Introduction

It is certainly well known that the decade which followed Stalin's death was a time when the USSR underwent a series of major upheavals as the Soviet system began to turn away from the stifling and repressive grip of late Stalinism. What is less well known, since the subject rarely came to public attention in the USSR or the West at the time, is just how far this was a period when elements of Soviet society refused to accept their lot and, for one reason or another, openly clashed with the authorities. Questions of ideology, culture, economic distress, nationalism and religion all stirred popular emotions and evoked an array of dissenting responses from the masses. Of course, the system held firm and the vast majority of citizens remained compliant, but the stories of those who did not do so give us many valuable insights into the nature of the Khrushchev period and the later Soviet system.

There was no 'dissident movement' during the Khrushchev era, but a great number of people – hundreds of thousands according to some estimates – unambiguously expressed varying degrees of frustration, anger and opposition towards the political authorities.[1] These expressions could take many forms, including public outbursts against government policies, mass riots, anonymous letters, abuse aimed at members of the Party leadership, leaflets calling on workers to take strike action and underground groups threatening to incite revolution. For their part, the authorities consistently refused to accept the legitimacy of almost any political complaint rising up 'from below' and sought to ensure that dissonant voices were stifled as far as possible. Thousands of those who protested were packed off to labour camps and prisons for 'anti-Soviet activity' and some

[1] For example, Ludmilla Alexeyeva and Valery Chalidze – both highly authoritative voices on the history of Soviet dissent – estimated that over 500,000 Soviet citizens participated in mass disorders, disturbances, demonstrations, protest meetings and strikes between 1953 and 1964. See L. Alexeyeva and V. Chalidze, *Mass Unrest in the USSR*, Washington, DC: Department of Defense Office of Net Assessments, 1985.

were detained in psychiatric institutions. Many more were dismissed from jobs or expelled from universities, while others found themselves ejected from the Communist Party and Komsomol or were given warnings of dire consequences if they did not step back into line at once.

Unlike the Brezhnev era, when Soviet dissidents were often the focus of attention from the global media and Western academics and politicians, relatively little was written during the Cold-War period about political protest during Khrushchev's time at the helm.[2] In those works that did appear, commentators tended to suggest that dissent under Khrushchev had been predominantly restricted to a handful of literary works and to simmering intellectual ferment among members of the intelligentsia.[3] With the opening up of former Soviet archives we can now see that although challenging liberal literature by the likes of Il'ya Ehrenburg and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was the most widely accessible medium for criticism – by virtue of the fact that such stories, poems and essays could be bought in shops and read in libraries by Soviet citizens and Westerners alike – it was not the only means of expression for negative political attitudes. In fact, thanks to the combined effects of both self-censorship and state censorship, the famous liberal literary works of the 'Thaw era' generally expressed some of the very mildest criticism that was aimed at the authorities.

In her classic study on Soviet dissent Ludmilla Alexeyeva described the Khrushchev era as 'an incubation period when people began to learn to talk about the problems of Soviet life'. Focusing her attention primarily on the liberal intelligentsia who would go on to dominate the Brezhnev-era dissident movement,[4] Alexeyeva was undoubtedly correct to assert that the Khrushchev years were a time when the foundations were being laid for future struggles, yet they were also much more besides. The era witnessed unprecedented spells of dissension within the Communist Party and Komsomol and mass disturbances on a scale that was unheard of in later years. Large volumes of critical and oppositional leaflets were distributed in

[2] The most notable exception to this trend was an article by Albert Boiter on popular unrest in the early 1960s. See A. Boiter, 'When the Kettle Boils Over', *Problems of Communism*, No. 1 (1964), 33–43. Vladimir Kozlov has rightly pointed out that parts of Boiter's material were based upon rumours and other unsubstantiated sources that have since proved to be inaccurate. See V. Kozlov, *Mass Uprisings in the USSR: Protest and Rebellion in the Post-Stalin Years*, London: M.E. Sharpe, 2002, pp. 6–7. Nonetheless, Boiter drew a number of useful analytical points and his work remains a valuable, if flawed, early source on Khrushchev-era dissent.

[3] For example, in 1972 Cornelia Gerstenmaier wrote that 'for about a decade, during the mid-50s and early 60s, hostile political currents found expression almost exclusively in literary works'. C. Gerstenmaier, *The Voices of the Silent*, New York: Hart Publishing Company, 1972, p. 32.

