

**TURNING BACK TOTALITARIANISM:**  
***Exorcising Stalin's Ghost***

---

Matthew R. Newton  
The Evergreen State College

"During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act."

--George Orwell

The death of Joseph Stalin left the Soviet Union in a state of dynastic confusion, and the most repressive elements of the society he established remained. After Nikita Khrushchev secured power in the mid-1950s, he embarked on a campaign to vanquish these elements. While boldly denouncing Stalin's cult of personality and individual authority in his 'Secret Speech' of 1956, he failed to address the problems of a system that allowed Stalin to take power and empowered legions of Stalin-enablers. Khrushchev's problem was complex in that he wanted to appease the entire Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 and yet legitimize his position of power.

The level of embeddedness of Stalinism in the Soviet Union was the biggest obstacle for Khrushchev. Characterized with the "permanent" infrastructure of the Soviet Union, Stalin's autocratic rule was intertwined with virtually all aspects of Soviet life. These aspects can be broken down into four elements: Stalin's status as an absolute champion of Communism, and his cult of personality; the enormous amount of propaganda in all forms that underlined Stalin as the "protector" of the Soviet Union during threat and impact of foreign war, and the censorship of any content that was not aligned with this mindset; the necessity and place of the Gulag prison camp in the Soviet economy, and how it sustained itself; and the transformation of Soviet society into something horrifically uniform and populated with citizens whom were universally fearful of arrest and arbitrary repression. <sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas B. Larson, "Dismantling the Cults of Stalin and Khrushchev", *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (1968): 383-390. Credit to Larson for identifying Stalin with "permanent" infrastructure of the Soviet Union. The four aspects of Stalinist rule are not associated with this article.

These four aspects describe the elements of Stalinism within the Soviet Union. His successor, Nikita Khrushchev increased the standard of living in the Soviet Union, reduced political and societal repression from above, released many of those imprisoned under Stalin, and opened up a level of artistic and creative freedom that enabled a level of criticism of the past and present. But Khrushchev did not entirely absolve the sins of Stalin, or his own under Stalin's rule, and as such the "cult of personality" that dominated the Stalin era also remained during Khrushchev's rule. Despite this, he was able to greatly reduce the three other factors of Stalinist rule from the Soviet Union.

Stalinism can be defined as a one-man dictatorship in which a single dictator rules arbitrarily, surrounded by a cult of personality. The dictator is unregulated by party or government organs, and is the sole interpreter of Marxist-Leninist dogma. De-Stalinization can be identified as a move away from idol-worship of Stalin, a push toward a more open and accountable regime, and a less oppressive and omnipresent State Security or secret police force. This movement began once the tyrant had passed on.

At Stalin's death in March 1953, power was shared by Lavrentiy Beria, head of the MVD, Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Central Committee, and Georgi Malenkov, Premier of the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> Beria is an interesting character of Soviet de-Stalinization, notably in his political turnaround in the wake of Stalin's death, and his denunciation and imprisonment prompted by hasty, politically-motivated attempts at reform. Originally, he served as one of Stalin's many "right hands" as chief of the NKVD and MVD, from 1938 until his arrest in 1953. Known for viciousness, cruelty, and propensity

---

<sup>2</sup> (MVD) stands for Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del, or Ministry of Internal Affairs; one of the many acronymic titles to describe the Soviet secret police agency.

for torture against his victims, Stalin went so far as to introduce Beria to Roosevelt at the post-war Yalta conference as “our Himmler.” Beria was also entrusted with administering a vast number of Gulag labor camps – and converting them from death camps into a stable unit of economic production in Soviet society.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, the first movement to free Gulag prisoners after Stalin’s death was pushed by the last *apparatchik* to massively arrest them. Once Stalin’s death was announced, Beria immediately seized power and aborted more than twenty upcoming Gulag projects including the Volga-Ural Canal, the Volga-Baltic Canal, even a project promising a tunnel to Sakhalin Island. On March 24, 1953, Beria sent a document to the Central Committee Presidium, requesting amnesty for a large number of prisoners.<sup>4</sup> The document claimed that of the 2,526,402 inmates, only 221,435 were “dangerous state criminals,” with the majority posing no serious threat to state or society. Along with this, he also prohibited his secret police agency from using physical force against the imprisoned, which effectively ended torture. The Presidium honored Beria’s request, granting amnesty to all those serving sentences of five years or less, to all pregnant women, and prisoners under the age of eighteen; approximately a million people were released immediately.<sup>5</sup>

Though his motives are uncertain, Beria’s quick change of political heart and pushing of massive, liberal reforms must have unsettled his colleagues. Khrushchev may have felt himself rising on

---

<sup>3</sup> Amy Knight, *Beria: Stalin’s First Lieutenant* (New Jersey: Princeton, 1993); as cited by Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Stalin* (Harlow: Pearson, 2005), 195.

