Stalinogrud, while the Palace of Science and Culture should bear the name of Stalin, with a monument raised to him outside. The Kremlin leadership decided to establish a Stalin Museum at the Kuntsevo dacha. A director was appointed, salaries were fixed, and large sums of money allocated before they changed their minds, realizing that there were already enough museums, institutes and monuments in Stalin's name, let alone that of his predecessor.

The death of Stalin closed a gloomy chapter in the history of the USSR. But history never stands still. Within a short time, the Stalinist Khrushchev would deal his former idol a devastating and fatal blow.

The Third Leader: Nikita Khrushchev

With the two giants of Bolshevism gone, it at once became apparent that their successors were political pygmies by comparison. Unlike Lenin, Stalin left no 'Testament'. Instead, he left a mighty and enigmatic empire.

Dictators never like to appoint a successor, if only because they think they are going to live forever. The absence of a democratic mechanism for the transfer of power invariably leads to a struggle among those remaining. Despite their assurances of 'unity', 'the monolithic Leninist leadership', 'loyalty to the cause of Lenin-Stalin', this was what took place following the death of Stalin.

Given the absence of an obvious successor, and even though the population was traditionally without a voice, Stalin's heirs nevertheless realized that in order to maintain the Leninist course, as well as their control of the vast country, they needed to enhance the prestige and role of the Party. For two decades it had been the magical incantation of Stalin's name that had moved the levers of power. Now he was gone. 'Collective leadership', as they all knew, was a fiction. Whoever ran the Party would now run the country. Khrushchev had been made chairman of the funeral commission – a position of enormous significance – and charged with 'concentrating on the work of the Central Committee', but had not yet been made head of the Party.

Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev was completely unlike the average dictator. He was outwardly affable, with a peasant-like bluntness, an open face, snub nose and big ears, unfeigned humour and boundless energy. The members of the Presidium had for so long been gripped by fear that it was natural for them to want the Party to be run by someone more yielding, more obliging than Stalin. From March to
September 1953 Khrushchev was merely one of the Central Committee secretaries, though with the special task of handling its organizational affairs. On 8 September, following the arrest of Beria, in which Khrushchev played the main part, he became First Secretary. It was the Beria Affair that lifted him above the other members of the Presidium, and from which his later fearlessness would derive.

Khrushchev was fifty-nine when he ascended the Party throne. He belonged to the generation of Bolsheviks that arose after the revolution, notably in the 1920s and early 1930s. He had stepped into the shoes of men who had been executed, but had no qualms on that score. He was one of the lucky ones whose career meteorically advanced by the savagery of Stalin's dictatorship.

Bolsheviks of the post-1917 generation like Khrushchev were generally speaking not very well educated, many of them having passed through only a brief spell in the so-called 'workers' faculties', in effect adult education day or evening classes that were meant to prepare workers and peasants for higher education. In Khrushchev's case was the Yuzovka Mining Workers' Faculty in Ukraine. True, he did a spell in the Moscow Industrial Academy in the mid-1920s, this barely enhanced his academic abilities, and according to Shepilov who was a close associate, he never learned even to compose a literary resolution.

Many of the middle-ranking regional leaders were from this second generation of Bolsheviks, but by the end of the thirties their number had been reduced to a handful, as most were consigned to oblivion in Stalin's purges. Khrushchev, however, was never threatened with this fate. Not even the most rabid Chekist could have accused him of anything. He personified a particular type of 'peasant' leader, a man from the very midst of the people, and this helped to create an atmosphere of trust around him in the eyes of simple folk. He was a typical leader of the Stalinist type: uneducated - 'two winters of schooling' - energetic, expeditious, never doubting the correctness of a Party instruction. He was also one of the most zealous executives of Stalin's will.

Khrushchev was a member of the Central Committee from 1938 until he was removed from all his posts in 1964 - thirty years in the 'Leninist headquarters of the Party'. He became a candidate (later full) member of the Politburo in 1938, and a full member the following year. He was briefly Chairman of the Council of Ministers in 1951, and between 1958 and 1964 occupied the same post for SR. It was customary for the top Party boss also to be Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet Armed Forces, and in April 1957 Khrushchev was confirmed in this post as well. This does not exhaust his list of his jobs. Suffice it to say that in becoming First Party Secretary, he held enormous power.

As First Secretary of the Moscow Party committee in 1938 and as First Secretary of the Ukrainian Central Committee in 1938, Khrushchev made his own contribution to the evil of the inquisition. Speaking at a Party meeting in Moscow on 22 September 1936, he said: 'Just as Comrade Stalin, with his sharp Leninist eye, always accurately pointed out the path for our Party, as for the course of the construction, so he has pointed out the corners where the scum, as they say, are crawling out. We have to shoot not only this scum, but they should also be shot.' Pausing for the applause to die down, he went on, whipping up the hysteria: 'At one Moscow factory... was a young Bakaev snake [the son of I. Bakaev, who had been working under his own name. Yet the Party organization even know about such odious names ... With a name like she ought to have been put under a magnifying glass ... Do all that vigilance? They've got to learn to organize their work, target someone, make a rapid study of him and bring the case to conclusion.'

Khrushchev's work in Moscow was not restricted to the political field. He was also involved in the 'reconstruction' of the city, though with a distinctly Bolshevik understanding of the task. Speaking on 23 October 1936 at a Party meeting in the Kirov district of Moscow, he said: 'If you tell anyone who hasn't been on the Garden Ring in the last three months to go and take a look; you won't recognize it; people won't notice. We're cutting the boulevards at night, so people won't notice. The people will come and say: the street is better, we've demolished the Triumphal Arch. The street is better without the arch. We tore down the Sukharev Tower and the city wall, even though the architects told us it was a
Such zeal was duly noted. Khrushchev was sent to Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, where he was able to apply what he had learnt in Moscow. Speaking as First Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party at its Fourteenth Congress on 13 June 1938, he declared: 'Here in Ukraine, almost the entire membership of the Politburo of the Ukrainian Party, with few exceptions, turned out to be hostile. Yezhov arrived and did a real demolition job. I think we are finishing off the enemies in Ukraine right now.'

This was the sort of speech that was being made by every right-thinking Stalinist, and like the vast army of Party organization men, Khrushchev believed every word of it. In the use of terror, Khrushchev was an ardent exponent of Stalin's will, and for that reason he survived, although it would have been difficult to portray this outwardly good-natured and comic figure as a Polish spy or Trotskyite saboteur.

As a graduate of the Stalinist school, Khrushchev had been taught to believe in Bolshevik tenets, to hate anyone defined as an enemy, and not to spare himself in carrying out the Party's orders. This elementary, harsh political thinking and ideological primitivism, combined with native peasant wit, inexhaustible energy and simple optimism, secured for Khrushchev a firm place in the top rank of the leadership, as far as that was possible under Stalin.

Despite the purges of the 1930s and its huge losses in the Second World War, the Communist Party was still led by men of the old 'Leninist-Stalinist' school. After Stalin's death, the Presidium consisted of Bulganin, Beria, Voroshilov, Kaganovich, Malenkov, Mikoyan, Molotov and Khrushchev, plus Pervukhin and Saburov, who had latterly been advanced by Stalin. It was clear that of these, Beria, Malenkov and Khrushchev would lay claim to the top job. As Shelepin put it a dozen years later: 'After Stalin came Khrushchev. He was also a leader. So the leadership psychology continued.' Khrushchev, like the others, saw that it was the feared Beria, as head of the allmighty Interior Ministry, who held all the important cards. He decided to take bold action.

Khrushchev was at first motivated by a desire to save himself, as well as the other members of the Presidium: it is impossible to find in his words or deeds any hint of protest against the Stalinist system as such. The political struggle in the Kremlin, however, acquired a logic of its own. The Khrushchev who took up arms against Beria was not the one who has gone down in history as the first Soviet leader to challenge Stalin's memory. But the 'plot' against Beria provided the original platform from which it became possible to strike the first, devastating blows against Stalinist totalitarianism.

**Encounter with a Monster**

Stalin's embalmed body was installed in the Mausoleum very slightly raised above that of Lenin, beside which it was to remain until 1961. Oaths of loyalty to 'the great continuer of Lenin's cause' were echoed around the whole country. The Kremlin leadership understood that the system was still sustained by three main supports: the Party, Bolshevik ideology and the vast repressive apparatus. There was no dominant leader, yet the Leninist system could not exist without one, and one must emerge. But who was it to be?

Given the virtual equality prevailing in the Presidium, Malenkov, as Chairman of the Council of Ministers, looked increasingly authoritative. It seemed he must become Stalin's successor, but he lacked the necessary leadership qualities. As Roy Medvedev has rightly observed, Malenkov was 'a man without a biography. His was a life of special departments and privy councils. He had no image of his own, not even his own style.' Malenkov was not capable of clinging to the pinnacle of power: he had been created by Stalin as a leader of the second rank, in effect a high-level Party functionary. Indeed, the fact that he had been Stalin's favourite worked against him.

Stalin's heirs were as yet untroubled by the fact that there were still more than four million people in the camps, that entire nations had been deported, and that the 'punitive organs' were still keeping a close eye on everyone. Also still active was the infamous NKVD Special Board, which had condemned 442,531 people to death and long terms of imprisonment. Stalin's heirs were more concerned with their own fate - how to preserve their exalted positions, how to protect their future careers, and above all their personal security.

The possibility that Beria might become the new leader caused profound disquiet. In his personal notes on Khrushchev, Fedor...
Burlatsky, who had served as one of his advisers, recalled his chief telling him: 'We stood alongside the dead body [at Stalin’s funeral], practically without a word, each man thinking of himself. Then we left. We travelled two to a car. The first to go were Malenkov and Beria, then Molotov and Kaganovich. Then and there Mikoyan says to me: “Beria’s gone to Moscow to take power.” I say to him: “As long as that bastard’s alive, none of us can feel safe.” And the idea took a firm hold in my mind that the first thing to do was to get rid of Beria.’

