Daniel Stambler, Russian History Essay 2

Russia under Khrushchev was different from Russia under Stalin and Lenin. Authors like Brooks, Khlevniuk, Gorsuch and Koenker, Taubman, and Zubok state that Khrushchev improved the standard of living in the USSR and made it less of a police state from the one ruled by Stalin. In addition, Khrushchev relaxed state censorship and thus allowed for greater diversity of opinion in art. Due to the sharp contrast between Khrushchev’s and Stalin’s regime, historians call Khrushchev’s era, “The Thaw.” However, in foreign affairs, Khrushchev acted more recklessly than Stalin. Zubok and Taubman called his foreign policy one of nuclear brinkmanship. Furthermore, all authors point out that Khrushchev, unlike Stalin, genuinely believed in the Marxist-Leninist theory of the spread of Communism around the world.

Under Khrushchev, the standard of living in the USSR improved significantly from the previous eras. According to Brooks and Chernyavskiy, (p 97) under Lenin’s War Communism policy, the countryside suffered severe food shortages. Similarly, Stalin’s collectivization policy during the five year plan caused mass starvation across the countryside. Furthermore, the standard of living plummeted after WWII. According to Khlevniuk, (p 324) the government made almost no effort to improve the condition of the Soviet people. Peasants had no heating, no internal plumbing and almost nothing to eat. And while city life was better, there were many food shortages. Zubok states that Khrushchev, unlike Stalin, sought to compete with the West and thus strove to improve the standard of living within the USSR. While the food shortages still remained, according to Gorsuch and Koenker, the Soviet Union became more materialistic. For the first time, Soviet brochures advertised goods such as vacuum cleaners and washing machines to Soviet households. Gorsuch and Koenker state (p 252) that beginning in the 1960s, many Soviet families had a T.V set. Also, Khrushchev’s government invested in housing.

In addition to increasing the standard of living, Khrushchev transformed aspects of Soviet culture. Despite maintaining anti-Western and anti-Capitalist propaganda from Lenin’s and Stain’s rule, Khrushchev relaxed the rhetoric of his propaganda. Brooks and Chernyavskiy state that Lenin labeled anyone who disagreed with him as an enemy of the people. Stalin kept some of this class consciousness while promoting Socialist Realism. Brooks and Zhuk state that Khrushchev relaxed state censorship. Thus, writers, artists, and filmmakers began to produce content other than state propaganda. Sometimes this content contained subtle criticisms of the Soviet system. For example, writers such as Boris and Arkady Strugatsky metaphorically stated how the USSR’s policy was hurting its children. Moreover, according to Gorsuch and Koenker, because Khrushchev allowed for tourism, many Soviet citizens were able to come in contact with Westerners and their ideology for the first time. This completely contrasts Stalin’s ideology, which according to Khlevniuk was xenophobic and only allowed a few communist sympathizers to visit. Finally under Khrushchev, the art scene blossomed and parts of the Soviet Union began to appear more cosmopolitan.

Moreover, there was an overall shift in the media. According to Brooks, Khrushchev dismantled Stalin’s cult of personality. Zubok notes that (p 139), Khrushchev’s son in law launched a small Khrushchev cult of personality which depicted him as a great peacemaker. However, this didn’t compare to the cult of personality surrounding Lenin and Stalin who the people viewed as divine figures. After Khrushchev denounced Stalin as a paranoid murderer in 1957 at the Twentieth Party Congress, Soviet media began to stress how important Lenin was to the founding of the USSR. Khrushchev, like Lenin, was driven by his ideology. Although unlike Lenin, as Brooks and Chernyavskiy point out, Khrushchev was reform minded and trusted the peasantry a lot more. According to Brooks, the media depicted Lenin as a great leader whose legacy was ruined by Stalin. In addition, according to Taubman, (p 592) Unlike Stalin and Lenin, Khrushchev did not try to eliminate the Intelligentsia. Khrushchev encouraged them to embrace reform but restrained them when they criticized the state.

Furthermore, under Khrushchev, Russia minimized the purges of the past regimes. Lenin established the Cheka, which had permission to execute suspects on the spot. In addition, Lenin banned all inner party factions and suppressed all opinions that weren’t in line with Soviet ideology. According to Khlevniuk, Stalin expanded the secret police and arrested millions of people during the Great Terror. Moreover, according to Khlevniuk, Stalin being paranoid, regularly purged the Party, the military, and the secret police. Anyone who was suspected of not being a loyal Stalinist was disposed of. Zubok states that Khrushchev scrapped this system of terror, greatly limited the power of the secret police, and rehabilitated many prisoners from the camps. After Khrushchev had Beria killed, no future Soviet official died as a result of inner party struggle. Under Khrushchev, according to Zubok, people within the party were allowed to show discontent towards Khrushchev. Those who openly opposed Khrushchev such as Molotov and the other members of the “anti-party group” only faced the prospect of losing their jobs.

Under Khrushchev, Russia practiced a different foreign policy from Lenin’s and Stalin’s. According to Brooks and Chernyavskiy, Lenin saw the Soviet Union in a constant state of war against the capitalist powers, but was able to concede territory to preserve his new government. Under Lenin, Trotsky, who was in charge of foreign affairs, believed that a more industrialized country should lead the way towards a worldwide Communist revolution. Stalin, by contrast, practiced the idea of Socialist Imperialism. According to Zubok, (p 51) Stalin was a realist who acted cautiously in foreign affairs. He distrusted everyone in the international community and always thought in worst case scenarios. Stalin gave away territory only when he would benefit, and he treated allies like Mao coldly. Moreover, Stalin wasn’t hesitant to send troops to brutally suppress rebellions within the Soviet Union. Taubman notes that while Russia under Khrushchev continued to strive to defeat the West, it behaved more aggressively in the international scene. Khrushchev was ideologically driven and, according to Taubman, (p 350) genuinely believed that the world would soon fall to Communism. Zubok mentions how western leaders were shocked that Khrushchev believed the propaganda put out by his own state. Thus, Khrushchev despised the West and publicly embarrassed himself at many meetings to show his disdain. Taubman describes how Khrushchev was too trusting of other Communist leaders. He tried his best to be generous to Mao and Tito to make up for how Stalin treated them. However, he was too generous. According to Brooks, he found that he could not overcome Stalin’s legacy and thus his generosity was coldly received by other communist leaders. However, the most important part of Russia’s foreign policy under Khrushchev was the practice of nuclear brinkmanship. Khrushchev understood the destructive capabilities of nuclear weapons, but he constantly threatened to use them in order to scare the West into conceding to his demands. This risky policy was criticized at home and backfired when Khrushchev withdrew Soviet missiles from Cuba after almost provoking nuclear war with the United States.

Russia under Khrushchev experienced a cultural flowering and an ideological Thaw from its past regimes. As Khrushchev strove to achieve World Communism and compete with the West, he abandoned Stalin’s xenophobic policies and sought to make the Soviet Union more materialistic. Although Khrushchev didn’t fix many problems with Soviet society, he altered Soviet culture so that it became more tolerant of different ideologies.