<sup>4</sup> The Presidium was the highest level of Soviet government, located within the Kremlin.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Random House, 2003), 478-479; *Lavrentii Beriia, 1953*, eds., Y. Sigachev and V. Naumov, 1953: *dokumenty*, Moscow, 1999, 28-29.

Beria's list of enemies and slowly turned other party members against Stalin's self-proclaimed predecessor.

On June 26<sup>th</sup>, 1953, Khrushchev had prepared an elaborate coup (with the help of several Kremlin generals he was close to) in a convening meeting of the Presidium, ending with Beria's arrest. Found guilty on charges of treason, terrorism, and anti-Soviet activity, Lavrentiy Beria was sentenced on December 23 to the highest form of punishment, death by firing squad. But it is within the text of the Preliminary Investigation on the Beria case where the tainted status quo became recognized and offered hope for systemic change.<sup>6</sup>

After the demise of J. V. Stalin, when reactionary imperialist forces stepped up their subversive activity against the Soviet State, Beria resorted to intensified actions to achieve his criminal goals, first of all by means of using the organs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs [MVD] to seize power, which soon made it possible to expose the true character of the traitor to the Motherland and to adopt resolute measures to suppress his hostile activity.<sup>7</sup>

As described, Beria certainly used his position of power in the MVD as a means to bolster his status amidst a dynastic struggle, and this court procession (and ultimate execution) blocked any hope of him achieving victory. Admittedly, the case against Beria was assembled in a Stalinist fashion. He was arrested by surprise, unaware of what punishment or charges he would face, and a reading of the case shows little evidence of legal defense for him. But this case is significant as it offered a sense of openness into the corruption of the MVD and public sector that could no longer be blocked by a Stalin

---

<sup>6</sup> Applebaum, 480.

<sup>7</sup> Appendix in Robert Conquest, *Power and Policy in the U.S.S.R.*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 440-444.

or Stalinistic figure. Beria's downfall is sacrificial in nature, and ultimately lead to a de-Stalinization of the secret police and legal system that kept serving the Gulag labor camps new bodies.

Beria's arrest prompted a pruning of the whole secret police system, removing many of its operators and agents from their posts, and reorganizing it as the KGB (Committee of State Security). When Khrushchev secured the title of Premier, he further reduced the secret police's militaristic autonomy by reforming the legal system. The military tribunals which had been instruments of terror were abolished or severely restricted in their functionality. Along with this, vague Stalinist terms such as "counter-revolutionary activity" and "terrorist intentions" were vanquished from the criminal code, which had figured into the mass arrests and show trials for decades. This was an effort to restore a sense of "socialist legality." Historian Robert M. Cutler described this phenomenon as a "signaling the end both of mass terrorism and of prosecutions of officials for honest failures." Regardless of accusations against Khrushchev's political nature, as someone "spontaneous," or as someone who was both a Stalinist and anti-Stalinist, Khrushchev's actions in domestic policy depict him more as a cautious liberal reformer than an antisocial autocrat.<sup>8</sup>

Khrushchev may have been hoping to win popular support in exorcising the ghost of Stalin. On February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1956, during the 'Secret Speech', which he titled, *On the Personality Cult and its Consequences*, Khrushchev debunked the myth of Stalin as a disciple of Lenin, as under the guise of battling the "enemies of the people," Stalin had eliminated Lenin's closest colleagues. Here,

---

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia and the Russians: A History*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press: 2003), 529- 532.; Robert M. Cutler, "Soviet Dissent Under Khrushchev: An Analytical Study," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1980): 20.; Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Introduction to *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (New York: Penguin Group, 1998), xvii.

Khrushchev exposed the supposedly Stalin-orchestrated assassination of Sergei Kirov, the execution of delegates to the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, and the arbitrary forced confessions of those arrested by the NKVD.

