

## History 12

### Lecture Notes: Post-War U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe.

We have noted that the political and military position of the U.S.S.R. improved substantially following the war. No longer would Soviet leaders talk about "Socialism in one country." Yet the Soviet position was still rather precarious - particularly in the eyes of Josef Stalin. Though the Red Army occupied strategic positions throughout Eastern and much of Central Europe, it faced a new and much more powerful capitalist competitor in the United States. Furthermore, the Soviet Union emerged from the war badly shaken by its experience of total war - with at least 15 million of its citizens were killed and 25 million more left homeless. 31 million factories were destroyed, along with 98,000 collective farms. Despite its outward appearance of power, Stalin recognized that the twin tasks of establishing military security and rebuilding the Soviet economy would not be easy.

#### Yugoslavia:

The limited nature of Stalin's military reach should have been clear to most observers following the split between Stalin and Tito. Given that Tito and the other leaders of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia were all originally picked by Stalin, it might come as a surprise that they should later publicly break with their mentor, however, their primary loyalty was to Yugoslavia and it was abundantly clear to them that Stalin put Russian interests first. Furthermore, Stalin's bargaining position was weaker here than in any other satellite nation, since Tito and his partisans had liberated their country without any help from the Red Army. Tito was touchy about the activities of Soviet agents in Yugoslavia and he strengthened his own hold on the Yugoslav Communist Party and on the country as a whole to counter them.

Stalin railed against Tito, claiming that the Yugoslavs were not following the Soviet pattern of reform, particularly in the area of collectivization of agriculture. In fact this seems not to be the case prior to the break, though afterwards he clearly pursued quite a different line to that of the Soviets. Tito came to reject the over-centralization of the Soviet model. He even turned to the West for aid in the 1950's, but this was long after the Soviet leader levelled his threats.

In the break became irrevocable. Stalin expelled Yugoslavia from the Cominform and cut off economic aid, but the moves did not break Tito. Though Stalin blustered and an invasion seemed imminent, nothing happened. In his memoirs, Khrushchev notes:

I'm absolutely sure that if the Soviet Union had a common border with Yugoslavia, Stalin would have intervened militarily. As it was, though, he would have had to go through Bulgaria, and Stalin knew we weren't strong enough to get away with that. He was afraid the American imperialists would have

actively supported the Yugoslavs ...."

The physical separation that benefitted the Yugoslavs resulted in a similar opportunity for Albania - though under Enver Hoxha, they chose a rather less liberalized road to communism.

#### **Significance of the Yugoslav break:**

Because Stalin did not (could not?) move against Yugoslavia, another possible model for Communism existed. Indeed, as the Yugoslav model liberalized, it looked even more attractive to developing nations. Particularly attractive was the Yugoslav practice of denationalizing businesses and handing them over to workers' councils and assemblies. The agricultural communes also proved a vast improvement over collective farms. Given a greater personal involvement in Yugoslav businesses, there was much more incentive to ensure the success of the enterprise. On the other hand, there was still the problem of unwillingness to fire colleagues and a tendency to pay themselves too much.

#### **The Soviet Union:**

In the U.S.S.R. there would be no such liberalization. Though there was hope that this might be allowed after the war, Stalin soon made his views clear. In 1955 Khrushchev told the story of how he, Malenkov and Molotov had talked to Stalin about reforms suggested by an economics expert:

We stated that we had seen and approved the measures proposed by Vosnesensky. Stalin listened to us, and then he said: "Before you go on, you should know that Vosnesensky was shot this morning."

The relaxation of political tension that had been allowed during the war years disappeared.

#### Forced Repatriation:

The deep hostility to the Soviet regime of the Soviet people was not immediately apparent to the West at the close of the war. Stalin took immediate steps to ensure that it would not be. Donald Treadgold, in Twentieth Century Russia, notes: "This required the speedy repatriation of Soviet citizens still outside the zone of Red Army authority."