The many accounts of what took place next all agree that Khrushchev’s part in the affair was crucial. He exhibited extraordinary courage by undertaking to organize a compact with the other members of the Presidium, all of whom were primarily motivated by fear and a sense of self-preservation. It was not that they saw in Beria the odious personification of the system and the most repellent features of Stalinism; they saw in him a threat to themselves. At Khrushchev’s secret meetings with the other members of the Presidium – including Malenkov, who was closest to Beria – they all agreed that Beria must go, but were terrified that the plot might go wrong. The plotters secured the assistance of a dozen or so senior army men, including Zhukov, Moskalenko, Batitsky, Zub and Yuferov.

Khrushchev would recount the tale of Beria’s arrest on numerous subsequent occasions, each time adding new details and flourishes, and always emphasizing his own role. In the revealing reminiscences dictated by him and published in the West as Khrushchev Remembers, he recounts what took place at a joint meeting of the Presidium of the Council of Ministers and Party Presidium. ‘As soon as Malenkov opened the session he said, “Let us discuss Party questions. There are some matters which we must deal with right away.” As had been arranged in advance, I requested the floor from Comrade Malenkov and proposed that we discuss the matter of Beria. Beria was sitting on my right. He gave a start, grabbed me by the hand, looked at me with a startled expression on his face and said, “What’s going on, Nikita? What’s this you’re mumbling about?” I said, “Just pay attention. You’ll find out soon enough.”’

Khrushchev then made a brief, confused speech, ludicrously accusing Beria, among other things, of spying for the Caucasian Muslim opposition, collaborating with British intelligence and intriguing with Tito, being negative about the prospects of socialism in East Germany, and, more realistically, interfering in the Party affairs of the national republics, and seeking to undermine the unity of the Soviet people. He concluded, equally ludicrously, by declaring that ‘Beria is no Communist.’

Everyone else then voiced their agreement. Malenkov, according to Khrushchev, was in a state of panic. Khrushchev proposed that Beria be relieved of all of his posts. Without putting this to a vote, the terrified Malenkov pressed a button, whereupon Zhukov and the other generals marched into the room. ‘Malenkov,’ Khrushchev continues, ‘said in a faint voice to Comrade Zhukov, “As Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, I request that you take Beria into custody pending investigation of charges made against him.”’

‘Hands up!’ Zhukov commanded Beria.’

By the afternoon Beria was being held in the Kremlin. In the evening he was moved to a military post in the capital, and then finally to the underground command headquarters of Moscow military district. The other leaders were still so afraid of him, even when he was under arrest, that more than once they had to give the ‘all-clear’ to local forces that had been put on alert.

When Beria had more or less come to his senses, he began banging his fists on the door. At once the guard commander, a full colonel no less, and several other armed officers poked their heads in. ‘What’s going on? Why all the noise?’ Beria replied: ‘I demand an immediate meeting with Malenkov, or at least pen and paper.’ Within a few minutes, after permission had been obtained from the Kremlin, a sheaf of paper and a pen and ink were brought. Before the start of the investigation, Beria wrote ceaselessly. Malenkov, Khrushchev, Bulganin and collectively all the other members of the Presidium received letters. On 28 June 1953 Beria wrote to Malenkov:

I was convinced that I would draw all the necessary conclusions from the Presidium’s serious criticism, and that I would be of use to the collective. But the Central Committee has decided otherwise, and I think it has acted correctly. I think it is necessary to say that I have always been infinitely loyal to the Party of Lenin-Stalin and to my motherland, and always active in my work … I tried to select cadres according to their business-like qualities … That applies to the Special Committee and the First and Second main boards, which dealt with
atomic affairs and guided missiles ... I ask Comrades Georgy Malenkov, Vyacheslav Molotov, Klementy Voroshilov, Nikita Khrushchev, Lazar Kaganovich, Nikolai Bulganin, Anastas Mikoyan and the others to forgive me. Dear Comrades, I wish you all great success in the cause of Lenin-Stalin ... Georgy, I ask you, if you think it possible, not to neglect my family (my wife and my old mother), and my son Sergei whom you know.

Signed Lavrenti Beria.

For two weeks, Beria wrote to his former comrades every day, until Khrushchev ordered the removal of writing paper.

The members of the Presidium decided that Beria must be tried, even though their ardent wish was to exterminate him with all due despatch. They seemed to fear that, even incarcerated in a prison cell, he still mysteriously retained some of the authority he had wielded as head of the Gulag and the entire system of punishment and control.

It was decided to proceed by resorting to the practice of 1937–38, handing the case over to a troika which would deal with it in half an hour. Many, however, feared that such a procedure could unleash a repeat of the great terror, the thought of which made their blood run cold. Khrushchev objected that on 29 June 1953 the Presidium had passed his resolution calling for an investigation of the ‘criminal, anti-Party and anti-state actions of Beria’. It had further agreed that the case would be handled by the General Prosecutor, that the investigation team should be formed within twenty-four hours, and its composition reported to the Presidium.

The investigation was also to deal with the actions of Beria’s deputies and assistants B. Kobulov, A. Kobulov, P. Meshik, R. Sarkisov, S. Goglidze, P. Sharia and others.

It was decided that the case should be debated by a special plenary meeting of the Central Committee. The session lasted five days, and the case was presented by Malenkov. Khrushchev took a less conspicuous part, opening the Plenum and chairing the sessions.

Malenkov’s speech was detailed, but contradictory. He stressed the fact that Beria had tried to put the Ministry of the Interior above the Party – which had in fact been the practice since Lenin’s time – and had carried out surveillance on the activities, conversations and correspondence of every member of the Presidium. He described how Beria had attempted to normalize relations with Yugoslavia over the

Party’s head, as if the rapprochement between Yugoslav and Soviet officials after Stalin’s death had been the work of a common criminal. In fact, at the time both states had been moving tentatively towards improving relations, but the Presidium was determined to use any possible weapon, and this seemed like a powerful one.

The charge that Beria had opposed forcing the construction of socialism in East Germany was equally biased. Malenkov defined Beria’s position on this as that of a ‘bourgeois degenerate’. Illogically, he was accused, as he sat in his underground cell, of having caused the explosion of the Soviet hydrogen bomb: ‘It was his personal decision.’ Equally, the amnesty following the death of Stalin had, it was claimed, been ‘too broad’.

Following Malenkov’s introductory speech, Khrushchev spoke for an hour. Frequently departing from his text, which was not unusual for him, the speech was disjointed and confused, though it drew the applause and laughter of the audience. Like other speakers, Khrushchev gave not the slightest hint that a phenomenon like Beria, whose hallmark was terror and complete disregard of the law, was a classic example of the Bolshevik system at work. Beria’s close association with Stalin was plain for the Plenum to see, but Khrushchev set out to deflect any suspicions from the former leader: ‘While Comrade Stalin was still alive we saw that Beria was a big schemer. He is a sly, cunning careerist. He got his claws deep into Comrade Stalin’s soul and was able to impose his opinions on Comrade Stalin.’

Explaining why Stalin had allowed this to happen, he went on: ‘We all respect Comrade Stalin. But time takes its toll. In recent years, Comrade Stalin did not read his papers or see people, as he was in poor health. And it was these circumstances that the scoundrel Beria exploited, very cunningly.’ Khrushchev thus in effect reduced the criminal nature of the regime to a matter of Stalin’s poor health.

It was Khrushchev who for the first time raised the question of the exaggerated power of the Interior Ministry and its fabrication of fake charges, and who first cast doubt on the legality of the Ministry’s so-called Special Boards. They had been established by a Party and government order of 5 November 1934 as extra-judicial organs with broad penal powers. Angrily, he recalled that he had seen a tsarist gendarme for the first time in his life at the age of twenty-four, but now Interior Ministry officials were thick on the ground, and they
were paid the highest salaries, more than a district Party secretary. Having raised the curtain to some extent on the secret services, Khrushchev could not, however, restrain himself from uttering the ritual Bolshevik formula: 'We must further strengthen the intelligence and counter-intelligence organs. We must put good, honest Bolsheviks onto this work.'

Like Malenkov and the rest of the Presidium, Khrushchev was blind to the fatal flaws in the Leninist system, which relied on repression and the Party's unlimited monopoly of power. Nor could they see that, like all 'good, honest Bolsheviks', they had themselves lived in a world of lies and coercion.

With the earthy humour that made him what he was, even at this grim Party meeting Khrushchev could make the delegates laugh. Describing Beria's reaction when he was arrested, he remarked, 'He dropped a load in his pants.' The official report modified this to: 'He turned to jelly, and possibly more than that.' The meeting was convulsed in mirth. Khrushchev recalled the last time he had seen Beria on the eve of his arrest: 'I shook him “warmly” by the hand, thinking to myself, well, you swine, this is your last handshake, tomorrow at 2 o'clock we'll really shake you!' This too got a good laugh.

Khrushchev did not remind his audience that he himself had given vocal support to Beria. Speaking to Ukrainian NKVD officials on 13 December 1938 he had declared: 'The new head is now Lavrenti Pavlovich Beria. He has spent his whole life working in the Party. He has shown himself as a Bolshevik-Stalinist who has defended the Party organization and Georgia in general from hostile elements. He has united Georgia in love for the Soviet people and love for Comrade Stalin (stormy applause). You have to unite and with Comrade Beria in command smash our enemies.'

Others added their own details to the list of charges against Beria. Although everyone knew that Malenkov had been closest to Beria, as he was now Chairman of the Council of Ministers such a charge could not be uttered; not that this prevented Malenkov himself from noting sadistically, when the Secretary of the Azerbaijan Party Central Committee rose to speak: 'Comrade Bagirov, you were close to Beria, but that issue is not under discussion at present.' A. Andreyev's tone matched that of Beria himself when he said, 'We must put this swine on the rack and get the whole picture of his relations with foreigners, just who and how he served them.' To any suggestion that there had been a cult of personality, Andreyev objected: 'Why has the issue of a cult of personality arisen? It's Beria's dirty tricks. We must not undermine Comrade Stalin's teachings. Comrade Stalin's teachings are eternal and immutable.' The other delegates muttered, 'Quite right.'

