

SOVIET LEADERS AFTER STALIN

De-Stalinization, Cold War, and Continued Repression

Joseph Stalin left a long shadow on Soviet communism when he died in 1953. He had been in the inner circle of power since 1917, and been head ruler for 25 years. His successors differed from him in policy and style, but they had been shaped and influenced by him, and all except the last shared his repressive style of leadership.

Georgy Malenkov (1953-55)

After Stalin died in 1953, Georgy Malenkov, who had headed the Soviet missile and rocket programs, became Premier. In office, he called for cuts in military spending and opposed amassing nuclear weapons. He wanted to reduce repression, but was slow to release political prisoners. Nikita Khrushchev organized a coalition against him, and by early 1955, Malenkov was voted out of office.



Khrushchev was voted Time Magazine's Man of the year for 1956, after he denounced Stalin and released Gulag prisoners.

Nikita Khrushchev (1955-64)

Nikita Khrushchev had been a key player in Stalin's Purges, but when he came to office, he began a program of De-Stalinization. In 1955, he began to release political prisoners from the Gulag. On February 25, 1956, Khrushchev gave a speech at the 20th Party Congress that denounced Stalin and introduced a "thaw" in repression. He rehabilitated over 500,000 former inmates. *Troikas*, three-person tribunals that sentenced the accused without following due process, were abolished. In 1961, Khrushchev had Stalin's body removed from display in Lenin's mausoleum. Forced labor continued until the end of the Soviet Union, but few political prisoners were sent to the Gulag during the Khrushchev Era. Repression didn't disappear; it took the form of losing one's job, being expelled from the Party, or being pressured to emigrate.

Khrushchev even permitted some freedom in the arts. In 1962, he allowed Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* to be published. The book depicted Gulag life with surprising accuracy, and gave the world the first glimpse into the Gulag. It was recalled in just three months.

The "thaw" sparked an uprising in Hungary in 1956, which the USSR used military force to suppress, killing several thousand unarmed protesters.

Attack on Religion. Khrushchev began a large anti-religious campaign in 1959, by forcing churches to close. In 1959, there were 22,000 churches in the Soviet Union; in 1960, there were only 13,008, and in 1965, just 7,873. Parents were forbidden to teach faith to their children and bring them to worship services. The KGB recorded who requested baptisms, church weddings, and funerals. Clergymen were forced to retire or sent to prison for giving sermons "attacking atheism." It was even illegal to perform Christian charity or make Christianity popular by personal example.

Economy. In 1959, Khrushchev announced that the Soviet Union would overtake the US in production of milk, meat, and butter. Unrealistic production goals caused all kinds of corruption, such as local farmers buying meat at stores, and reselling it to the government. In June 1962, meat and butter cost 25% more, and 1963 saw long bread lines.

During the Khrushchev Era, several significant international events occurred

The Warsaw Pact. In 1955, a coalition of democratic powers created the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), pledging as democratic powers to defend each other against military threat. In response, the USSR and seven of its European satellite states (Albania, Poland, Romania, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria) created the Warsaw Pact, stating that they would come to each other's aid if attacked. It gave the Soviet Union dominance in Europe, and the strength to defend its ideology with military force. It remained intact until 1991.

Soviet Space Program. In 1957, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik 1, the first satellite, into space, and three years later, the first manned spaceflight.

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The Berlin Wall (August, 1961). After World War II, Germany was divided into East and West Germany. The West was democratic, capitalist, and prosperous, while the East was repressed and poor. The East German government closed its borders, but 1.6 million young, educated East Germans escaped to the west through Berlin. At midnight on August 12, 1961, East Germans started

constructing a wall through Berlin to stop the mass defections from East to West. The Berlin Wall stood until November 9, 1989, a symbol of the repressive communist state.

The Cuban Missile Crisis. In October, 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union nearly went to war over the placement of Soviet missiles in communist Cuba. After tense negotiations, Khrushchev withdrew the missiles after the US promised to withdraw missiles from Turkey. After this standoff, relations improved between the US and the USSR.