Khrushchev denounced the crimes committed by Beria and his associates. In one instance, Beria is described in the speech as an “abject provocateur and vile enemy” who “murdered thousands of Communists and loyal Soviet people.” Khrushchev also stressed that:

many party, Soviet and economic activists who in 1937-1938 were branded "enemies" were actually never enemies, spies, wreckers, etc., but were always honest communists. They were merely stigmatised. Often, no longer able to bear barbaric tortures, they charged themselves (at the order of the investigative judges/falsifiers) with all kinds of grave and unlikely crimes.<sup>9</sup>

To further combat this heinous treatment of individuals by Stalin’s renegade secret police, Khrushchev described the downfall of one of his colleagues, Comrade Eikhe, who had been a party member since 1905. Khrushchev illuminated Eikhe’s arrest in 1938, on the basis of “slanderous materials,” without sanction of a prosecutor. Soviet legality was violated during the investigation of Eikhe's case, and seriously falsified. Undergoing torture, Eikhe was compelled to approve a confession prepared by troika judges, in which he and other party workers were accused of anti-Soviet activity. In his declaration sent to Stalin, Eikhe denied his guilt, and wrote: 'There is no more bitter misery than to sit in the jail of a government for which I have always fought.' When brought to the judges, Eikhe declared, 'The most important thing for me is to tell the court, the party and Stalin that I am not guilty.

---

<sup>9</sup> Nikita S. Khrushchev, “The Secret Speech – On the Cult of Personality, 1956,” Delivered by First Party Secretary at the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 25 Feb, 1956, <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/krushchev-secret.html>>; This example is taken from the Yezhov regime of purges, whom was Beria’s predecessor.

. . I will die believing in the truth of party policy as I have believed in it during my whole life.' Eikhe was shot two days later, and Khrushchev ends his jarring anecdote, "It has been definitely established now that Eikhe's legal case was fabricated; he has been posthumously rehabilitated...." <sup>10</sup>

While Khrushchev's testimony may seem tame to contemporary audiences, the speech itself was a political bomb. Never before had the Soviet administration expressed guilt for past crimes at such magnitude. After the speech, there was no debate allowed. The British *Observer* appropriated an entire issue to the 26,000-word speech. Moscow correspondent for the *Guardian*, Tom Parfitt explained, "The delegates went home in awe. Many were sunk in depression; two committed suicide within weeks." Some delegates held their heads in shame, others wept, and few "even had heart attacks in the conference hall." <sup>11</sup>

Certainly, there were good political motives in separating the current Party leaders of the time from the void created by the Stalin succession problem. One can also assume that at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Khrushchev intended to capture a Presidium more inclined toward his reform-heavy agenda. It is also clear that Khrushchev made firm attempts to sever the current (shared) regime from its Stalinist origin, but historian Robert Conquest raises a key question: How far should Stalin himself be disavowed and attacked, and in what way?

In denouncing Stalin, Khrushchev was also denouncing the problems of one-man rule. But this may have proved a double-edged sword if Khrushchev was envisioning that for himself. However, this

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Tom Parfitt, "The Real Secret of Khrushchev's Speech," *guardian.co.uk*, 24 February 2006, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/feb/24/russia.tomparfitt>> (22 April 2011); Claire Bigg, "Russia: Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' Remembered After 50 Years," *Radio Free Europe*, 15 February 2006, <<http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1065804.html>> (22 May 2011).

was also an attack toward other members of the Presidium who could be described as Stalin sympathizers, those whom identified with Stalin's more reprehensible acts.

Khrushchev would later say of Stalin's funeral, "We were sincere when we wept." And he backed down on his assault at certain times, perhaps yielding to Party conservatives. More often than not, he would imply Stalin without actually using his name, perhaps not wanting to sound too harsh. Near the close of the speech, Khrushchev spoke on the cult-worship of Stalin indirectly, "Many of us participated in the action of assigning our names to various towns, *rayons*, enterprises and *kolkhozes*. We must correct this."<sup>12</sup>

The attack on Stalin did not turn into a full-out attack on the Soviet system, and for good reason. In praising Lenin as a mythic hero of Soviet communism, and paraphrasing his legacy and teachings gracefully, Khrushchev essentially kept the system in place and ensured a level of stability. "After Lenin's death," he said in the speech, "Stalin trampled on the principle of collective party leadership." It was in a delicate manner in which Khrushchev made his ousting. If he went further, he worried the "thaw" would "turn into a flood that might wash the regime away."<sup>13</sup>

Khrushchev was also selective about which crimes of Stalin to indict. He did, in fact mention the forced deportations of Caucasian and Central Asian nationalities such as the Chechens, Ingushets, Kalmyks, Karachai, Balkars. That is about as far as Khrushchev went in describing Stalinist crimes against everyday Soviet citizens. He did not discuss the Katyn forest massacre of World War II, the mass deportations from Poland and the Baltic states, the man-made famine of 1932-3, nor did he

---

<sup>12</sup> Khrushchev – On the Cult of Personality.