Stalin's former aide A. Poskrebyshev had been groomed to make a speech at the Plenum, but when the members of Presidium read what he had written, they found that he had gone beyond merely unmasking Beria, and had set himself up as an interpreter of many hitherto unknown sayings and declarations of his old master. It was agreed to drop him from the agenda and merely to attach the draft of his speech to the evidence for the Special Judicial Hearing. As for Poskrebyshev himself, at least he was rehabilitated after having lived during the last months of Stalin's life under a cloud.

The Plenum itself was not of particular significance. It served chiefly as a prop for the leadership in the emerging struggle for power, a means of dissociating itself from the universally hated hangman. No one saw the need to examine the roots of the system that had produced and nurtured Beria: all that was required was to replace this 'bad' Bolshevik with a 'good' one, and everything would be fine.

Unexpectedly, Malenkov's closing speech turned out to have some importance. He did not criticize the system or the genesis of Stalinism as such, but he did condemn attempts by such delegates as Andreyev and Tevosyan to 'defend' Stalin. Malenkov was probably the first person to state that there was a Stalin personality cult. He declared, 'Nothing justifies the fact that we did not hold a Party congress for thirteen years, or a Central Committee for years, and that the Politburo did not function normally and was substituted by the troikas ['committees of three and five'] and so on, working on Comrade Stalin's orders in an uncoordinated way on different issues and various tasks.' Anticipating to some extent what Khrushchev would say three years later at the Twentieth Party Congress, Malenkov added: 'We do not have the right to hide from you the fact that such a deformed personality cult led to arbitrary individual decisions and that in recent years this began to cause serious harm to the business of leading the Party and country.' The solution was,
characteristically, 'to raise the revolutionary vigilance of the Communists and toilers all round'.

Towards the end of 1953 Beria’s trial took place in camera in the office of a member of the Military Council of the Defence Ministry. The Special Judicial Hearing was chaired by Marshal Konev, assisted, among others, by former head of state and now chairman of the trade unions N. Shvernik, E. Zaidin, M. Kuchava (a Mingrelian, like Beria), Marshal K. Moskalenko and Moscow Party boss N. Mikhailov. It ‘proved’ that Beria and his aides had established contacts with bourgeois intelligence services for the purpose of ‘destroying the Soviet worker-peasant regime, restoring capitalism and resurrecting the rule of the bourgeoisie’.

For days the members of the hearing examined in meticulous detail the intimate contact Beria had had with a multitude of women in Moscow and elsewhere. They made a close study of the deposition extracted from Beria’s chief bodyguard, Colonel R. Sarkisov, which included his admission that he had delivered dozens of underage girls, as well as older girls and women, to his boss. Long lists were submitted containing the names of women Beria had raped, indecently assaulted or forced into performing sexual acts. Among them were some well-known names, including the wife of a Hero of the Soviet Union, actresses and others.

The daughter of the writer Maxim Gorky, N. Peshkova, pleaded with Khrushchev over her own daughter, Marfa Peshkova, who had married Beria’s son Sergei in 1946. After Beria was arrested, Marfa, her husband and their two small children had in best Bolshevik tradition also been arrested and spirited away, and her mother now wanted to know what had happened to them. Khrushchev saw that they were released. Sergei Beria was given a new name and the family was sent to Sverdlovsk, where Sergei got work in a factory. Marfa left Sergei at the end of the 1950s and returned to Moscow, where she still lives.

The trial dragged on. In December Khrushchev told Konev and Rudenko to ‘get on with it’. For the summing-up by the prosecution and pronouncement of the sentence, the Presidium again crowded into a room in the Kremlin. Beria admitted everything, and begged only for his life to be spared. Konev read out the charges, and then the verdict: ‘Beria, L.P.,

Merkulov, V.N., Dekanzozov, V.G., Kobulov, B.Z., Goglidze, S.A., Meshik, P. Ya., Vladzimirsky, L.E. are sentenced to the supreme capital penalty, death by shooting.’ According to Marshal Moskalenko, Beria fell off the bench onto the floor and, whining quietly, crawled on all fours to the desk where Konev and the others were sitting, and begged incoherently for mercy. Konev brusquely gave the order: ‘Take him out.’ The Kremlin had already issued their orders: the sentence must be carried out immediately.

At the end of a staircase leading down to a bunker a large board had already been fixed to the wall, to which Beria was to be tied before being shot. There are numerous accounts of what happened next. A general who was a member of the team said in 1961: ‘When they brought Beria down, a large group of generals and other officers were following behind. I don’t know if there had been an order or whether the senior guards simply lost their nerve, but when they were a few steps before the threshold of the bunker, a shot rang out, then more shots. Beria was hit in the back. It was all over in seconds.’

One of the long, confused letters Beria wrote to the Presidium from his cell ends:

I am a true son of our motherland, a true son of the Party of Lenin and Stalin and a true friend and comrade to you. Send me wherever you like, to do any work you choose, find the smallest job for me, I can still give ten good years of work with all my heart and all my energy . . . You will see that in two or three years I’ll have straightened out and fine and will still be useful to you. To my last breath I am faithful to our beloved Party and our Soviet Government. I ask the comrades to forgive me for writing somewhat disjointedly and badly because of my condition, and also because of the poor lighting and not having my pince-nez.

It was not in the nature of Bolsheviks of the Leninist school to forgive, especially as the members of the Presidium knew full well the extent of the lawlessness, terror and savagery that Beria’s agencies carried out, in effect in their name as the supreme Party institution. It is more surprising that they took so long to execute him after his arrest.

Khrushchev could breathe freely at last: the personal danger to himself and the others had been dealt with. His position was finally
secure. On 7 September 1953 he had been appointed First Secretary of the Central Committee, making him Party chief and, effectively, the top man in the country, the third leader.

He was above all indebted to the military leadership, especially to the decisive role played by Marshal of the Soviet Union Zhukov. On 7 July 1953 Khrushchev had proposed that Zhukov be promoted from non-voting status to full membership of the Central Committee. Army General I. Serov also became one of Khrushchev’s favourites. He was an unsavoury character who had been made a Hero of the Soviet Union for organizing the deportation of nations from the Northern Caucasus, the Crimea and elsewhere, and similar atrocities. He had sat on 150 of the infamous troikas that had sent thousands of people to their deaths. He was also responsible for destroying Beria’s archives, on Khrushchev’s orders, in July 1954. He reported that they included ‘documents containing provocative and libellous facts’.23

The Party leadership simply removed the evidence of Serov’s involvement in the terror. Khrushchev gave him his protection for a very long time (he was deprived of his decorations in December 1963 when some of his criminal activities as Beria’s assistant were exposed), while nearly all the generals who had taken part in Beria’s arrest and execution were decorated and promoted. Moskalenko said that after Beria had been ‘liquidated’, Bulganin, a member of the Politburo, arranged on Khrushchev’s orders for all the ‘basic’ generals who had taken part in the affair to be made Heroes of the Soviet Union. When Batitsky and Moskalenko heard about this, they pleaded indignantly with Khrushchev not to shame them with an award for such work. They nevertheless accepted the decoration when Khrushchev ignored their pleas.

The physical extermination of Beria was a highly significant step, but it did not address the main problem, the de-Stalinization of the country. Laudatory references to Stalin no longer appeared in the press, but whatever issue the Presidium turned its attention to, whether agriculture, defence, or raising the material well-being of the population which had been reduced to poverty, it still felt gripped by the leaden shackles of the system.

In this respect, Khrushchev was helped by the torrent of letters that came from the camps in Siberia and elsewhere, and which expressed the hope that their writers’ cases would now be reviewed. Khrushchev knew that inmates in special camps were not allowed visits by relatives, that they worked in harsh conditions for ten hours a day, and that only the strongest could expect to survive the twenty-five-year sentences most of them were serving. He also knew that the least infringement meant solitary confinement for twenty days, and there was no other fittings; the cot (which comes down from the wall) may only be used for sleeping six hours a day. A prisoner in solitary gets only 300 grammes of bread a day and boiling water. Once every three days he gets hot food. Smoking is forbidden in the cells.’

There was a good deal of unrest in the camps, as demands for release rose in number. Hundreds of thousands of people were due for release in 1955 in any case, as the categories that had been given ten-year sentences at the end of the war came to the end of their terms. These included Vlasovites (i.e. Red Army men who had joined the German Army), former prisoners of war, Baltic citizens and the like. Some decisions had to be taken. Malenkov, Molotov, Kaganovich and Serov suggested leaving the entire problem with the MGB: when prisoners finished their sentences, they would just have to stay put. There were about four million people in camps and prisons when Stalin died, as well as 2,572,829 ‘deportees’ or ‘special deportees’ who had been condemned to deportation ‘in perpetuity’ in Siberia and Kazakhstan by an order of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet dated 26 November 1948.25

Khrushchev had come to realize that he was no longer capable of signing such a document. The time had passed when, as a young secretary, he could declare to a cheering audience of Party members: ‘A Bolshevik is someone who feels himself to be a Bolshevik even when he’s sleeping!’ and added: ‘The blow must be merciless, but the blow must also be well-aimed!’26 The ‘blow’ he delivered to Beria and his gang was the last one Khrushchev would land, as it would have meant continuing the Stalinist line of terror. The Twentieth Party Congress was at the top of the agenda; not the liberation of millions of prisoners, nor the freedom of the Soviet people. The Stalinist system had reached the age of totalitarianism and, for the system to survive, changes...
were needed. It was the task that Communism was least capable of achieving.

Crimea – A Gift from Khrushchev

It is clear enough today that Beria was no more guilty than the rest of Stalin's Central Committee. He had simply been chosen to act as its professional inquisitor, and for that reason was feared by everyone, including his so-called comrades. He knew everything about all of them, and could cook up a case against any one. If Beria had not been given the job, any of the others could have done it. But if before Stalin's death their lives had been in the hands of Stalin and his hangman, after it only Beria sat in judgement, or so they felt.

In recent years Beria has been written about almost as if he was a frustrated reformer, a forerunner of things to come. Some of his acts, such as his attempts after Stalin's death to limit the terror, to break up the Gulag by shifting some of its structural elements into agriculture, to improve relations with Yugoslavia and not compel East Germany to adopt socialism were those of a sober politician. Beria had grounds for thinking that after Stalin had gone he might succeed him. He already had ideas for changes in the system, but none of them would have been fundamental. He simply wanted to 'improve' it. Any idea that he was a genuine reformer is simply wrong-headed.