5 million Soviet citizens were west of the U.S.S.R. at the close of the war, with perhaps 3 million of them in the Western zone. Some were prisoners of war, others slave labour in Nazi Germany, and finally there were those who had retreated along with the German army to avoid Stalin's rule. At Yalta the Big Three agreed to repatriate the citizens of all Allied countries when the war ended. Roosevelt and Churchill clearly did not understand what this would mean to Soviet citizens. They probably felt that it was only natural that people would choose to return home; those

who did not must have been traitors or feared being brought to justice for other offences.

Soviet citizens were herded into camps for **displaced persons** prior to being shipped back home. Many pretended to be from areas outside the U.S.S.R.'s August, 1939 borders. Others protested that they were not Soviet citizens at all. Others avoided the camps at all costs. When repatriation began, Western observers could not help notice the fears of these unfortunate souls. 2 million people were repatriated before the repatriation ended. For those who returned home, their fate was every bit as bad as many of them expected. Stalin did not want to reintegrate these unfortunates back into Soviet society - after all, they were tainted with Western ideas. Even Soviet partisans, who had fought for their country behind enemy lines, were sent along with the repatriated millions into the prisons of the **Gulag Archipelago**. So important was this to Stalin that, as Solzhenitsyn notes in his Gulag Archipelago trilogy, common criminals were amnestied to make room for the new arrivals.

#### The Zhdanovshchina:

Yet there were still at least 65 million Soviet citizens who had, at one time or another, lived under Nazi occupation and were, in Stalin's eyes, suspect. A general tightening up of Soviet society was undertaken.

- Contacts with the West were reduced to an absolute minimum - even contacts with Eastern Europe were discouraged as the U.S.S.R. closed its borders firmly.
- Legislation was introduced to prevent marriages to foreigners - wives had to divorce foreign husbands or go into exile in Siberia.
- Western films were not shown - except **Tarzan**, and even this was attacked.
- Jazz music was banned as it was considered morally dangerous.
- "Decadent" Western writing was attacked.
- Everything Russian was boosted as Soviet citizens were told that their country was in the vanguard of technology.
- Writers had to stick to government-approved themes and styles - Many Soviet artists found themselves in trouble. The composers Prokofiev & Shostakovich & the film director Sergei Eisenstein were all censured. Lesser lights entered the Gulag
- Trofim D. Lysenko, a poorly educated breeder of plants, attacked the work of the Soviet Union's best geneticists, claiming that it was possible for acquired characteristics to be inherited. The idea appealed to Stalin and Lysenko was elevated to the highest levels of Soviet Science. In the new Soviet Union facts would not stand in the way of ideology

Though Zhdanov died suddenly in 1948, the purges continued, though unlike the 1930's, this time it did not extend to the CPSU itself.

- In 1949 there was a campaign against the Jews.

- In 1949-1950 it was the turn of physiologists.
- In the winter of 1952-1953, it was claimed that doctors were conspiring to kill high party officials - the doctors' plot.

#### The Economy:

Soviet citizens were asked to make even more major sacrifices to help rebuild the economy. Heavy industry and armaments were strengthened again - in preparation for a new capitalist attack. The Soviet Atomic programme, under Beria (who also headed the Secret Police), was given a very high priority, producing their first atomic bomb in 1949. Once again the Soviet consumer was asked to tighten his belt. To make matters worse, there was a harvest failure in the Ukraine in 1947 - made worse by a similar failure in the Kuban. Agriculture was still given a very low priority in the 1946 five year plan. The plan apparently succeeded in restoring industrial production to 1940 levels, but at tremendous cost to the Soviet public.

#### Stalin's End:

After 1948 it was clear that Stalin's health was seriously deteriorating. His physical deterioration was clear and he did little to help himself. He drank too much, ate too much, and distrusted his own doctors. His paranoia increased (he had Mrs. Molotov sent to the Gulag). He came to distrust his closest friends, even having Voroshilov's room bugged. Few meetings of the Central Committee were held, or even of the Politbureau. No new congress was held until 1952. The day to day affairs of government were handled by his henchmen who were clearly jockeying for position for when the old man died.

On March 4, 1953 it was announced that Stalin had suffered a stroke on the 2nd. On the 5th came an announcement that he was dead. Many have suggested that the old man might have been "helped along" by other Soviet leaders - Beria was a prime suspect as he appeared to have the most to gain. On March 9, Stalin was laid to rest in the Lenin Mausoleum. A joint communique of the Soviet leaders was issued called upon Soviet citizens not to panic and to remain loyal. The funeral was nowhere near as grandiose as expected.