<sup>13</sup> Tim Tzouliadis, *The Forsaken: an American Tragedy in Stalin's Russia*, (New York: Penguin, 2008), 323.

mention the crimes against accused kulaks during the heinous collectivization campaigns of the 1930s.

14

Most importantly, Khrushchev did not find the courage to admit his own responsibility during the majority of his life as a Stalinist. He would also occasionally backtrack and defend the predecessor whom he despised. At other times, perhaps out of fear of being too radical, Khrushchev had also publicly referred to Stalin as a “great fighter against imperialism,” conveying the idea that Stalin had still offered notable duties to the Soviet Union. This was not hypocrisy. This was damage control.<sup>15</sup>

But the idea of Khrushchev’s speech as wholly a power play, for his own political ends, is a fallacy. Yuri Zhukov, a historian from the Russian Academy of Sciences, argued that “Khrushchev’s speech was a cynical ploy to save his skin and that of his party cronies.” The very act of ousting one’s predecessor as a criminal would naturally raise such criticism. Also, this argument is not entirely true, as Khrushchev attacked a number of his “cronies,” as well. The Secret Speech referred to all senior members of the Presidium: Molotov, Malenkov, Voroshilov, Kaganovich, Mikoyan, and Bulganin. Kaganovich, Molotov, and Malenkov were blamed for committing crimes of terror alongside Stalin, and the rest were mentioned as victims, although there is some crossover here.<sup>16</sup>

But this was not a ploy to “save his skin” because, for one, he did not specifically mention his crimes under Stalin’s reign. Secondly, if Khrushchev was largely afraid of backlash, he would not have addressed the Central Committee during the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. He would have kept his mouth shut.

---

<sup>14</sup> William Henry Chamberlin, “Khrushchev’s War with Stalin’s Ghost,” *Russian Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1962), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Introduction to *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (New York: Penguin Group, 1998), xvii.; Chamberlin, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Parfitt, “The Real Secret of Khrushchev’s Speech”; *Conquest*, 284-5.

Prior to the bombshell of the Secret Speech, transition towards an economy without slave labor was slow. The Gulag system did not collapse or even diminish after the victory of World War II. It inflated – reaching its largest populace in the early 1950s, with 2,561,351 prisoners, almost a million more than there had been five years prior.<sup>17</sup>

Beria deserves some credit in convincing the Presidium to release roughly a million prisoners three years before Khrushchev did, despite his ambiguous motives. But by 1954, the economical inefficiency of the labor camps became recognized. Surveys, ordered by Khrushchev, were carried out in the summer of that year and revealed the camps were being heavily subsidized, and the costs of guards' wages eliminated any profitability. On July 10<sup>th</sup>, the Central Committee granted prisoners an eight-hour workday and making it easier to earn early release. Within camps, clothing became available to purchase, letters and packages were sent and received, and in some camps, prisoners could even marry. Wider debates on the necessity of Stalinist justice took place within the upper echelon of the Soviet elite, and over the next year and a half, releases began at a turtle's pace. But despite knowledge of the camps' unprofitability, Gulag officials refused to shut them down.<sup>18</sup>

With little downtime after Khrushchev's Speech, changes in Soviet society took place. Roughly a million former prisoners returned from Siberian labor camps during 1956. Some of the hopelessly imprisoned, expecting to spend another decade 'Out There,' had been released in a moment's notice. Others, who had repeatedly filed for re-examination of their charges, found they could simply walk

---

<sup>17</sup> Edwin Bacon, *The Gulag at War*, (New York: NYU Press, 1994), 24; as cited by Applebaum.

<sup>18</sup> Applebaum, 507-510.

away. But a sense of confusion was pervasive, as some prisoners were reluctant to experience freedom after they had endlessly hoped it would come.

