviet power around the world. Relations with the USA were poor following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and deteriorated further when **Reagan** described the Soviet Union as an "evil empire . . . the focus of evil in the modern world." The relationship between the superpowers was intensified by the downing of South Korean airliner – KAL 007 – in September 1983.

Whether Andropov could have improved diplomatic relations with the USA and led the country out of its economic stagnation will never be known. His health declined rapidly, and he died in February 1984 after disappearing from public view for several months.

Arguably, Andropov's most significant legacy to the Soviet Union was his discovery and promotion of **Mikhail Gorbachev**, who, it was believed, was being groomed to succeed him.



Konstantin Chernenko

ITAR-TASS News Agency / Alamy Stock Photo

**Konstantin Chernenko** was elected General Secretary in February 1984 following the death of Andropov, and in April, he became chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet. Aged 72, Chernenko was in poor health during much of his rule and so was unable to play an active role in policy making. His main function, it seemed, was to sign papers – literally tens of thousands. Chernenko was the ultimate bureaucrat, and for over twenty years, he put his signature on hundreds of documents each day. It was said that while Lenin and Stalin had the blood of millions on their hands, Chernenko's were covered with ink.

Chernenko did not endorse the economic and political reforms instituted by Andropov, and as a result, the Soviet economy continued to struggle.

He planned increased investment in consumer goods and called for more investment in agriculture. He advocated a reduction in the USSR's micromanagement of the economy and greater attention to public opinion. In a speech in 1984, Chernenko finally focused national attention on the problems of alcohol abuse, encouraging more rigorous enforcement of existing legislation.

There was some evidence that both alcohol consumption and alcohol-related crimes were falling by 1984.

However, KGB repression of Soviet dissidents and nonconformists also increased, and the memory of Stalin was revived and glorified.

In foreign affairs, Chernenko called for renewed détente with the West, but little progress was made in closing the rift in East-West relations during his time in office. The Soviet Union boycotted the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles in response to the US boycott of the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. In the summer of 1984, the Soviet Union also prevented a visit to West Germany by East German leader **Erich Honecker**.

Chernenko died in March 1985, unable, rather than unwilling, to make any policy decisions of note. The last years of Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko were characterised more by illness than anything else, and the Soviet system had just managed to survive. Interestingly, what the Soviet Union was unable to survive was the reform minded and progressive Mikhail Gorbachev, whose energetic leadership would finally put the Soviet Union to rest.