It is, however, equally clear that Khrushchev regarded Beria not as the curse of the system, but as the sword that hung over his own head and those of his comrades. Khrushchev could not accept that Beria had been a mere tool of the Party leadership. He no longer concealed his claim to supreme leadership, which he couched in terms of 'the need to strengthen the role of the Party' in all spheres of state and social life. He was already taking unilateral decisions on a wide range of issues. One such was the transfer of the Crimea from the Russian Federation to the Ukrainian Soviet Republic. Ostensibly, Khrushchev came to this decision suddenly. He spoke about it to Malenkov in December 1953 and, encountering no objection to the idea, added, virtually in the form of an order: 'Let's not delay on this. We'll discuss it at an early session of the Presidium.' Malenkov, to whom it was all too clear that Khrushchev had eased him into second or third place, agreed at once.

Just why, so soon after the death of Stalin, Khrushchev should have wanted to alter the administrative map of the country is impossible to answer definitively. As a district and then city Party Secretary, he had always felt a close physical proximity to the leadership. He had never overstepped the line, and had been an obedient and exacting executive of the Kremlin's orders. Despatched as First Party Secretary to Ukraine in 1938, he had soon become aware of the differences between the capital and the provinces. While Moscow's authority seemed to Communists in Kiev absolute and autocratic, in fact there were greater opportunities for the top man in Ukraine than there were in Moscow for someone lower down the hierarchy.

Back in Moscow in 1939, Khrushchev was still mentally in Ukraine, it were, and he never lost an opportunity to refer to his Ukrainian experience and success. In his memoirs he remembered his time there with special warmth: 'I myself am a Russian and wouldn't want to slight the Russian people, but I must attribute our success in the restoration of Ukrainian agriculture and the reconstruction of Ukrainian industry to the Ukrainian people themselves.'
At the beginning of 1954 the three hundredth anniversary of Ukraine's reunification with Russia was to be celebrated. On the eve of these events Khrushchev had a number of meetings with Ukrainian leaders. They discussed in particular how to observe the anniversary with due gravity, and it was in this small circle and in this context that the idea of transferring the Crimea to Ukraine arose, although who initiated it is unknown. Khrushchev saw nothing offensive to the dignity of the Russians in such a move, since the whole Soviet state was a single political entity, even if it was called a 'union'.

Having become the pre-eminent leader by the end of 1953, Khrushchev began persistently raising the question of the Crimea with his colleagues. He advanced no cogent reasons or motives, and none were asked for. He had decided, and that was that. He might even have already promised the Crimea to Kiev. Rational arguments were not required of the supreme leader, and in any case, what difference could it make?

Khrushchev also loved the Crimea, the 'All-Union health resort', as it was known. At the Yalta Conference of February 1945 the Soviet, American and British delegations had been housed in the Yusupov, Livadia and Vorontsov palaces respectively. Reinforced air-raid shelters had been specially built for the occasion, and several hundred anti-aircraft guns had been moved into the area, along with a large number of fighter aircraft. The palaces were guarded by four special NKVD regiments and many other units and special detachments. Stalin had turned the place into an impregnable zone.

At the end of February 1945, after the conference was over, Stalin approved the transfer of all the palaces, with domestic staff drawn from neighbouring collective farms, into the hands of the Ministry of State Security. Now Khrushchev insisted that these gems of Crimea's past be handed over to the Health Resorts Board of the Trade Unions. Having removed the palaces from the clutches of the security ministries, Khrushchev went further and handed over the Crimea itself to a new owner, Ukraine.

It was normal procedure for major issues to be settled first by the Presidium and then rubber-stamped by the appropriate agencies. Thus it was that 'the transfer of the Crimea from the RSFSR to the Ukrainian SSR' became item 11 on the agenda of a routine Presidium meeting under Malenkov's chairmanship on 25 January 1954. There was no discussion. The Presidium's draft resolution consisted of two points, which were duly read out: 'To confirm the draft decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on the transfer of Crimea Oblast from the RSFSR to the UkrSSR.' The meeting of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet that had supposedly passed this decree had in fact not yet taken place, and was only convened later that day. The decree also called for a 'special session of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet to review the joint representation of the Presidiums of the Supreme Soviets of the RSFSR and the UkrSSR on the transfer of Crimea Oblast'. The whole question was covered in fifteen minutes. The decree was signed by Khrushchev. The rest was a matter of Party 'mechanics'. Needless to say, no one thought even to ask what the population of the Crimea, the majority of them Russians, might want. The entire territory of the Soviet Union was at the disposal of the leaders of the CPSU to do with as they wished.

Khrushchev had embarked on this project in ignorance of Crimea's history. He did not know that, in the process of creating the centralized Russian state, Moscow had conducted a fierce and prolonged struggle with the Crimean Tatar khans in the eighteenth century. The military expropriation of this fragment of the Golden Horde's territory had been a major preoccupation and a constant source of threat to the south of Russia. In the course of the Russo-Turkish wars of 1771–91, when the Crimean khanate was a vassal of the Ottoman Empire, Crimea, Taurida and the territory between the Bug and the Dniester were conquered by Russia. It was during this time that Russia built the Black Sea Fleet and established the port-cities of Sevastopol, Odessa, Kherson and Nikolaev. The Crimea, and particularly Sevastopol, were symbols of the empire's might and glory. The fleet's victories were a matter of Russian national pride, as were the names of its great admirals. Khrushchev knew none of this. Nor could he be expected to foresee that one day Ukraine would become sovereign power and would make use of his generous gift. Ignorance was to be responsible more than once for Khrushchev's making a fool of himself. His relations with China, the Suez crisis and the Cuban missile crisis come to mind, and his decision on Ukraine fits the same mold.

Following the Presidium meeting of 25 January, events moved
rapidly. Meetings were held by the two governments, which decided that 'in view of the territorial attraction of Crimea Oblast towards the Ukrainian SSR', and 'taking into account the community of their economies and their close economic and cultural ties', the Crimea should become part of Ukraine. There was of course no 'decision' made by the obedient functionaries who signed the decree: they were simply doing what Khrushchev had told them to do.

On 19 February the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR met in the Kremlin, in less than full complement, chaired by Voroshilov. Khrushchev was there as one of its members, watching as the scenario concocted by Suslov and Pegov was acted out. The speeches for all the participants had been scripted by the propaganda department of the Central Committee. The Supreme Soviet Deputy for the oblast of Ufa, Mikhail Tarasov, declared that the Crimea was 'as it were an extension of the southern steppes of Ukraine', and thus its transfer would 'serve to strengthen friendship of the peoples of the great Soviet Union'. As Ukrainian head of state, Demian Korotchenko expressed his 'heartfelt thanks to the great Russian people for this uniquely remarkable act of fraternal assistance'.

Two speakers inadvertently let the cat out of the bag. Nikolai Shvernik declared that 'the transfer of such a major oblast, rich in mineral resources, with a developed industry and valuable natural therapeutic assets, could only be done in the conditions of our socialist country.' Otto Kuusinen developed this theme: 'Only in our country is it possible for such a great people as the Russian people without any hesitation magnanimously to hand over one of their richest oblasts to another fraternal people. Only in our country are such highly important questions as the territorial attachment of a particular oblast to another republic decided without the slightest difficulty.'

Voroshilov wound up the 'debate' by declaring: 'Only in the conditions of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is such a just resolution of all territorial questions possible. In the distant and not so distant past, our enemies tried repeatedly to take the Crimean peninsula away from Russia, to use it for the plunder and ruination of the Russian and Ukrainian lands, to create there a military base from which to attack Russia and Ukraine.' He added that the 'donation' of the peninsula was very important as 'the Soviet peoples celebrate the splendid historical date of the three hundredth anniversary of the reunification of Russia with Ukraine'.

The news of the reunification, when it was published a week after the meeting, was greeted with indifference even in Ukraine itself. The population was used to decisions being made in the Kremlin without prior notice, let alone public consultation. Like his predecessors, Khrushchev acted decisively and without standing on ceremony. Like Stalin, and like his own successors, he used the words of Lenin to support his actions, deploying such ritualistic incantations as 'We must remember what Lenin taught us', 'The Leninist norms of Party life must be regenerated', 'That's how it was under Lenin'. Also like most of the top Soviet leadership, Khrushchev's knowledge of Lenin's writings was extremely limited. They all had Lenin's Collected Works on their shelves, but rarely if ever consulted them. Worship of Lenin as a common feature of all the General Secretaries. Indeed, without them they could hardly clung to their positions at the summit of power.

De-Stalinization

Khrushchev's attack on the so-called 'personality cult' was in many respects mendacious and superficial, and did not touch the foundations of the Leninist system. Yet, in all the seventy years of Soviet history, it would be difficult to find another political act of such importance for the future of the country, and not only that. Khrushchev's courageous assault on this particular aspect of Bolshevism had far-reaching consequences. He concentrated on demolishing Stalin's role, genuinely believing that he had only to uproot the cult, restore 'Leninist principles' to the internal life of the Party and repair the damage done to revolutionary legality' for the country to get back on the rails of socialist democracy'. It was a bold, but naïve dream.

Once he began to feel secure in his own position, Khrushchev undertook a number of bold initiatives, such as inaugurating the 'virgin lands' project in Central Asia, and instituting some effective changes in agriculture, while beginning the process of rehabilitating hundreds of thousands of people from the camps. In so doing, he also reinforced his own place as the new leader. In foreign policy, he gained the
friendship of several Arab countries by his decision to give aid to President Nasser of Egypt. It proved to be a popular move with the Russian people.

Yet, even though he had reached the pinnacle of power, he had a permanent feeling that Stalin's shadow was hanging over him. The penal system was still working, if with greater circumspection than before; it was still impossible to tell the truth about the political trials of the pre-war and post-war period; and the Stalinist taboo still operated on many questions of domestic and foreign policy. Khrushchev knew a lot about the Soviet past, having been a primary participant, and now it haunted him. He could either reveal the truth, or leave things alone.