One voice describes this: “Although I could hardly believe it myself, I was weeping as I walked out to freedom . . . I felt as though I had torn my heart away from what was dearest and most precious to it, from my comrades in misfortune.” Another former prisoner knew a woman afraid to leave her barracks: “The thing is that I – I can’t face living outside. I want to stay in camp,” she told her fellow prisoners.<sup>19</sup>

And for those who desired to return home found it nigh-impossible. How would one with no money and only traces of bread in hand travel from Magadan to Moscow, or from Kotlas to Kazakhstan? Some rode home, facing overcrowded trains, on baggage racks. Many, weakened and emaciated by the hardships of camp labor, never made it back.<sup>20</sup>

While Khrushchev’s Secret Speech had been a shock to Party hierarchy, the gradual reappearance of individuals long considered dead delivered the message to commoners directly. Traditionally, the Gulag system was a secretive instrument of repression and violence. After its dissolution, former prisoners were available to provide living testament to the horrors of this Stalinist (and Leninist) system of control. “Two Russias are eyeball to eyeball,” wrote Anna Akhmatova, “those who were in prison, and those who put them there.”<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Vera Korneeva, quoted in Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, vol. III, p. 454.; as quoted by Applebaum, 511.; Galina Usakov, interview with Applebaum, (Moscow, May 23, 1998)

<sup>20</sup> Applebaum, 512.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 517.

This sense of confusion is somewhat analogous to the mass emancipation of serfs in 1861 under Alexander II. Many former serfs still found themselves desperately indebted to their landlords, without employment, and just as hungry as before. The sense of freedom that was yearned for did not usually turn out to be as lush or rich in reality. Nonetheless, the 20<sup>th</sup> century's equivalent to serfdom, in its closure, offered some advantages in reconciliation of prisoners compared to its imperial counterpart. A relatively open and wide market for literature and journalism, paired with ever-increasing literacy rates enabled more rehabilitary political discussion amongst commoners. And though the Gulag incarceration rates are astounding, only a minority was actually sent 'Out There.' When the serfs were emancipated roughly two hundred years prior, they typically remained on the same plots of land but under different terms with their former landlords. Whereas with the emancipation of Soviet Gulag camps, a level of social friction was created as former prisoners began to brave the journey home. There could not be a continuing sense of normalcy when word of what went on at Glazov, at Vorkuta, or Ukhta-Izhma spread.

Those responsible for the Gulag boom were still alive. At the 22<sup>nd</sup> Party Congress in October 1961, Khrushchev, probably feeling more secure in Premiership, announced that Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, and Malenkov were all "guilty of illegal mass repressions against many Party, Soviet, military and Komsomol officials and bear direct responsibility for their physical destruction."<sup>22</sup>

But instead of having his colleagues arrested, Khrushchev chose to continue his de-Stalinization campaign by thrusting his agenda into the literary universe, widening public discussion.

---

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Cohen, ed., *An End to Silence: Uncensored Opinion in the Soviet Union*, (New York: Norton, 1982), 38.

The de-Stalinization policies that Khrushchev enacted after the ‘Secret Speech’ of 1956 had positive results, as repression of culture began to ease. For example, he broke from the policies of Stalin’s cultural advisor Andrei Zhdanov, policies enacted in 1946 to censor “anti-Soviet” writers such as Anna Akhmatova and Mikhail Zoshchenko. Zoshchenko’s satire on the conditions of communal apartments was unacceptable to the Central Committee and Zhdanov had labeled Akhmatova a “harlot-nun” and her work the product of “eroticism, mysticism, and political indifference.”<sup>23</sup> It was during the Second Congress of the Writer’s Union in 1954, when the definition of “socialist realism” was edited to reflect a break from Zhdanovian doctrine, into something less dogmatic. But Khrushchev appeared weak in the eyes of many Soviet and world politicians, and his own party eventually removed him from the seat of power. But despite this example of political checkmate, under Khrushchev’s reforms, the general public felt relieved to experience a newfound freedom of expression.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 brought sequential change to the institution of the arts. Pressure from below against the Stalinist system of artistic success – driven by party-line loyalty and compliance – successfully caused the Party to expand its list of permissible artistic and literary themes. The Party undoubtedly recognized that Soviet cultural reform was a necessity.<sup>24</sup>

But the first sense of freedom from the horrors of Stalinism began shortly after the tyrant’s death in 1953, conjuring a level of disarray yet a sense of “endless possibility” within literary circles.

---

<sup>23</sup> Robert M. Cutler, “Soviet Dissent Under Khrushchev: An Analytical Study”, *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1980): 19-20.; “Anna Akhmatova,” <<http://personal.georgiasouthern.edu/~jpellegr/teaching/authors/akhmatova.htm>> 12 May, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Cutler, 21.