[4] L. Alexeyeva, *Soviet Dissent: Contemporary Movements for National, Religious and Human Rights*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987, p. 269.

public spaces. People also formed underground political groups and even a few would-be terrorist cells. In other words, dissent under Khrushchev was not simply about liberal intellectuals in Moscow 'awakening' and beginning to question the regime's moral authority. It was also about Gulag returnees and workers hurling political abuse at the police, miners forming underground groups in Rostov, Party and Komsomol members both attacking and defending Stalin after the Secret Speech, forestry workers distributing anti-Khrushchev leaflets in Arkhangel' and students all over the USSR protesting against the bloody suppression of the Hungarian rising.

While the somewhat teleological view of the Khrushchev era as a time of 'incubation' or 'underdeveloped dissidence' made sense for those looking backwards from the perspective of the Brezhnev-era dissident movement, it also provides only a narrow view of – or else overlooks – a whole host of events and trends that had far-reaching implications for the Soviet system as a whole, not just for the dissenting activity of later years.[5] As I show throughout the book, and particularly in Chapter 9, there were all manner of important connections between Khrushchev-era political dissent and the dissident movement of the Brezhnev years. Nonetheless, with high levels of underground activity, huge public disorders and extensive worker protest taking place between the mid 1950s and mid 60s, there were too many significant points of distinction for us to regard Khrushchev-era dissent as simply an embryonic form of the subsequent human-rights movement.

One of the most distinctive aspects of dissent in the Khrushchev era was its diversity, both in the social origins of protesters and the behaviours they engaged in. Under Stalin, those acts of protest that have since been documented were largely spontaneous and volatile, and were often centred upon angry workers and peasants.[6] The Brezhnev years, on the other hand, were characterised by far more legalistic and sober criticism that saw dissent primarily restricted to the metropolitan intelligentsia, albeit a fairly small proportion of that body.[7] Fittingly for its chronological position between the two eras, the Khrushchev period was a time that featured enraged acts of protest by workers and peasants as well as more cerebral criticisms made by members of the intelligentsia. Consequently, dissent could be crude and

[5] In regard to earlier historiography on Khrushchev-era dissent, see V. Kozlov and S. Mironenko eds., *Kramola: inakomyslie v SSSR pri Khrushcheve i Brezhneve 1953–1982*, Moskva: Materik, 2005.

[6] See, for example, L. Viola ed., *Contending with Stalinism: Soviet Power and Popular Resistance in the 1930s*, London: Cornell University Press, 2002.

[7] The literature on the Brezhnev-era dissident movement is particularly rich. See, for example, J. Rubenstein, *Soviet Dissidents: Their Struggle for Human Rights*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1980 and R. Tökes ed., *Dissent in the USSR: Politics, Ideology, and People*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975.

explosive at some points, and then more sophisticated and considered at others, depending on the issues at hand. In practice, there was often minimal convergence between these different types of dissent. Working-class protest, which changed only a little following Stalin's death, generally still flared up on the spur of the moment and centred upon quite personalised and material issues such as poor living standards and specific abuses of power, whilst members of the intelligentsia were likely to show their frustration at slightly more nebulous problems, like the uneven progress of deStalinization or the Party's dogmatic restrictions upon cultural affairs.

Even though outbursts of worker and peasant anger tended to originate in material discontent, they could quickly become politicised in their language and gestures. Because this was such a large sector of society – and one in whose interests the regime purported to rule – working-class discontent in particular had the potential to be very dangerous for the authorities, especially in an era when people's aspirations were rising fast. An increasingly consumerist social contract meant that living standards clearly fed into social stability. After a major flaring of worker discontent during the summer of 1962 – and a particularly brutal government response at Novocherkassk – the dynamics of dissenting behaviour began to shift and protest activity among workers declined in both frequency and scale. This was not necessarily because would-be protesters became any more afraid to voice criticism of the authorities, but because the regime began to take ever greater care to prevent mass discontent from again reaching such a dangerous level. First and foremost, this meant alleviating the more acute material frustrations within society, such as growing desires for consumer goods and better housing. Although it demanded a certain re-orienting of economic priorities, this was a price worth paying in order to help head off large-scale dissent.

The situation in regard to the liberal intelligentsia was somewhat different. For them, the major turning point came when Khrushchev first exposed Stalin's failures and cruelty in the Secret Speech, on 25 February 1956. In denouncing Stalin, the Secret Speech implicitly also denounced rule by terror, thus providing an assurance that there would be no return to full-blooded Stalinism, under which the voicing of political criticism was liable to end in unmitigated disaster. Responses to protest remained harsh by any other standard, but they were no longer murderous. The realisation that one could now speak up without ultimately facing physical destruction thus loosened slightly the shackles of self-censorship on those who considered the consequences of their actions before protesting. The main challenge for the authorities in handling the frustrations of intelligentsia

dissenters lay in the fact that their complaints were often of a more fundamentally politicised nature than those of workers and could not so easily be 'bought off' with material improvements, but instead required genuine reform. As such, their grievances were mostly ignored or suppressed while those of Soviet workers met with a more sympathetic response.

