

The death of Stalin in 1953 sparked a debate about his place in history that is still not completed

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Summary: After achieving power in the late-1920s, Joseph Stalin came to be considered almost a god in the Soviet Union. A 'cult of personality' elevated him above criticisms, no matter what crimes he committed. Yet his death, in 1953, led to a re-evaluation of his record, and in February 1956, in a highly controversial speech, Nikita Khrushchev attacked Stalin as a power-hungry tyrant. There followed a period of bitter disagreements, and Stalin was partly rehabilitated when Khrushchev himself was ousted from power. Stalin could not be judged objectively within a political system that he had done so much to create.

Questions to consider

- ♦ What ingredients made up the popular image of Stalin in the 1930s and 1940s?
- ♦ What were the reasons for the collapse of the Stalin cult?
- ♦ Why did so many people support and so many people reject the message conveyed in Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' of February 1956?
- ♦ Why could the post-Stalin communist regime in the USSR not distance itself entirely from Stalin's dictatorship?



Stalin at the height of his power, depicted as the heroic warleader

THE DEATH OF STALIN, IN MARCH 1953, transformed the Soviet Union. Within weeks of the leader's demise, the Soviet system was undergoing more radical change than at any time since the end of the 1920s, when Stalin had first risen to power. As Stalin's successors Khrushchev, Malenkov and Molotov fought among themselves to be crowned the new Soviet leader, they introduced policies which sought, with different degrees of subtlety, to change Stalinist politics. Their policies, which included the liberalisation of the criminal justice system (especially the GULAG, or labour camps, in which millions of Soviet citizens had been imprisoned under Stalin) and a partial easing of restrictions on freedom of expression, have usually been termed 'de-Stalinisation' by historians. Yet why did the Soviet leadership feel the need to de-Stalinise the past? What new information about Stalin and what new images of the 'great leader' had come to light so suddenly, leading his successors to renounce his legacy?

This article will examine the new images of Stalin which emerged during the 1950s and early 1960s, putting paid to the cult of the leader which had prevailed during his lifetime. New information about the violence inflicted by the Soviet state upon its people revealed not only its staggering scale and enormous human cost, but also Stalin's leading role. Stalin's fall

from grace, from the wise leader portrayed in Stalinist propaganda to the flawed, even evil, dictator of these new revelations, was abrupt, but the Communist party, under Khrushchev, did not present the new information about Stalin in a straightforward way. It often distanced itself from the most shocking revelations, once their disturbing consequences had become clear. However, as this article will also argue, other people outside the party had their own stories to tell about Stalin, and disputed the party's new version of events.

The superhuman Stalin

During his lifetime, Stalin had come to symbolise more than just the Communist party, of which he had been leader since the end of the 1920s. Journalists, poets, novelists, film-makers and painters depicted Stalin as an improbably wise, caring and capable leader (in Russian, the term was *vozhda*, a similar term to the German *führer*, used of Hitler). In posters and monuments, Stalin was depicted as literally superhuman, a gigantic figure many times larger and, therefore, more important, than those around him. In novels and films throughout the Stalin era, ordinary people's encounters with Stalin often possessed a dream-like quality of sacred communion. Party propaganda, such as newspapers and even schoolbooks,



Images of Stalin before post-1953 revaluations. Stalin in 1900, left, Stalin and Lenin, centre, and Stalin and the people, 1936

and party ceremonies, such as parades and official congresses, repeated key expressions of praise for Stalin in rituals of leader worship which Stalin did little to curtail. The slogans of the Stalin cult appeared in every newspaper and public space in the USSR. So ubiquitous were they that it is possible to argue that they became meaningless, invisible to the Soviet population whom they were supposed to impress. Although it is difficult to know what the Soviet people thought, especially at the height of the Stalin era when speaking one's mind was extremely dangerous, historians, working with the newest archival materials, have found that people *did* absorb the phrases, if not always the full meaning, of the Stalin cult. Certainly, on learning of Stalin's death, the vast majority of the Soviet population reacted with genuine shock and distress. What, then, happened to change this mood? When, and how, did the Stalin cult collapse?

Revaluations

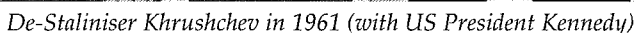
Some historians have argued that widespread popular worship of Stalin, in fact, ceased very soon after his death. It has often been claimed that, simply by dying, Stalin struck a fatal blow to the cult's claims of his immortality and infallibility. If this made the Soviet population doubt the future of the Soviet system, it also made them reconsider the Soviet past, for much of which Stalin had been promoted as a demigod. Yet, in the years following Stalin's death, such was the mythical power still conjured up by his name and image that the new Soviet leaders still struggled to emerge from their predecessor's shadow; indeed, within the new Soviet elite, there were several important figures, such as Molotov and Voroshilov, who actively sought to perpetuate Stalin's legacy, continuing to believe that he had been a great leader. As such, more radical figures on the Central Committee such as Khrushchev and Mikoian still found themselves in a minority in pushing for more frank revelations about the Stalin era.