The second thaw in 1956 was more official, as reform trickled down in the wake of Khrushchev's Speech. The movement drew its strength from revulsions of the past, ousted by the new Soviet leader. Max Hayward described the new relationship between the Party and writers as a compromise with concessions on both sides. Khrushchev obviously wanted discussion of the empire's Stalinist past, but within reason. Hayward likened the compromise to a Russian proverb: "do not tease the goose."<sup>25</sup>

But before *Ivan Denisovich*, there was Dudintsev. *Not by Bread Alone* is a symbolic example of the push against Stalinist censorship. Published in *Novyi Mir* in 1956, the work is a tale of an engineer frustrated with bureaucracy, who attempts to patent a new invention for the Soviet people. The work functioned as a call-to-arms for intellectuals and writers as it created an immense, uneasy response from bureaucratic organizations. The work received a significant amount of criticism in literary journals for which current *Novyi Mir* editor Simonov was forced to apologize for multiple times. Being a purveyor of somewhat bold material for the post-Stalin period, *Novyi Mir* had earned a reputation for being a liberal leaning journal. Due to this, Khrushchev would occasional flip-flop in his relationship with the writers. Perhaps he felt the goose *was* teased. The outbreak of the Hungarian Revolution in the same year probably did not help, and he had attacked the novel in a published statement the following year. "The Soviet people should equally reject such an essentially slanderous work as Dudintsev's book," he wrote. It is likely that he did not feel ready to speak his true feelings on the

---

<sup>25</sup> Max Hayward, "The Thaw and the Writers," *Daedalus*, Vol. 89. No. 3, 1960. 553-4.

work, as in May 1959 he had remarked opposingly. In an address to the Third Congress of Soviet Writers, Khrushchev revealed that *Not by Bread Alone* echoed some of his own private thoughts.<sup>26</sup>

But the next shift in certainty for the literary thaw was the reinstatement of Aleksandr Tvardovsky as editor of *Novyi Mir* in 1958. Tvardovsky, esteemed poet, yet member of the Communist Party since 1940, proved to be a worthy candidate. In one sense, his identity with the liberal intelligentsia poised him to publish material consistent with Khrushchev's reformist agenda, yet his longtime Party membership ensured he could be trusted to provide what the Party would want to read. ". . . He was devoted to Russian literature, to its holy approach to life," wrote Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn of Tvardovsky. "Today he could not direct Russian literature or help it without a party card. But he could not carry his party card insincerely. And it was just as necessary to him as air that these two truths should not be dichotomized, but should blend."<sup>27</sup>

Konstantin Simonov, who had held the post for four years and originally replaced Tvardovsky in 1950, had been removed. "Any man can make mistakes," Khrushchev said of Tvardovsky, "but it is necessary to see not only what the man did yesterday, but also what he is capable of doing tomorrow...."<sup>28</sup> It seemed as if the temporary tightening of control over writers in the wake of the Hungarian Revolution – with Khrushchev's position of power steady in 1958 – was being replaced by a more enlightened policy.

---

<sup>26</sup> "Dudintsev, Vladimir Dmitrievich," SovLit.com, 2000. <<http://www.sovlit.com/bios/dudintsev.html>> 22 April 2011.; Edith Rogovin Frankel, "Literature and Politics under Khrushchev: The Return of Tvardovskii to Novyi Mir," *Russian Review*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (1976), 165-6.

<sup>27</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Bodalsia telenok s dubom* (Paris, 1975), p. 36; as cited by Frankel.

<sup>28</sup> Frankel, 168-172.

Characters previously unacceptable in Soviet popular fiction – superfluous bureaucrats and returning camp prisoners – began to appear in published works. Khrushchev saw this as a model for writers to conduct his propaganda for his own purposes, without necessarily having his name in the byline. This is why, in 1962, he allowed the publication of arguably the most famous Gulag novel, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.<sup>29</sup>

But it did not happen overnight. Allegedly, in 1962, Tvardovsky began reading the realistic account of former Gulag prisoner Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn one evening while lying in bed. He found himself so fascinated by the work that he felt he had to get up, put on some clothes, and finish the story sitting entirely upright. He spent the whole night reading it, and in the morning, hurried to his office and hailed Solzhenitsyn as a literary genius and shouted at the typists to churn out extra copies to distribute to his friends. It was certainly a break from traditional Soviet realism, where typically a thief would accept his glorious role in Soviet society by finding redemption in Work. By contrast, Ivan Denisovich creatively finds ways to avoid it. The book was also controversial in its ambiguous, existential ending. Even one of *Novyi Mir*'s editors found it disturbing, saying that it “shows life too one-sidedly, involuntarily twisting and upsetting the proportions.” Soon after, Tvardovsky submitted it to Khrushchev, hoping he could utilize the book as a testimony to his de-Stalinist campaign. After some changes to avoid immediate censorship (including the addition of a “positive hero” to the manuscript), the work appeared in the November 1962 issue of *Novyi Mir*. Tvardovsky allegedly cheered, “The bird is free! The bird is free!” in the streets as he held the printed issue in his hands.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Applebaum, 520.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 520-21.; Michael Scammel, *Solzhenitsyn: A Biography*, (New York: Norton, 1984), 415; Scammel, 485.