Many of the behaviours examined herein would have been entirely acceptable under less authoritarian regimes or would have simply constituted regular political interchange, rather than dangerous acts of protest. Soviet domestic priorities dictated a wider conception of subversive behaviour which encapsulated a range of acts that one generally would not recognise today as being subversive. Perhaps most notably, this included a fierce protection of the official public sphere from any sign of ideological heterodoxy, whether originating in the West or the East, from neo-Bolshevik underground groups or from drunkards in the street. However, as I show at several points, there were also plenty of protest behaviours taking place that would have been unacceptable or else would have attracted close interest from the state under any political system, either then or now. Khrushchev-era dissent often centred upon people, causes and behaviours that bore limited resemblance to the broadly liberal and legalistic protests of Andrei Sakharov et al. from the late 1960s onwards.

Whilst acknowledging the deep significance of the regime's abandonment of mass terror, a growing number of scholars have emphasised that the well-established characterisation of the Khrushchev era as a time of relative liberality, or 'thaw', is problematic in a number of important ways. This is especially evident when one looks at policies and attitudes toward dissenting behaviour.[8] In fact, the trend was not for the Khrushchev regime to show significantly greater acceptance of discordant political expressions from among the masses. Those who kept quiet were no longer in danger of facing groundless repression, and those who did fall foul of the authorities would not face such severe punishment, yet there was still to be no compromise or meaningful dialogue with citizens deemed 'anti-Soviet', including those who ultimately considered themselves loyal critics. While there was greater scope for disagreement among political elites and some toleration of non-conformist thought in the cultural sphere, things had changed relatively

[8] See, for example, M. Dobson, *Khrushchev's Cold Summer: Gulag Returnees, Crime and the Fate of Reform after Stalin*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009 and B. Firsov, *Raznomyslie v SSSR 1940–1960 gody: istoriya, teoriya i praktika*, Sankt Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo Evropeiskogo universiteta v Sankt Peterburge, 2008.

little for the ordinary citizen in terms of what they could legitimately do or say about political issues.

Naked coercion of dissenters never disappeared entirely, but the authorities in the post-Stalin era did become considerably more sophisticated – and were often remarkably effective – in the way that they dealt with their detractors. Once mass repression had been abandoned with Stalin's passing, the Khrushchev regime had to find new ways of keeping protest and non-conformity at a minimum. By lambasting the late dictator after years of adulation, the Secret Speech created uncertainty for a time as to where the new boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable comment lay. By failing to prescribe discourse on the matter, the authorities also inadvertently prompted citizens to search for their own conclusions about what the attack on Stalin said about the Soviet past, present and future. As a result, many of those most earnest in taking up Khrushchev's call to overcome the consequences of the Cult of Personality soon faced censure for 'overstepping the mark'. By proclaiming a vaguely defined 'return to Leninism' it also facilitated a wider ideological discourse that quickly proved threatening within a political system that was essentially focused on consolidating and preserving gains already acquired by the revolution, rather than launching a genuine revolution of its own.[9] Though there was never any question of tolerating entirely unfettered comment, the authorities were initially ill prepared for taking on critics so soon after proffering a new and less repressive style of government.

When the Hungarian rising and the subsequent Soviet response compounded and amplified tensions already arising more widely from the Secret Speech and the post-war years, the authorities considered it necessary to reassert their prerogative to tackle dissent with alacrity. For over a year there was a small-scale reversion to the 'bad old days', as the number of citizens jailed on political charges shot up during 1957 and 1958. Thereafter, social control again became less heavily reliant upon such direct and draconian measures. Instead, new mechanisms for policing proliferated and were honed as the boundaries between state and society were deliberately blurred. Popular opinion was carefully shaped to leave non-conformists isolated and unpopular. Public involvement in the work of the authorities and intrusion into citizens' everyday lives became an increasing feature of the Soviet system, as new layers of social control and peer-policing were employed to stifle the expression of political doubts and discontent. In

[9] On the subject of the post-war Soviet regime's focus on consolidating gains already won, see J. Fürst, *Stalin's Last Generation: Soviet Post-War Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism*, Oxford University Press, 2010.

many ways, the post-Stalin decline in repression was ultimately compensated for by an increase in the scope and effectiveness of policing.