Eventually, towards the end of 1955, as they planned the first congress of the Communist party since Stalin's death, the party Central Committee started to edge toward an active confrontation of the Stalinist past.

Recently opened archives have filled in many of the gaps in our understanding of this shift in policy, although the deepest psychological motivations prompting Stalin's former entourage to turn against their leader remain a mystery. We now know that the Central Committee, in late 1955, organised a commission to investigate the crimes of the Stalin era and that this commission found evidence to suggest that hundreds of thousands of leading party members had been killed in the 1930s, with Stalin's consent and, at least some of the time, active encouragement. Armed with this knowledge, Khrushchev faced down his remaining opponents in the Central Committee, putting them under considerable moral pressure, and pushed through plans to publicise this evidence to the party elite at the 20th Party Congress in February 1956. In the end, the evidence from the commission formed part of a much longer and broader speech, 'On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences', which became known as the 'Secret Speech' after it was given to a closed gathering of the Soviet party elite on the night of 25 February 1956.

Khrushchev's challenge

The 'Secret Speech' is universally acknowledged as a seminal event in Soviet history. Until the advent of Gorbachev and his policy of *glasnost* (openness) in the late 1980s, the revelations about the Stalinist past made that night in 1956 constituted by far the most honest account of Stalinism ever given by a party official, and the most disruptive, controversial episode of historical reassessment before or since. The speech was particularly shocking for the language it used to describe Stalin. No longer a 'bright sun', or 'kindly father', Stalin was instead painted as paranoid, suspicious, sadistic and power-hungry. These character traits had led to numerous national catastrophes, from the paranoid search for 'enemies' during the 'Great Terror' of the late 1930s, to Stalin's refusal to believe military intelligence during the Second World War, which had led to the failure to anticipate and adequately defend against Hitler's 'surprise' invasion of the USSR in June 1941, to the post-war purges directed against innocent ethnic minority communities. Throughout his rule, Khrushchev claimed,



For all that, as numerous commentators have argued, there was a great deal wrong with the Secret Speech. It was hastily written and, as a result, there were flaws and sometimes serious inaccuracies in its historical account. In spite of Khrushchev's attempts to broaden his account beyond the Great Terror, the speech still failed to reveal the full tragedy of the Stalin era, the thousands of lives of ordinary non-party members which were also ruined by the purges. More broadly, the speech sought to heap all the blame for past failings on to Stalin while avoiding the question of whether any surviving members of Stalin's entourage, including, of course, Khrushchev himself, ought to share some of the responsibility for the tragedy described. Another potentially implausible feature of the Secret Speech was its assertion that the Soviet system, based on Leninist principles, was opposed to Stalinism and had remained unaffected by it. In fact, as outraged listeners and later historians have cogently argued, there were considerable continuities between Leninism and Stalinism, not least in the absolute intolerance of opposition and the advocacy of force against opposition. Yet the speech ignored this important point, as it did numerous other counter-arguments, in its eagerness to convince listeners of its version of the Stalinist past.

Yet to what extent did the speech succeed in convincing

Central Committee: the Central Committee of the Communist Party was, in theory, the organisation that acted in the name of the Party Congress when it was not in session. It contained all the important ministers and party officials.

Great Terror: a term for Stalin's purges in 1937-8, in which over one million died.

Ubiquitous: to be found everywhere, omnipresent.

From the party's point of view, however, such questions were a minor annoyance compared to the far more worrying statements of political opposition which listeners across the Soviet Union (and especially among the intellectual elite of the big cities, such as Moscow and Leningrad) made in response to the speech. It was common for meetings where students, academics, writers and artists predominated to be disrupted, and in some cases broken up, by speakers who criticised not only Stalin(ism), but also the Soviet system as a whole and the current Soviet leadership. There were widespread allegations that Khrushchev and the rest of the Central Committee had been 'saving their own skins' by heaping the blame on Stalin only after his death, after the threat to their own lives had abated. Additionally, many listeners expressed scepticism that the Soviet system could have survived Stalinism unscathed, that Stalinism could somehow be held to be distinct from Leninism, or that the Soviet system was superior to its predecessor, the Tsarist regime which, after all, had not killed its own subjects on such a large scale. In response to this, the party had to resort to arrests and strongly worded criticism of the perpetrators, but, without the

credible threat of actual repression, it was difficult to ensure their silence. Indeed, these controversial views of Stalinism lived on in the beliefs of the many dissident groups and movements who first emerged as a result of the Secret Speech, and were never fully silenced again.