*One Day* sent a shockwave through the political sphere. In response to its publication, many purge victims felt compelled to ascribe their reactions on paper. They submitted memoirs to *Novyi Mir*, hoping to tell their stories in writing for the first time. But when one former prisoner, Aleksandr Zuev, attempted to submit his, he received a response from Tvardovsky that it was not likely to be published, as the journal was already overflowing with such accounts.<sup>31</sup>

Solzhenitsyn was hailed as a “long awaited rebel” in Russia, and the Soviet intelligentsia raised the novel as its anti-Stalinist banner, but he was indifferent to such remarks. Growing up in the chaos and bloodshed of the Russian Civil War, and functioning as a devout Communist, Solzhenitsyn was not considered a progressive. Max Hayward argues that it was important to Solzhenitsyn to depict his Gulag experiences not through the eyes of an intellectual, but as a “semiliterate” commoner, like Shukhov’s character. In one scene of the novel, Shukhov wanders into a room where a few *zeks* are discussing the themes of Eisenstein’s films. In ignoring the conversation and swiping a piece of scrap metal he sees, Shukhov is most certainly a pragmatic individual, not concerned with art, but utility.<sup>32</sup>

And as a political tool serving his purposes, Khrushchev ensured his well-prepared aide carried numerous copies of the formerly-banned novel in his many trips in and outside Russia.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Miriam Dobson, “Reader’s Responses to *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*,” *Slavic Review*, Vol. 64, No. 3, 2005, 580-85.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 583.; Max Hayward, “Solzhenitsyn’s Place in Contemporary Soviet Literature,” *Slavic Review*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 1964, 435.; Yevtushenko, xv.

<sup>33</sup> Yevtushenko, xvii.

Khrushchev boldly denounced Stalinism in culture, the Gulag economic system, and in the justice system, and his reforms have certainly shown him to be more than a talking head. The standard of living rose, as his housing policies offered millions free apartments, he put an end to “Stalin’s virtual serfdom” in the countryside, and the secret police system influenced by the Gestapo had been largely tamed. But the issue in vanquishing Stalin’s cult of personality is more complex.<sup>34</sup>

Stalin died in honor and in good standing, thanks in part to his personality cult. Setting the factor of propaganda aside, two issues greatly contributed to Stalin’s embeddedness (compared to Khrushchev) in post-Stalinist Soviet life. The triumph of the Eastern Front and the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 is arguably the greatest reason for Stalin’s reverence, even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the Secret Speech, Khrushchev described this awesome sense of Soviet nationalism:

After the conclusion of the Patriotic War, the Soviet nation proudly stressed the magnificent victories gained through [our] great sacrifices and tremendous efforts. The country experienced a period of political enthusiasm. The party came out of the war even more united. Its cadres were tempered and hardened by the fire of the war. Under such conditions nobody could have even thought of the possibility of some plot in the party.<sup>35</sup>

In fact, several Russian cities are currently discussing, amidst controversy, the idea of plastering “victory buses” with the face of Stalin to commemorate Russia’s 66<sup>th</sup> anniversary of World War II.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, “The First Steps towards a new Era,” *guardian.co.uk*, 26 April 2007, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2007/apr/26/greatspeeches4>> 28 April 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Khrushchev – On the Cult of Personality.

<sup>36</sup> “Stalin buses may appear on Russian streets,” *Russia Today*, 22 April, 2011, <<http://rt.com/politics/stalin-bus-communists-victory/>>, May 9, 2011.