Mass conformity was not maintained solely by punishment and intimidation, however. For the majority of the population, Soviet rule was widely accepted as legitimate, even if it was not always embraced in all its forms. Communist notions of social fairness and collectivism had taken root and in fact proved to be recurrent themes on which the authorities were criticised for failing to deliver. As the limits to which the masses were willing to be pushed by their political leaders narrowed following the Second World War, and then narrowed further following Stalin's death, the authorities began to make less exacting demands, in terms of both material sacrifices and ideological zeal. Living standards rose and positive incentives for compliance proliferated, such as growing access to consumer goods, new apartments and university places or the occasional granting of permission to travel abroad. Alongside changes to policing and intermittent appeals to communist idealism, this helped to make possible the maintenance of a social order in which an increasingly educated and informed public, with rising aspirations for the future, would remain overwhelmingly compliant without either deep political reforms, such as democratisation or freedom of expression, or reversion to mass state violence.

Looking at the range of measures that the Soviet leadership put in place to combat dissent, we can see that many of them were based upon eminently rational (though that is not to say 'fair') assessments of the domestic situation, yet often they were implemented in a heavy-handed and unhelpful manner that exacerbated, rather than alleviated, existing problems. For example, they were fundamentally correct in the belief that foreign powers – most notably the US – were conducting propaganda warfare with the aim of undermining the Soviet system in the eyes of its people. Nonetheless, the spectre of foreign subversion was consistently overstated, to the point where it became counter-productive and masked entirely organic and broadly apolitical reasons for citizens' discontent, such as low wages or poor housing. They were also correct to view the younger generation as a potentially fertile breeding ground for non-conformist views and behaviour, but they often diagnosed inappropriate or unhelpful reasons for this, such as 'insufficient respect for physical labour', rather than accepting that in reality students struggled on pitifully low stipends and post-war youths held different ambitions and interests to their parents' generation. This did not make them 'anti-Soviet'. Dogmatic thinking prompted a perception of even mild political non-conformity which could heighten those tensions that did come to

the surface. As a result, even those who had desired to help repair the system through loyal and constructive criticism tended to find themselves increasingly alienated and marginalised. Conversely, private doubts and frustrations were no longer such a major concern for the authorities, provided that they remain unvoiced. Although the point was never made absolutely explicit, efforts at shaping and transforming the masses increasingly came to centre upon inducing obedience rather than upon instilling communist values as the vitality of the Soviet project waned.

Formerly classified archival materials have helped to turn research on the Khrushchev era and Late Socialism more widely into a particularly active field since around the turn of the millennium, as historians are now increasingly taking over from where contemporary political scientists and journalists left off. With a wealth of new archival material now available to the researcher, the last few years have seen emerge a much more detailed and nuanced picture of the period in question. Monographs by the likes of William Taubman (on Khrushchev himself), Miriam Dobson (on the release of Gulag inmates), Thomas Wolfe (on journalism), Vladislav Zubok (on the post-Stalin intelligentsia) and Stephen Bittner (a micro-history of the Khrushchev-era Arbat district in Moscow), along with edited volumes by Polly Jones (on deStalinization) and Melanie Ilič and Jeremy Smith (on state and society under Khrushchev), have provided a wealth of new information on the era and posed significant challenges to a range of long-standing assumptions and interpretations of the period.[10]

Notions of the Khrushchev period as a time of 'liberal communism' are rightly being questioned, though this questioning tends to centre upon comparisons with the succeeding Brezhnev era, rather than the preceding Stalin years.[11] Ideas of the Khrushchev era as a time when high politics was predominantly characterised by struggle between 'liberals' and 'conservatives' (or 'reformists' and 'Stalinists') within the elite are also being further

[10] It is also worth noting that a number of excellent Ph.D. theses have been produced in this area recently. See, for example, B. Tromly, 'Re-Imagining the Soviet Intelligentsia: Student Politics and University Life, 1948–1964', Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 2007; E. Cohn, 'Disciplining the Party: The Expulsion and Censure of Communists in the Post-War Soviet Union, 1945–1961', Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2007; G. Tsipursky, 'Pleasure, Power and the Pursuit of Communism: Soviet Youth and State-Sponsored Popular Culture during the Early Cold War Period, 1945–1968', Ph.D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2011; J. Hardy, 'Khrushchev's Gulag: The Evolution of Punishment in the Post-Stalin Soviet Union, 1953–1964', Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 2011.