At the same time, it would be wrong to claim, as many more idealistic historians have done, that the Secret Speech completely destroyed the mentality of Stalinism. There was a significant constituency of listeners who, in response to the speech, defended Stalin in the strongest terms from the slights of his opponents. Listeners in the republic of Georgia, Stalin's birthplace, had a particularly strong attachment to Stalin, and they demonstrated it by taking to the streets on the anniversary of Stalin's death (5 March 1956) in defiance of the Secret Speech. Outside of Georgia, too, Stalin found numerous defenders, from military men who claimed to treasure the wartime memory of fighting 'for Stalin, for the motherland!', to ordinary people holding fast to the legend of Stalin's greatness.

Assessment

Therefore, in spite of the party's hopes, the Secret Speech did not provide a new set of images of Stalin on which the Soviet people would or could agree. This had probably been true of the imagery of the cult, too, but any diversity of opinion about Stalin during the Stalin era had largely been contained by the severe constraints on freedom of expression before 1953. To admit, after 1953, that the party had distorted the truth about Stalin in the past was also to throw the post-Stalinist party's authority into question, creating a uniquely uncertain atmosphere in which to rethink the past. By the end of 1956, the party had tried to regain control, first punishing its new opponents (on both sides of the political spectrum) and then going back on some of its more severe criticisms of Stalin and settling for a view of the erstwhile leader as both bad and good, ambiguous rather than wholly bad. Some five years later, in 1961, with Khrushchev's personal authority more firmly established, the party presented its final revision of Stalin's image, going back on the offensive against the leader, in a more detailed public critique at the 22nd Party Congress, and electing to remove his body from the mausoleum-shrine where it had lain for the previous eight years, giving it an undignified night-time burial. To the party leaders, it must have seemed as though the ghost of Stalin had finally been exorcised. Yet, within a few short years, Khrushchev had been ousted from the leadership, partly on the grounds of his reckless criticism of Stalin, and his successor, Leonid Brezhnev, was attempting to inflate Stalin's reputation once more.

Why the Stalin issue should have been so vexing in the Khrushchev era might best be summed up in the words of the celebrated Soviet writer, Mikhail Sholokhov, who, responding to Khrushchev's attempts to reject Stalinism as a personality cult, claimed 'There was a cult, but there was also a personality'. To deal with the legacy of this towering personality required more than hastily-written history; it required the system which he had built to collapse along with the cult which had been an integral part of it. Yet Khrushchev, like his successors, was not prepared to go nearly that far.

TIMELINE

Important junctures in the Stalin cult

1929	(Dec) Stalin's 50th birthday, the extravagant celebrations of which are usually held to mark the start of Stalin's cult of personality. Increasingly lavish celebrations are held in 1939 and 1949
1934	(Jan) 17th Party Congress, otherwise known as 'The Congress of Victors', at which Stalin's power is fully entrenched. Also marks the start of the 'Great Terror', following the murder of Leningrad party boss, Sergei Kirov later in the year
1937-8	'Great Terror', over one million Soviet citizens murdered on fictitious charges of treason
The Khrushchev era and de-Stalinisation:	
1953	(Mar) Death of Stalin
1956	(Feb) Khrushchev delivers Secret Speech to closed session of the 20th Party Congress. The party then decides to disseminate the speech more widely and spends the next few months holding meetings in local party branches about the cult of personality
1956	(July) Publication of resolution on the cult of personality, which considerably downplays the harsher criticism of the Secret Speech, and heavily criticises opponents of the current administration
1961	(Oct) 22nd Party Congress, at which Stalin is publicly criticised, and his body reburied in an unmarked grave on Red Square
1962	Publication of a wave of anti-Stalinist literature, mostly about the GULAG, and 'Terror', including Solzhenitsyn's <i>One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich</i>
1964	(Oct) Fall of Khrushchev

FURTHER READING: Robert Service, *A History of Twentieth Century Russia*, London, 1998; Nikita Khrushchev, *On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences* (available in multiple editions, and also online at <http://www.uwm.edu/Course/448-343/index12.html>); M. McCauley, *Khrushchev and Khrushchevism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1987.

Images of Stalin in the Khrushchev Era by Dr Polly Jones
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