Boris Yeltsin's acting prime minister in 1992, Yegor Gaidar, has studied this phenomenon, which he coined "post-empire nostalgia." "Positive feelings toward Stalin," he describes, "grew from 19 percent in 1998 to 53 percent in 2003." This is part in due to official Russian propaganda's attempt to present the Great Patriotic War as a chain of events leading to the inevitable victory by the ruler, which causes memories of Stalinist repression to quickly vanish.<sup>37</sup>

The other factor that keeps Stalin notable among Russians is simply the length of his regime. From his inception as head of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1928, until his death in 1953, Stalin held absolute power in the USSR for roughly an entire generation. And despite the millions of deaths ascribed to his regime, through starvation, war, disease, and execution; millions of people survived Stalin's regime and lived to tell about it. Memory is fickle in how we understand and interpret the past, and there is the factor of nostalgia – in remembering the best and forgetting the worst – that has thwarted Khrushchev's best efforts to pin Stalin as the betrayer of socialism, the Judas to the Revolution's ultimate Marxist-Leninist credo.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Yegor Gaidar, *Collapse of an Empire*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (Washington, D.C: Brookings, 2007), xvi-xvii.

<sup>38</sup> Larson, 383-390.

## Works Cited

## Articles

Bigg, Claire. "Russia: Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' Remembered After 50 Years." Radio Free Europe. 15 February 2006. <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1065804.html> (22 May 2011)

Chamberlin, William Henry. "Khrushchev's War with Stalin's Ghost." *Russian Review*. Vol. 21, No. 1 (1962).

Cutler, Robert M. "Soviet Dissent Under Khrushchev: An Analytical Study." *Comparative Politics*. Vol. 13, No. 1 (1980).

Dobson, Miriam. "Reader's Responses to One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich." *Slavic Review*. Vol. 64, No. 3, (2005).

"Dudintsev, Vladimir Dmitrievich" *SovLit.com*. 2000.  
<<http://www.sovlit.com/bios/dudintsev.html>> 22 April 2011.

Frankel, Edith Rogovin. "Literature and Politics under Khrushchev: The Return of Tvardovskii to *Novyi Mir*." *Russian Review*. Vol. 35, No. 2 (1976).

Gorbachev, Mikhail. "The First Steps towards a new Era." *Guardian.co.uk*. 26 April 2007.  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2007/apr/26/greatspeeches4>>. 28 April 2011.

Hayward, Max. "Solzhenitsyn's Place in Contemporary Soviet Literature." *Slavic Review*. Vol. 23, No. 3, (1964).

---. "The Thaw and the Writers." *Daedalus*. Vol. 89. No. 3. (1960).

Larson, Thomas B. "Dismantling the Cults of Stalin and Khrushchev." *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (1968).

"Stalin buses may appear on Russian streets." *Russia Today*. 22 April, 2011,  
<<http://rt.com/politics/stalin-bus-communists-victory/>>. May 9, 2011.

Parfitt, Tom. "The Real Secret of Khrushchev's Speech." *Guardian.co.uk*. 24 February 2006.  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/feb/24/russia.tomparfitt>> 22 April 2011.

## Books

Applebaum, Anne. *Gulag: A History* New York: Random House, 2003.

Bacon, Edwin. *The Gulag at War*. New York: NYU Press, 1994.

Cohen, Stephen. *An End to Silence: Uncensored Opinion in the Soviet Union*. Norton: New York, 1982.

Conquest, Robert. *Power and Policy in the U.S.S.R.* New York: Harper & Row, 1967.

Gaidar, Yegor. *Collapse of an Empire*. Translated by Antonina W. Bouis. Washington, D.C: Brookings, 2007.

Hosking, Geoffrey. *Russia and the Russians: A History*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2003.

Knight, Amy. *Beria: Stalin's First Lieutenant*. New Jersey: Princeton, 1993.

Kuromiya, Hiroaki. *Stalin*. Harlow: Pearson, 2005.

Scammel, Michael. *Solzhenitsyn: A Biography*. New York: Norton, 1984.

Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. New York: Penguin Group, 1998.

---. *Bodalsia telenok s dubom*. Paris, 1975.

Tzouliadis, Tim. *The Forsaken: an American Tragedy in Stalin's Russia*. New York: Penguin, 2008.

Yevtushenko, Yevgeny. Introduction to *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. New York: Penguin Group, 1998.

Etc.

Khrushchev, Nikita S. "The Secret Speech – On the Cult of Personality, 1956." Delivered by First Party Secretary at the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 25 Feb, 1956. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/krushchev-secret.html>.

Lavrentii Beriia, 1953, eds., Y. Sigachev and V. Naumov, 1953: dokumenty, Moscow, 1999, 28-29.

Usakov, Galina. Interviewed by Anne Applebaum. Moscow, May 23, 1998.