The Twentieth Party Congress, set for February 1956, was approaching. It would be the first nationwide Communist forum to take place since the death of Stalin. Khrushchev set up a number of working parties to prepare for it, and met no opposition. When he proposed, however, that there ought also to be a commission 'to investigate Stalin's activities', his former supporters in the Presidium, Molotov, Kaganovich and Voroshilov, raised a vociferous protest. Molotov was especially incensed. 'To investigate Stalin's activities,' he stormed, 'would mean revising the results of the entire great path of the CPSU! Who would benefit from it? What purpose would it serve? Why stir up the past?' Kaganovich seconded him: 'Stalin personifies a host of the Soviet people's victories. To re-examine the possible errors of Lenin's successor would put the correctness of our entire course under question. Also, the people will simply say: "And where were you? Who gave you the right to judge a dead man?"'

The argument was heated, and was not cooled by Khrushchev's promise that only 'violations of socialist legality' for which Beria had been chiefly responsible would be considered, and only in conditions of the greatest secrecy. He urged that the commission be allowed to do its work, and that the Presidium make up its mind about how to proceed only after it had seen the results. This was agreed on 31 December 1955.

The commission was composed of a very small group, consisting of Academician and Central Committee member P. Pospelov, Central Committee Secretary A. Aristov, chairman of the trade unions N. Shvernik, and P. Komarov, an official of the Central Committee Party Control Commission. The chairman was Pospelov, who was particularly knowledgeable about Stalin, having co-authored the second edition of the uncannily hagiographic Short Biography of the former leader that appeared in 1951 in a print run of nearly seven million.

Khrushchev summoned the members of the investigative commission on the mass arrests, and raised the cases of a host of senior party figures who had been shot, but not including the chief defendants in the great show trials such as Kamenev, Zinoviev, Bukharin, and the like. Nor did he touch on the question of Trotsky's assassination in Mexico. The intention was to create a picture of Stalin's arbitrary and lawless rule.

The commission sat practically day and night, sifting files and trying to find the appropriate quotation from Lenin to condemn the personification cult and Stalin's violations of 'socialist legality'. The plan outlined by Academician Pospelov was primitive but comprehensible: everything boiled down to Lenin's wisdom, modesty, humanity and norms of behaviour on the one hand, and Stalin's violation of those norms on the other. The report stated that absolutely everything Lenin had ever done had been truly Marxist: 'Vladimir Ilyich demanded harsh treatment of enemies of the revolution and the working class, and when the need arose he employed such methods mercilessly . . . But Lenin had used those methods against genuine class enemies, not against those who had made mistakes.'34 Just who had been genuine class enemies and who not, Pospelov and his commission did not venture to suggest. The entire object of the report was to show that the system, created by Lenin, had nothing in common with arbitrary terror, which was the result of Stalin's personality cult.

The report was fully approved by Khrushchev, and when it was presented to the Presidium many of the members were satisfied. Others, however, found it highly objectionable. First, they did not like the assertion that it was Stalin who had introduced the idea of enemies of the people'. They were quite right: Lenin had used the term, having borrowed it from the lexicon of the French Revolution. The report stated: 'This term obviated the need to prove that someone was arguing with was ideologically incorrect: it provided the opportunity for anyone who disagreed with Stalin over anything, or who was suspected of hostile intent, or anyone who was simply
slandered, to be subjected to harsh repression, and for all norms of revolutionary legality to be violated.35

The opponents of the report argued vehemently over the facts of the purges, for the obvious reason that they themselves had been deeply implicated in them, and had no stomach for publishing the truth and accepting responsibility. The report, moreover, included documents addressed by Stalin to Kaganovich, Molotov and others. On 25 September 1937, for instance, while resting in Sochi, Stalin had sent a telegram to the Politburo – of which Khrushchev was not then a member – that read: ‘We regard it as absolutely essential and urgent to appoint Comrade Yezhov as People’s Commissar for the Interior. Yagoda is plainly not on top of the job, as far as unmasking the Trotskyite-Zinovievite bloc is concerned. The OGPU is four years late with this case . . .’

Kaganovich reminded the others that they had all approved Stalin’s circular to Party secretaries throughout the country, dated 10 January 1939, which told them that the permission to use physical violence against prisoners given in 1937 was still in full force: ‘Physical pressure,’ the order had said, was correct and ‘must without fail be used now against open and un-disarmed enemies of the people, as a completely proper and appropriate method’.

‘What shall we say now?’ Kaganovich wanted to know.

The Politburo, moreover, had on several occasions passed resolutions – unanimously, of course – on ‘anti-Soviet elements’ which brought yet more people into the ‘first category’. On 31 January 1938, for instance, it approved an order for the execution of a ‘further’ forty-eight thousand people in twenty-two oblasts.36

It was only with the support of Saburov, Pervukhin, Bulganin and Kirichenko that Khrushchev managed to obtain the decision to proceed with the work on the report. As to what should be done with it when it was ready, there was no clear idea. Kaganovich proposed it be debated at the Twenty-First Congress (which was scheduled for 1961, but actually took place in 1959), while Molotov suggested the mistakes of the past be gradually ‘corrected’ without publicity. In the event, Shepilov was told to get on with the report.

The Twentieth Party Congress opened on 14 February 1956 in the Great Kremlin Palace. It proceeded smoothly through the customary reports, approval of the ‘Leninist course’, applause, standing ovations, ideological oaths and calls to strengthen ‘the unity of the Party and people’. Everything had as usual been scripted down to the last detail and the Congress was moving towards a harmonious conclusion, yet a decision had been taken as to what to do with Pospelov’s report. Khrushchev’s colleagues knew that he had staked everything on it, and was prepared to make it known to the delegates at whatever cost.

On several evenings in the course of the Congress he had summoned Pospelov and inserted new material into the report as a result of the background material he had seen.

On 19 February, for instance, his insertions included: ‘Enemies of the people need not have been exterminated, they could have been put in prison or exile’; ‘Cite the case of Zinoviev and Kamenev; they played the revolution yet Lenin didn’t shoot them’; ‘How were confessions extracted? Only one way, by beating, torture, deprivation of consciousness, deprivation of reason, deprivation of human dignity means of physical violence and intimidation’; ‘Smirnov treated Smirnov ... yet such people were being arrested ... He [Stalin] said: put shackles on Smirnov, put shackles on so-and-so,” and so they did,’ ‘On the Mingrelian case. The Georgian government was accused wanting to attach flourishing Georgia to the impoverished Turkish state, which was starving, fleeced, illiterate (give figures); ‘The members of the Politburo looked upon Stalin with different eyes at different times. At first they consciously extolled him because Stalin mainly was great and capable. He was one of the most powerful dictators and his logic, strength and will played a positive role in the Party. But then, later ... After the executions there emerged not just intellectual but also physical subjection to this man.’37 Some of these passages were included in the report verbatim, others only partially, others not at all.

Khrushchev referred to the case of Zinoviev and Kamenev, and the fact that Lenin had not had them shot. On 22 August 1936, however, Khrushchev himself had told a group of cheering Party activists: ‘The fascist ringleaders, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Smirnov, Mrachkovsky, Terensian and more of their fascist accomplices are in prison ... Not these blackguards, but Trotsky too should be shot.’38 And two days after that, as Party boss of Ukraine, he had said: ‘We have only begun the clear-out in Ukraine ... We will carry out a complete and finish the job.’39
Of course, it would not have been easy for Khrushchev to stand up to Stalin's tyranny, not least because he and his like had lauded the dictator as no one in Russian history had ever been lauded. In three brief election speeches Khrushchev made in 1937, he managed to call Stalin a 'genius', a 'great leader' and a 'great creator' no fewer than fifty-four times. He had called not only for 'more hatred of our class enemies', but also for 'more love of our leader, the great Stalin'.

Nevertheless, while he could never forget the delusions of former years, Khrushchev had the courage to move beyond them, and the strength to exorcize the obsession with terrorist methods. His comrades, however, were not prepared to forgive or forget the fact that he was as implicated in the crimes of the past as they were themselves. Molotov and Kaganovich were particularly persistent. 'What will you say about yourself, Nikita?' they wanted to know. 'After all, we're all involved . . . And what are they going to make you tell about what happened? We should be correcting the mistakes without haste, not savouring them.'

Khrushchev replied: 'Some of us didn't know many things because we were part of a regime in which you were told what you were supposed to know and you kept your nose out of everything else ... Some knew what was happening, and some even got their own noses dirty in the events we're speaking about. But while the degree of responsibility for what happened varies among us, I'm prepared as a member of the Central Committee since the Seventeenth Congress [of 1934; here Khrushchev is stressing that he was not a member of the Politburo during the worst years of the terror] to bear my share of responsibility before the Party, even if the Party should see fit to bring to task all those who were in the leadership under Stalin.'

Although this argument weakened his opponents, they nonetheless did everything they could to moderate the presentation of the issue, which they rightly felt to be of terrifying force. Finally, during an interval towards the end of the congress, Khrushchev suggested asking all 1,436 delegates if they wanted to hear the report: 'I'll tell them who on the Presidium is for and who against. Let the delegates decide. Whatever they vote for, that's what we'll do.' The others remained silent. Khrushchev was now ready to take his momentous step towards the rostrum.

On the morning of 25 February, Khrushchev read his sensational report 'on the personality cult and its consequences' to a closed session, with no foreign guests or journalists. No minutes were taken, and at Prime Minister Bulganin's suggestion it had been decided not to open the subject to debate. For more than four hours the delegates listened, astonished. As Khrushchev later recalled: 'It was so quiet in the huge hall you could hear a fly buzzing. You must try to imagine how shocked people were by the revelations of the atrocities to which Party members . . . had been subjected. This was the first that most of them had heard of the tragedy which our Party had undergone - the tragedy stemming from the sickness in Stalin's character which Stalin had warned us against in his Testament and which Stalin himself confirmed in his confession to Mikoyan and me - "I trust no one, not even myself."'