#### The Rise of Khrushchev:

On Stalin's death, it appeared that Malenkov and Beria would have the best chances of assuming Stalin's mantle. Malenkov had been acknowledged as the heir apparent at the XIX Party Congress, while Beria controlled the security apparatus. Molotov also seemed to be part of a ruling triumvirate at this time.

Within the Politbureau things were more complex. By the end of March Malenkov had relinquished his Party Secretary position to a relative unknown, Nikita Khrushchev. The Party was clearly adopting the same solution to the problem that followed Lenin's death

-collective leadership. An almost immediate relaxation occurred in Soviet society.

- Malenkov promised more consumer goods within 2 or 3 years.
- Beria announced that the doctors' plot was a hoax.
- It was also announced that the criminal code would be revised to reduce penalties for minor crimes. More importantly, it was even hinted that greater protection of the rights of citizens would have to be ensured.

Changes in Eastern Europe:

The changes occurring in the U.S.S.R. were also reflected elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

- Soon after returning from Stalin's funeral, Gottwald died and was replaced as Czech president by Zapotocky and as party chief by Novotny.
- In Hungary Imre Nagy replaced Rakosi, and announced a reforms
- Everywhere leaders gave up their titles of General Secretary and described themselves as First Secretary instead.

The changes seemed to indicate weakness at the highest levels and throughout the Soviet bloc strikes and demonstrations occurred. Matters got out of hand in **East Germany** where general strikes took on revolutionary tones in Berlin and other major centers. Soviet forces were used to put down the troubles. In the Soviet Union, Beria was executed in December - charged with attempting to seize power. The leadership of the CPSU probably found it convenient to eliminate this dangerous rival.

In 1955, Imre Nagy, the reformist leader of Hungary relinquished his post to Rakosi again. In the same year, the Soviet Union strengthened its hold on Eastern Europe by arranging the **Warsaw Treaty**, which placed the satellite armies under Soviet command. This seems to be the Soviet Union's answer to West Germany joining NATO. Khrushchev and Bulganin followed this with a surprise trip to Belgrade, where they attempted to patch up the old Soviet-Yugoslav rift.

Spirit of Geneva:

In May, 1955, the Soviets concluded the Austrian treaty. Soviet and Western troops were evacuated and Austria was once again an independent, neutral country. A summit meeting of world leaders was held in Geneva, where they all appeared quite friendly. To put pressure on the Americans to pull their troops out of Europe, the Soviets announced a unilateral return of their base at Porkkala in Finland. The Soviets also announced recognition of West Germany. Khrushchev and Bulganin then went off on a tour of India, Burma and Afghanistan. They were winning great support for their efforts elsewhere in the world - particularly in Nasser's Egypt. The Soviet Union clearly was making a pitch to the new third world nations - competing with American liberalism

and Chinese communism.

The XX Party Congress:

Officially at least, the big news of the 20th Party Congress was Khrushchev's allowing that there could be different "forms of transition of various countries to socialism" and his pointing to Tito's Yugoslavia as an example. Unofficially, there were more startling announcements.

At a closed meeting on February 24, 1956, Khrushchev criticized Stalin's crimes, accusing him of murdering loyal Party leaders and of causing the break with Tito. He was careful to avoid going too far however, after all, there were few present who had not taken active roles in the purges of the 1930's. Stalin's crimes were errors and not "the deeds of a giddy despot." Some public rehabilitations occurred, but countless Party members remained non-persons. Now that de-Stalinization was launched, the problem was how well it could be controlled.

In addition, Khrushchev formulated the policy of **peaceful coexistence**. He argued that the peace movement in the West made it difficult for them to wage a war, that the bomb makes war impossible, and that it was no longer correct to assume that war was inevitable. He didn't say that an ideological accommodation should be made with capitalism, just that competition should be in the economic and not the military sphere.