[11] See, for example, B. Firsov, *Raznomyslie*.

refined.[12] Similarly, notions of a mass retreat from meaningful participation in public life and withdrawal into a world of private concerns are being challenged by new models that highlight extensive interaction between public and private activities and relationships.[13] In terms of periodisation, assumptions of a relatively liberal early period and a more conservative later period have been found to hold true in some important respects but not in others. The worst excesses of Stalinism were quickly abandoned forever but key pillars of the Brezhnev-era political system were firmly established by the time that Khrushchev was removed from office. Citizens' increased awareness of and interaction with the outside world was an important catalyst for social change but it was often much more slow-burning and less overtly ideological in nature than was first assumed when Soviet young people began scrambling for blue jeans, jazz records and Western youth slang.[14]

The ups and downs of deStalinization have rightly been the focus of much academic attention but they by no means defined the everyday lives of Soviet citizens throughout the period. Nor were they always at the heart of dissenting activity – something which a long-standing focus on intelligentsia protest has tended to obscure. While Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the XX CPSU Congress in February 1956 either sparked or facilitated much of the intelligentsia dissent that subsequently followed, it was generally not such an important catalyst for expressions of political discontent among other sections of the population. The catalysts for dissenting behaviour were myriad: only a portion of them related to questions of liberalisation. As Nikolai Mitrokhin points out, for example, for millions in the armed forces it was not the Secret Speech but the swingeing military cuts of the late 1950s that were key to their experience of the era.[15] For Soviet Jews, it was often the authorities' anti-Semitism that generated most resentment. For workers and peasants, issues such as increases in the price of foodstuffs and restrictions on private plots engendered far greater discontent than did questions of political reform.

[12] The more traditional 'conflict model' can be seen in works such as Carl Linden's *Khrushchev and the Soviet Leadership*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990. One of the most notable challenges to this approach in recent scholarship has been in Miriam Dobson's *Khrushchev's Cold Summer*.

[13] See, for example, L. Siegelbaum ed., *Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres of Soviet Russia*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

[14] See, for example, S. Zhuk, *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City: The West, Identity, and Ideology in Soviet Dnepropetrovsk, 1960–1985*, Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2010.

[15] See N. Mitrokhin, *Russkaya partiya: dvizhenie russkikh natsionalistov v SSSR , 1953–1985*, Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2003, p. 6.

Much attention has been paid to Soviet dissent over the years, firstly in the West during the Cold War, and then during *glasnost'* and the immediate post-Soviet period inside what was the USSR. In both cases one can point to a whole range of factors driving interest in Soviet dissidents, such as humanitarian concern, political expediency and simple curiosity about what really lay beneath the Soviet regime's monolithic façade. Some looked for evidence that the classical liberal values of Western civilisation had been able to survive in the face of a decades-long attempt to produce a new, Soviet man.[16] Doubtless there were also many who hoped that in monitoring dissent they were picking up on early signals of an impending mass rejection of communism. With the Soviet Union now long since collapsed, more than a few of these earlier reasons for studying dissent have also expired. Nonetheless, there is still much to be learned from this theme.

Dissenting behaviour cannot be used as an always-reliable and straightforward prism through which to view the state of the Soviet system. In some cases protesters quite possibly were voicing the concerns and frustrations of silent millions but one could never be entirely sure of that. In many cases protesters almost certainly represented no one but themselves. Questions of motivation and intent often remain a matter of interpretation, rather than fact. Nonetheless, in aggregate form acts of protest and criticism do give an insight into what particularly aggrieved certain sections of society at any given time and allow us to interpret some of the on-going political and social changes for which the Khrushchev period became known, whilst also providing tantalising glimpses of deeper-lying troubles, such as declining faith in the integrity and ability of the Soviet regime's political leadership. The forms and themes of protest activity can also help us to gain an idea of how deep the roots of the Soviet system had penetrated by the 1950s and 1960s. Many critics during the early part of the Khrushchev period, for example, assailed the authorities from distinctly communist ideological positions. More often than not, the language and protest behaviours that dissenters deployed bore the hallmarks of a profound identification with, or at least an acceptance of, the system rather than its rejection.

Responding to dissent was only a part of the regime's workload, and a reasonably small part at that, but it was nonetheless an important facet of the state's domestic activity and one that tells us much about the period in question. In terms of the authorities' responses to dissenting behaviour, we learn about what factors shaped attitudes toward critics, how policy-making

[16] On this broad theme see A. Krylova, 'The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter 2000), 119–46.