In his speech - which in Russia remained a secret buried in the archives until 1989, decades after the rest of the world knew every word of it - Khrushchev did his best to elevate Lenin, the Party, the Bolshevik system and the 'masses'. He cited Lenin on collective leadership and on Stalin's insulting behaviour towards Krupskaya, and lamented the fact that the Party had ignored Lenin's warnings. All the woe of the period came precisely from the fact that Stalin's behaving behaviour had gradually turned into 'mass terror against the Party cadres'. The speech's chief importance, Khrushchev wrote in his memoirs, 'was that it touched off the process of purifying the Party of Stalinism and re-establishing in the Party those Leninist norms of life for which the best sons of our country had struggled.'

The paradox was plain: Khrushchev was repudiating one aspect of the heresy in order to resurrect its basic, Leninist, form. It was Khrushchev at his most typical. But neither he nor his fellows, nor rank-and-file Communists, could then see that Stalinism had been born out of Leninism, of which the fundamental tenet was class violence.

An example of Khrushchev's crusade to 'resurrect Leninist norms' was soon enough. In his memoirs, he recalls that the Polish Communist leader Boleslaw Bierut died during the Twentieth Congress, and that major and prolonged disturbances had ensued in Poland. Finally, in September 1956 Khrushchev, Molotov, Mikoyan, Stalin and Marshal Konev flew to Warsaw, uninvited and against
the wishes of the Polish leadership. Talks between the two ‘fraternal’ sides were acrimonious. Khrushchev accused Ochaba, Gomulka and Cyrankiewicz of turning their backs on the USSR and leaning towards the West, of giving Soviet Ambassador Marshal Rokossovsky the cold shoulder, allowing anti-Soviet comment to appear in the press, and declining to accept Soviet advisers in the Polish army.

For their part, the Poles stoutly defended themselves and accused Moscow of Stalinist methods in their relations. The talks had reached a high pitch when, according to notes dictated by Mikoyan on 28 May 1960, ‘one of the Polish comrades handed Gomulka a note. Gomulka blenched and, turning to Khrushchev, said: “I’ve been informed that your units in western Poland are moving tanks towards Warsaw at this moment. I ask you to stop this movement and return them to where they were.”’ Khrushchev and I exchanged glances. Khrushchev said: “All right.” And he gave the order to Marshal Konev to stop the movement of our troops and return them to their stations.46

This behaviour was characteristic of Khrushchev: having gone to ‘normalize’ relations with Russia’s Polish allies and to put an end to the disorders, he had backed up the initiative with a demonstration of military force. He did not understand that in order to free the system of Stalinism, he must first repudiate Leninism. The target chosen by him at the Twentieth Congress was essentially a secondary one. It was not an individual dictator who was responsible for the atrocities, but the system and the ideology founded on Leninist principles. It was not apparent in 1956, but time would show that the attack on Stalin would in the end bring insight into Lenin. As for Khrushchev himself, he would die without realizing that in defending Lenin he was preserving Stalin.

Even in the report itself, Khrushchev felt it necessary to stress Stalin’s services to the Party and the people, though he did not have the courage to tell the people to their face of Stalin’s crimes. He concluded his speech: ‘We must look at the question of the personality cult with all seriousness. We cannot take this question beyond the confines of the Party, still less to the press. That’s why we are reporting on it in closed session here. We have to keep a sense of proportion, not give ammunition to our enemies, not expose our sores to him.’47 In fact, the stamp ‘Top Secret’ would soon be removed and replaced by the more lenient ‘Not for publication’. The report was produced in brochure form and distributed to all Party committees for information. But its contents had already long been known in the West, where it created a sensation. The foreign Communist parties, especially in Western Europe, began to search their consciences and to raise many aspects of Marxist-Leninist ideology.

Khrushchev was afraid of publicity, imagining that it was possible to keep the lid on the truth forever, as in the past. Secrets, after all, had been the very lifeblood of Leninism, and Khrushchev regarded himself as a ‘true Leninist’. He had ended his speech against Stalin with: ‘Long live the victorious banner of our Party, Leninism!’ Leninism had been holed, but remained afloat because Leninism remained unsinkable.

The Impulsive Reformer

In 18 October 1961, on the second day of the Twenty-Second Party Congress – his third and last as Party leader – Khrushchev followed the interminable reading of the Central Committee report with an interminable speech on the Party programme. Tracing his notes with his finger to make sure he did not lose his place, and pausing at key moments to elicit applause, he came to a section headed, ‘Communism, the Great Aim of the Party and the People’, and concluded with the words: ‘The cup of Communism is the cup of plenty; it must be full to the brim. Each of us must pour in our own contribution and each drink from it. We are guided by strictly scientific calculation. And our calculations show that in twenty years’ time we shall essentially have built the Communist society.’48 The published minutes of the meeting state that these remarks were greeted with ‘long and hearty applause’. In fact, the delegates – Communist fundamentalists by nature – were very doubtful about Khrushchev’s ‘strictly scientific’ calculations.

He laid out the Party programme which described Communism in detail, and explained why the classes would disappear along with exploitation, and how everyone would be equal. Yet again, in the tradition of the Leninist Utopia, he declared that ‘historical development would lead inevitably to the withering away of the state’, and
wound up by assuring the delegates that ‘the present generation of Soviet people will live under Communism.’

Khrushchev knew that many people opposed his policy, but he sensed that he had right on his side. This sense became stronger after he got rid of his main rivals, Malenkov, Kaganovich and Molotov, in a fierce skirmish at the June 1957 plenum, and was able to implement numerous reforms in the stagnant country. The ossified state and society, mired in bureaucracy and dogmatism, adapted poorly to the cascade of change, yet the country did break free of its former anchor-age. The decade of Khrushchev’s rule demonstrated his potential as an innovator, a demolition artist, experimenter, opportunist and inventor. It was as if he had suddenly woken up. Initiatives followed one after the other, and at the source of each of them stood the stocky figure of the First Secretary, gesticulating energetically, a veritable fount of ideas and activity. Alexander Alexandrov-Agentov, a functionary who spent much of his life in close proximity to the post-war leaders, described Khrushchev as ‘authoritative, hot-tempered, unbridled, crude, and self-confident and prone to flattery in relations with his closest colleagues. At the same time he was impetuous, intolerant, carried away, possessed by a spirit of innovation, but with no serious concept.’ For such a man, there were many opportunities to apply himself in the country that was beginning to thaw.

His first task was in agriculture. The harvests of 1949 to 1953 had been catastrophically low, something like eight hundred kilogrammes per hectare, when even in 1914 the yield had been seven hundred. The figures, which were a state secret, show that the total yield of grain declined from 36.4 million tonnes in 1940 to 31.1 million in 1953, while over the same period the state reserves increased from 4.1 million tonnes to 17.8. In order to survive, the people stole grain, and in June 1946 the Central Committee and Finance Ministry issued the strictest prohibition against this. Interior Minister Kruglov reported to Stalin regularly on the progress of this order. In December 1946 and January 1947, for instance, 13,559 and 9,928 people, respectively, were charged with criminal responsibility for the theft of grain. Stalin was not afraid to starve the country, and he would never ‘lower’ himself to buy grain from the imperialists.

As early as September 1953, Khrushchev urged a Central Committee plenum that if the countryside was to be revived, it was necessary to bear income, costs and profitability in mind. In February 1958 he launched a number of measures designed to raise efficiency in agriculture. When he was invited to the USA by President Eisenhower, he made sure that time would be set aside for him to take a look at US agriculture. He especially wanted to see Iowa, the nation’s ‘corn capital’. There he was shown a large corn farm owned by a Mr Oswell Garst. Andrei Gromyko, who accompanied Khrushchev as Foreign Minister, recalled that Khrushchev ‘inspected the fields, and asked the owner many questions, as he tried to fathom how the man had made a lot of money out of farming land that did not look very different in its fertility from several regions of our own country’. Among his own people, Khrushchev later admitted that, although he had seen much of interest, ‘I still don’t see how Garst’s experience can be transferred into Soviet conditions’. This should not have surprised him: the fundamental disparities between the two social-economic systems had created utterly different conditions for production and marketing. The system of collective farming had reduced the cultivator of the land’s personal interest in the crop to a minimum, and the simple transfer of practice from anywhere would have been impossible. His American trip nevertheless persuaded Khrushchev that high production of corn could greatly increase the output of livestock, though the over-zealous application of this policy often led to ludicrous results, with the crop being planted entirely unsuitable places.

The measures applied by Khrushchev in agriculture led to the growth of grain output, without doubt, but also to a sharp rise in consumption. The shortage became chronic, and the consequent drop in reserves was so drastic that he was finally compelled to purchase supplies abroad. This desperate step was proof, if proof were needed, that the Soviet system of agriculture was bankrupt. The purchase of grain from abroad continued for more than thirty years, as the country literally ate up its gold reserves, which declined from 13.1 million tonnes in 1954 to 6.3 million in 1963. Khrushchev’s ‘maize campaign’, which lasted for several years, did not save him, and he had to find other ways of raising livestock production. He ordered the compulsory purchase of cattle from collective farmers, but then winter came, and with it a lack of fodder shelter. Cattle plague ensued. Someone pointed out that horses...
were eating up the much-needed fodder, so large numbers of them were duly slaughtered.

Similarly, Khrushchev's idea of *agrogorods*, or farm cities, collapsed. The villages became depopulated, collective farms were enlarged to huge size, vastly beyond human scale, and the individual was lost in these great impersonal rural conurbations.

Khrushchev's endless proposals and new regulations produced very little in the way of positive results. Nor could they, as long as it was not realized that the capacity of the Leninist system for reform was extremely limited. The people became disgruntled, and jokes about 'Nikita' proliferated. His courageous speech at the Twentieth Congress had given the population a taste of freedom, and they wanted more, but he had not wanted to alter the basic form of the system or the economic foundations of the country.

Like Stalin, Khrushchev attributed all his failures to 'poor cadres', personal errors and the heritage of the Stalinist past. And to some extent this was so. Like Stalin, he thought in terms of 'catching up and overtaking'. At the Twenty-Second Congress of 1961 he proclaimed: 'In recent years our country has, as before, significantly overtaken the USA in the pace of production, and has begun outstripping it in terms of absolute growth in many of the most important forms of production... The completion of the Seven-Year Plan will bring our Motherland to the point where only a little time will be needed in order to overtake the United States in economic terms. Having solved the basic task, the Soviet Union will gain a universally historic victory in peaceful competition with the United States of America.'