Reactions to Khrushchev's Speech:

It did not take long for word of the speech to leak out. On June 4, the U.S. State Department published the text of the secret speech. Riots occurred in Georgia after word of the speech leaked out there. Hundreds were killed. The troubles were apparently a combination of opposition to the current regime and anger at Stalin's demotion in the Communist pantheon. Many felt that "though a bastard, he was our bastard."

Poland:

In March, 1956 Edward Ochab, a moderate was elevated to the position of First Secretary. Vladislav Gomulka was released from prison and a power struggle ensued within the Party hierarchy. On June 15, 15,000 workers revolted at Poznan over economic issues. The military moved in, killing 53 and injuring 300-400 others. Moderates in the Party called for Ochab to step aside to allow Gomulka to take power. Soviet troops moved toward Polish cities and Khrushchev went to Warsaw with several Soviet Politbureau members on November 19. A showdown occurred at the airport and it appeared as if violence might break out. The Soviets had the tanks, but Gomulka had the Polish Communist Party behind him. Gomulka threatened to instigate a national revolution, forcing Khrushchev to back down. Gomulka was soon elected First Secretary of the Polish party. Though he grew more conservative upon assuming office, his Polish nationalism had won out.

Hungary:

The pressures for change in Hungary were similar to those in Poland. Rakosi was the target of more moderate anti-Stalinists. Writers and intellectuals were encouraged by Khrushchev's XX Congress speech. Rakosi tried to placate them by rehabilitating a former Party leader who had been executed for Titoism. Since Rakosi had been responsible for the execution, his efforts merely infuriated the moderates and nationalists. In July, Rakosi was forced to resign. On October 6 a posthumous funeral was held for Rajk, the executed minister - 300,000 attended.

After the initial Polish successes, students demonstrated and they were joined by not only workers, but soldiers too, on October 23. 50,000 marched on Parliament and soon their numbers swelled to hundreds of thousands. The Hungarian secret police fired on students who approached the Radio Building, hoping to broadcast their demands. Fighting broke out and the Hungarian army disintegrated as soldiers went over to the rebels.

On the night of October 24, the Hungarian Politbureau named Nagy Premier and also called for Soviet military assistance. Janos Kadar was named First Secretary. Events were beyond the control of the politicians though. Revolutionary worker's councils, soviets, were formed the following day - all over the country.

On October 27 the government was reorganized to include non-Communists. A cease-fire was arranged the following day and Soviet troops withdrew from Budapest. Nagy now committed a fatal mistake. He announced that Hungary would no longer be a one-party state or a member of the Warsaw Pact. Though the lack of reaction over the next couple of days seemed to signal victory, this was far from the case.

On November 4, the Soviet forces returned. Hungarian soldiers and civilians fought against the Russian invaders. Kadar was made Prime Minister of a new regime as Nagy took refuge in the Yugoslav Embassy. Thousands of Hungarians voted with their feet and fled to neighbouring Austria. Though Nagy appealed desperately for the UN to deal with the matter, its attention was focused elsewhere, on the Suez crisis. By the time the matter was taken up, it was too late for the Hungarians; resistance had been crushed. The U.S. was paralyzed, being in the middle of an election campaign, so no help was forthcoming from it.

Though the Soviets succeeded in enforcing their control of their satellites through the invasion, it had a devastating effect on Soviet prestige abroad. Even the prominent French Communist Party member Jean-Paul Sartre tore up his party card in protest. Tito took note of the new Soviet attitude and Yugoslav-Soviet relations cooled once again.

Even within the Kremlin there was a political price to pay as

Khrushchev was criticized for his handling of de-Stalinization. His critics were elevated to more important positions in the Party and the chief Soviet leader began a difficult struggle to maintain his position. In June Malenkov, Molotov and Kaganovich engineered a Presidium (Politbureau) vote against Khrushchev calling for his dismissal. Quick thinking saved him, however, as he announced that only the Central Committee could fire him, and he flew them in from all over the country for a quick vote of confidence. The old Presidium members, with the exception of Bulganin were dropped from full membership and he elevated new members in their place.

From being in disgrace for his handling of de-Stalinization, it now appeared that he had cleverly maneuvered into a position of power such as the Soviet Union had not seen since the death of Stalin.