Khrushchev's ideologized view of the economy and its future was the same as Stalin's, based on striving for 'victory' over imperialism.

The agricultural reforms were accompanied by changes to the administrative system. In February 1957 it was decided to abolish branch ministries and to establish in each republic, region and province territorial economic councils, or *sovmarkhozy*, with a Higher National Economic Council of the USSR to run them. Within four years, Khrushchev decided that this new structure also necessitated the reform of the Party administration, and proposed that provincial and regional councils be divided into industrial and agricultural sections. This change caused enormous and steadily growing discontent among Party officials. As the Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers from 1960 to 1963, Ignati Novikov, recalled: 'The overwhelming majority of ministers and their staffs did not welcome these changes. The majority of factory managers was equally against them. Like several other ministerial officials, I thought that qualified enterprise managers would be wasted and that this would endanger technological progress. Ministers in charge of the defence industries were particularly incensed at having to hand factories over to the economic councils.'

However, Khrushchev was convinced of his own Bolshevist infallibility, and continued to take major decisions without consultation. Those who worked close to him were aware of his susceptibility to personality cult. Novikov asserts that in 1960 'a new personality cult began operating, that of Nikita Sergeevich. Unfortunately, the apple does not fall far from the tree.' This was an exaggeration, but there was undoubtedly organized glorification of the third leader.

Khrushchev's 1957 slogan, 'It is the population's moral responsibility to catch up and overtake the United States in the production of meat, butter and milk,' naturally turned out to be a fantasy, and not only because he planned to achieve these aims by 1960. He and his advisers mistakenly decided that by sharply reducing livestock production on the collective farmers' private plots and increasing investment in state and collective cattle-farming, they would reach their goal. The policy was implemented with the backing of the June 1957 plenum, and in August 1958 the Central Committee issued an order banning the private ownership of cattle by citizens living in towns and workers' settlements'. This utterly absurd order had serious consequences. There was a sharp reduction in meat and dairy products and sharp rise of public resentment. It was not until 31 May 1962 that the Central Committee and Council of Ministers passed a regulation raising meat and dairy prices. Instead of overtaking the USA, the communist regime was registering its own bankruptcy.

Public disgruntlement, meanwhile, began to assume more active forms. From towns and cities all over the Soviet Union the KGB was porting calls for strikes in protest against the price rises, an unheard-of event in the Soviet Union. Home-made posters appeared and hand-written leaflets were circulated secretly, but widely. The most impressive demonstration against the government's policies took place in Novocherkassk, where in June 1962 the workers at an electric
locomotive plant staged a riot. The local Party authorities, naturally, called out the troops and the tanks, but the strike gained the support of workers at other plants.

KGB Chairman V. Semichastny reported to the Central Committee: 'At 9.50 all the slackers (about five thousand people) left the factory zone, slipped past the first line of tanks and are moving towards the town of Novocherkassk. The main column is carrying a portrait of V.I. Lenin and flowers in front.'57 The security services reported that hooligan and criminal elements were distributing the 'provocative' slogan 'Meat, milk and wage increases'. Khrushchev immediately despatched Presidium member Frol Kozlov to Novocherkassk, where he broadcast to the local population: 'In the speech he gave in Moscow yesterday and that was broadcast on the radio, N.S. Khrushchev explained with great conviction and his customary bluntness why the Party and the government took the decision to raise the price of meat and meat products.' He went on to talk about the need for resources to invest in industry, housing construction and defence. 'Nor must it be forgotten that the imperialists are again threatening us with war.'58

Clashes with militia took place outside the offices of the town Party committee. The crowd 'tore down portraits', presumably of members of the Presidium, and a meeting held under the red flag and a portrait of Lenin was described by the KGB as a 'provocation'. The troops fired into the crowd, killing twenty-three people and injuring dozens more, all of them workers and students. Semichastny reported to Khrushchev that burials had been carried out at five cemeteries in the district, and that the security organs had taken steps to discover and arrest the most active participants in the disorders. Forty-nine people were arrested.59

The KGB staged a public trial in the town, lasting a week. Five of the 'criminals' were sentenced to be shot, while the rest were gaoled for between ten and fifteen years. The Deputy Chairman of the KGB, P. Ivashutin, reported that the sentences 'met the approval of the workers', who allegedly shouted, 'Give the dogs a dog's death!', 'Serve the vermin right, it'll teach others!'; 'It's the right sentence, such people should be shot.'60 The report was followed by another, from the Deputy Chief of the Central Committee Department of Propaganda and Agitation, Vladimir Stepakov: 'The trial played a great educational and precautionary role ... There was repeated applause from the gallery whenever the court called for harsh sentences.'61

This was the Stalinist accompaniment to Khrushchev's reforms. Following the Twentieth Congress people had sensed a certain weakening, and they began to express their thoughts more freely. A spontaneous strike, however, had to be suppressed at any cost. Khrushchev did not understand that semi-liberty was a delusion and a deception. At it was not only he who was trapped in the Leninist dogmas: the striking workers carried Lenin's portrait before them. Stalin, the�ious dictator of the system, may have been exposed, but the system itself had been left intact.

Needless to say, the country as a whole knew nothing of the Novocherkassk tragedy for nearly three decades, as they knew nothing of a number of other 'undesirable' occurrences, such as a major radioactive disaster near Chelyabinsk and a catastrophe at the satellite launching centre of Baikonur, to name but two.

Another such event took place on 29 October 1955, when as the result of an unexplained explosion the battleship Novorossiisk had sunk in Sevastopol harbour with the loss of 603 lives. Khrushchev was furious, and ordered the Minister of Defence to get to the bottom of the affair. The outcome of the investigation was that the naval commander-in-chief, Admiral of the Fleet of the Soviet Union Nikolai Uznetsov, who as it happens was undergoing medical treatment at the time of the explosion, was demoted (for the second time in his career) to vice-admiral, and other admirals of the Black Sea Fleet were similarly relieved of their commands.62 Characteristic of Bolshevik practice, everyone even indirectly involved had to be punished.

In another incident, on 24 October 1960, an experimental rocket exploded on the launchpad, engulfing in flame hundreds of people standing in the vicinity. Among them were Marshal Mitrofan Nedelin, commander-in-chief of missile forces, and several top rocket scientists. The next day, the press reported that Nedelin had been killed in an air crash. The Bolshevik tradition had asserted its influence again: lying was an intrinsic part of the Leninist system.

For all his originality, courage and desire for innovation, Khrushchev was a child of his times, and decades of working under Stalin could not but have an effect. He had the manners of a totalitarian dictator: peremptory, dogmatic, arbitrary, concerned with
appearances, and harsh when the need arose. He correctly diagnosed the desperate need for deep reform of the economy, but was prepared to alter only the form of administration and management, barely touching its essential nature. The dictatorial style and previous practice continued, whereby the orders of the leader were not questioned. Khrushchev believed it was his right to demote any official who displeased him for whatever reason, and to do so without consultation. He had correctly judged the mood of the moment, which called for reforms, but he tried to carry them out by the old bureaucratic methods.

He would speak on any subject, at any place. At the drop of a hat he would deliver a lecture on the importance of growing maize, the future of space research, architecture and missiles, art, current international problems - always assertive and didactic, teaching and preaching. He acquired the habit of departing from his text to colour his speech with biting aphorisms and often impenetrable proverbs from Russian folklore. His style was to interrupt a speaker, heckling and throwing up all sorts of questions to put him off his stroke. He could be counted on to produce a surprise at any forum, the famous shoe-banging incident at the United Nations being only the most publicized.

Khrushchev had always been impulsive, as the minutes of a meeting of the Moscow Party Committee in 1950, convened to debate ways of improving the management of agriculture, illustrate. The Moscow Party Secretary, S. Morsin, had given his report, and only two other members showed a desire to speak. Khrushchev admonished the others severely: 'Put your names down to speak. If you don't, we'll nominate speakers. We're not going to let you sit here in silence. If we have to, we'll sit here for a week, but we will hear those who should speak.'

The director of a motor tractor station, one Zolotov, responded. He was concerned about the huge quantity of manure in his region that was infected with brucellosis. 'With the floods at the moment, the disease could be carried right into the Caspian itself . . .'

Khrushchev interrupted: 'That's not the main thing, comrade manager. If there's a danger of transmitting the disease, let's deal with it outside the terms of the discussion. Otherwise we'll get bogged down in brucellosis manure and find ourselves sitting on a heap of it.'

Zolotov objected tactfully, an unheard-of impertinence, and was rewarded with a hail of questions and insulting remarks. Finally Khrushchev caught Zolotov out on a triviality, which he enjoyed doing, and closed the discussion triumphantly: 'You came here to talk nonsense about brucellosis and a pile of manure. Write a report. Do you want to make a speech? We can also make speeches. We're trained orators.'

Khrushchev certainly was an orator, and an inexhaustible one at that. His speeches and news conferences appeared in the press almost weekly. They were not read with much enthusiasm, but he believed he could influence the 'masses' and assist the reforms he wanted to introduce through all this activity. When his enemies ousted him in 1964, they cited the fact that his picture had appeared in the press more than a thousand times in a single year. Conversely, Western observers were quick to note that Khrushchev's press appearances dropped dramatically in the days before his political demise.

One of Khrushchev's priorities was equipping the armed forces with nuclear missiles. He summoned weapons designers and builders and leading scientists to the Kremlin. No expense was spared for experiments and tests and the space programme. He could be proud of what he achieved in the military sphere, declaring at the Twenty-Second Party Congress on 17 October 1961: 'As I've departed from my text, I might as well tell you that the tests of the new hydrogen bomb are going very well. We shall complete these tests. Apparently at the end of October. Finally, we shall probably explode a hydrogen bomb (equivalent to) 50 million tonnes of TNT [applause]. We said we would explode a bomb of 100 million tonnes of TNT. And that's true. But we're not going to explode it, because if we exploded it even in the most remote areas, we might blow our own windows out [stormy applause].'

Khrushchev did not understand that security was not to be found along the path of a monstrous arms race. He told the Congress with pride that 'the re-arming of the Soviet Army with nuclear missile technology was fully complete. Our armed forces now have weapons powerful enough to enable them to crush any aggressor,' although he qualified this by adding that he hoped it would never be necessary to drop such bombs on any country.

Needless to say, Khrushchev did not mention the cost of the nuclear programme, which was ultimately responsible for the pitifully low standard of living of the average Soviet citizen. Nor was anything said
about the accidents at the factories producing nuclear weapons. He was silent, for instance, about the huge explosion that took place on 29 September 1957 at Chelyabinsk Combine No. 817. An investigating commission concluded that the accident had been caused by gross negligence of cooling regulations. The fallout from the explosion polluted a large area, including living quarters for army units, a big camp for prisoners and, among others, the villages of Berdyaniki, Saltykovo, Golikaev, Kirpichiki, Yugo-Konevo and Bogoryak. The Minister for General Machine Building, Ye. Slavsky, reported: 'All the factories at the complex did not cease production following the explosion.'

Khrushchev and the Presidium did not discuss the event until 19 October, a full twenty days later, when they instructed the Council of Ministers to take the necessary measures. The government in its turn did not debate the issue until 12 November, almost six weeks after the disaster had taken place. Its solution was to order that by 1 March 1958 the inhabitants of four villages should be moved to another district. The sinister bell was tolling for Chernobyl, but no one was allowed to hear it. Factory managers and engineers received gaol sentences, but the Presidium's main concern was to hush up the affair. All the documentation was concealed in 'Special Files' marked Top Secret and tucked away in the Presidential Archives.

The system continued to live by Stalinist norms. Human life remained a matter of statistics, and Khrushchev, despite his courageous challenge of the dictatorial past, did not alter his basic view of the value of individuals, or their rights and liberties. For him, results, the achievement of political and economic goals, were everything, and human beings took second place.

Only this, surely, can explain his approval of a plan by Marshal Zhukov to conduct an experiment by exploding an atomic bomb on 14 September 1954 at the Totsk base in a relatively densely populated district in the Orenburg region. The object was to see whether animals, held in tanks, trenches and dug-outs at various distances from the explosion, would survive an atomic blast; to test the reliability of engineering equipment installed in a specially constructed section of urban development; and to measure the extent of radioactive pollution of the area, and the effect on people driven through the bomb zone in armoured cars an hour after the explosion.

A few days after the test, Zhukov reported that the results were highly satisfactory. The nuclear device was exploded 350 metres above ground. I myself visited Totsk some time later, and the scene of devastation, of molten, swollen ground, collapsed trenches and the shredded remains of large trees, was truly apocalyptic. Whether such tests were necessary is arguable, but to hold them virtually in the centre of Russia was the height of irresponsibility.

Khrushchev devoted much attention to space research, the driving force of which was military. He would entertain the top space scientists at his dacha, and he admired them greatly for carrying the USSR into space and putting the country in the lead in this sphere. No expense was spared. The best engineers and technologists were engaged on this work, and their achievements provided both military and propaganda benefits.

Khrushchev was impatient for the first manned space flight, and constantly telephoned the constructors and organizers of the project. On 11 April 1961 he dictated a note for transmission to the members of the Presidium from Pitsunda on the Black Sea: 'I am told that tomorrow, if all goes well, at 09.07 a manned spacecraft will be launched. It will orbit the Earth for an hour and a half and should then land. We would like everything to go well. [The cosmonaut] will be brought to Moscow the day after tomorrow. The flight was originally planned for the thirteenth but was changed out of superstition. We will meet him at Vnukovo airport with all due ceremony...'

He then dictated his chief ideas for an address from the Central Committee to the population, which included the phrase: 'This achievement is an accomplishment not only for our people, but for the whole of humanity.]

The next day Korolev telephoned Khrushchev and, dropping with fatigue and excitement, shouted: 'The parachute has opened, he's coming down to land. The ship's in good shape!' Khrushchev's son-in-law Alexei Adzhubei recalled that Khrushchev kept asking: 'Is he alive, is he sending signals? Is he alive? Is he alive?' Finally, he heard the news: 'He's alive!'
sharpening their claws against us now know. They know that Yurka has been in space, seen everything, knows everything [applause]. And if we have to do it again, and if he needs back-up, he can take another comrade with him so he can see more. I propose another toast to Yura, whom we have toasted already! I propose a toast to Comrade Yuri Gagarin, to all the scientists, engineers, workers, collective farmers, our entire people, and to you, dear guests, ambassadors of countries accredited to our government. To your health!68

Khrushchev's rule was marked by a host of major historic events, on all of which the stamp of his personality is to be seen. As well as the first manned space flight, the list includes the Berlin crisis, Suez and the Cuban missile crisis, a range of domestic economic reforms, reconciliation with Tito and the Sino-Soviet rift, the sudden fall from grace of the national hero Marshal Zhukov, the mushrooming of five-storey blocks which provided housing for millions, and the American U-2 spy-plane incident.

On 30 October 1961 Khrushchev reinforced his attack on the Stalin personality cult when, on the day before it ended, the Twenty-Second Party Congress passed a resolution: 'The continued preservation of I.V. Stalin's sarcophagus in the mausoleum is inappropriate, as Stalin's serious infringements of Lenin's tenets, his abuse of power, his mass arrests of honest Soviet people and other actions in the period of the personality cult make it impossible to leave his body in V.I. Lenin's mausoleum.'69

At the same time, Khrushchev was making strenuous efforts to ensure that some of Stalin's monstrous acts remained buried deep in the Party's most secret repositories. On 3 March 1959 KGB Chairman A. Shelepin wrote to Khrushchev, suggesting that 'the records and other documents relating to the shooting of 21,857 Polish officers, gendarmes, police, settlers and others in 1940' should be destroyed. 'None of these files,' Shelepin wrote, 'are of any operational interest to Soviet agencies, nor are they of historical value... On the contrary, some unforeseen event might lead to the exposure of the operation with all the undesirable consequences for our state. Especially as the official version on the shooting of the Poles in Katyn forest is that it was done by the German Fascist invaders.'70 Khrushchev chose to leave the documents hidden. In 1987, in the new spirit of glasnost, a joint Soviet–Polish commission of historians set out to expose this and other 'skeletons in the cupboard', and in February 1990 the newly free Soviet press published the findings on Katyn. Two months later, on 14 April, Mikhail Gorbachev publicly stated that the Soviet regime had committed the atrocity.71

The stamp of Khrushchev's contradictory personality marked everything he touched. In July 1956 he received a delegation of Italian Communists, consisting of Giancarlo Piaeta, Celeste Negarvile and Giacomo Pellegrini. Their conversation, or rather Khrushchev's monologue, lasted six and a half hours, and dwelt at length on the decisions of the Twentieth Congress and a host of other issues.

Suddenly, out of the blue, Khrushchev started talking about Jews. 'We have released a large number of Polish Jewish Communists from our prisons and sent them to Poland,' he said. 'These people are behaving disgustingly in Poland and are actively pushing their own people into the leading organs of the Party and state.' They were, he said, 'quite brazen'. He told the Italians that when a successor for Kierut was being decided at the Polish Party plenum, which he himself had attended earlier in the year, and the Poles had wanted Zambrowski, he had told them that, 'although Comrade Zambrowski is a good and capable comrade, in Poland's interests, however, you should choose a Pole.' Otherwise, he concluded, 'the fundamental leading posts will be held by Jews'. The Italians listened to all this in depressed silence.

Khrushchev then turned to the question of elections in the USSR, and why only one candidate was put up for any seat: 'We hold to the opinion,' he said, 'that we should continue to put forward just one candidate. We have no other parties, and to create them would mean making concessions to the bourgeoisie.'72 This was Khrushchev. Bold and inconsistent, impulsive and unpredictable, ready for change and reform in any field. Nor could he resist the temptation to 'educate' the creative intelligentsia. In 1957 he held his first meeting with leading figures in the cultural field, followed by two further meetings. The meetings revealed not only his ignorance of cultural matters, but his belief, like that of Stalin, that as Party leader he was the best judge of what artists and writers should be doing. Typical was the draft of a speech written on 8 March 1963, which declared that 'Abstractionism and formalism are a form of bourgeois ideology.'73
Khrushchev's attempts to drag the intelligentsia into line cost him the support of many of them, but above all it was the Party functionaries and state bureaucrats who took up arms against him. His name invariably provoked argument, and no one was neutral, although by the end he had very little support among any section of the population. His passion for change and experimentation constantly came up against a wall of silent non-acceptance and dissatisfaction.

**Revolutionary Diplomacy**

Lenin had spent much of his adult life abroad, but once he became head of the Soviet government he never left the country again. Stalin, who had been to Europe twice before 1917, also left Soviet Russia only twice, on both occasions to meet Western leaders during the war. Khrushchev, however, made many visits to foreign capitals, and he was soon raising the eyebrows of diplomats and journalists with his extravagant and eccentric propaganda remarks. The West was amazed when he chose to travel to the New York in September 1959 for the Fourteenth Session of the UN General Assembly on the cruise ship *Baltika*, taking several days on the voyage and accompanied by an entourage of a hundred people, including his wife Nina and his family, and the wife and family of his Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. He again surprised the world by spending a further two weeks in the US, holding engagingly entertaining press conferences and spontaneous interviews in a coast-to-coast tour that even took in Hollywood.

Although he invariably justified his attacks on the 'imperialists' as being in defence of peace, in fact Khrushchev's diplomacy was typically Bolshevik, militant and aggressive. There was an example on 16 May 1960 in Paris, at a preliminary meeting of the four powers. At the beginning of that month the Soviet Union had shot down a US U-2 spy-plane over its territory, and it demanded an apology. Despite a public admission by the pilot, Gary Powers, the US had denied responsibility. When President Eisenhower extended his hand to greet Khrushchev in Paris, the Soviet leader declined, declaring indignantly: 'This meeting can begin its work if President Eisenhower will apologize to the Soviet Union for Gary Powers' provocation.' Gromyko, who was present, recalled that Eisenhower replied, 'in a barely audible