Removal from Office. On October 14, 1964, the Presidium and the Central Committee ousted Khrushchev from office.

Leonid Brezhnev (1964-82)



Leonid Brezhnev succeeded Khrushchev as head of the Soviet Union in 1964. He ran the country for 18 years, longer than any Russian leader but Stalin.

Brezhnev ended Khrushchev's cultural reforms. He ended cultural freedoms and restored the KGB to their former power. Although the Gulag never again reached the height it had during Stalin's years (2.8 million), there

were still up to 10,000 political prisoners in the Gulag at any time.



East German troops building the Berlin Wall on November 20, 1961. The wall divided the city for 28 years, becoming an international symbol of communist repression.

During the Brezhnev Era, Yuri Andropov was head of the KGB for 15 years, and the agency regained some of its Stalinist power. In 1969, Andropov launched a plan to create a network of psychiatric hospitals as a place to put dissidents. By the mid-1970s, many of the regime's political and religious

prisoners were drugged in mental hospitals. The KGB infiltrated government organizations and arrested those with dissenting viewpoints.

New laws curbed public expressions of dissent and religion. After 1958, Article 70 replaced Article 58, which had imprisoned millions during the Stalin era, forbidding "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda." And in 1967, Article 190-1 was introduced, which forbade "dissemination of fabrications known to be false, which defame the Soviet political and social system."

Foreign Policy. Brezhnev determined to build up the Soviet military. He ordered an invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, to suppress an uprising that threatened communism in the Eastern Bloc. His **Brezhnev Doctrine** policy stated that the USSR would intervene wherever socialism was threatened, using force if necessary to safeguard socialism. This led to a heightening of tension between East and West, and an arms race. Between 1965 and 1970, military spending increased by 40%. In 1982, 15% of the national budget was spent on the military.

During the 1970s, however, Brezhnev attempted to follow a policy of **Détente** (easing of hostility) with the West. In 1972, he and American President Richard Nixon signed the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks Agreement (SALT 1), trying to work out a peaceful co-existence. The Soviet Union broke with détente by invading Afghanistan in 1979 to support communism there. In response, the US halted grain exports to the Soviet Union and boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympics.

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Economics. Brezhnev oversaw the Eighth, Ninth, Tenth, and Eleventh Five-Year Plans. The Eighth Five-Year Plan caused production in factories and mines to increase 138% over their 1960 output. The Ninth-Year Plan (1971-76) saw consumer products outproduce industry for the first time ever, but the government didn't like the shift and reversed this trend in the Tenth Plan. Between 1964 and 1973, the Soviet output was about half of Western Europe's output per capita.

Agricultural Policy. Collectivization was still in effect, although it continued yielding less than private farming. Thirty percent of the national agricultural output was produced on private lands, even they represented only 4% of cultivated fields. The workers met their quotas, but did shoddy work; and since they were all paid the same, what did it matter?

Economic Stagnation. Economic growth tapered off during the 1970s. The government invested too much in the nuclear arms race and not enough domestically. Meanwhile, Soviet agriculture could not feed the people in cities, and homelessness was on the rise in Moscow. The workforce of the USSR was "work-shy;" communism ensured every member of society a job, but those who were lazy, inept, or corrupt could not be removed from their jobs. Corruption was everywhere: in the government, in factories, mines, and offices. The country had to give up the idea that it could be self-sufficient and began to trade internationally.



Soviet tanks stifling reform in Prague, 1968. The Breznev Doctrine stated that Soviets would uphold socialism in other countries, using force if necessary.

In his last few years, Brezhnev's health deteriorated, and he was mostly a figurehead. He loved medals, and the government indulged him by giving him over 100, including "Hero of the Soviet Union." He died in 1982 after ruling for 18 years. He had given the USSR international power and peace, but failed to modernize the country and did not affect economic reform. The economic stagnation would eventually cause the dissolution of the empire.



Yuri Andropov (1982-84)

Yuri Andropov was a hardline communist and Cold War Soviet leader. As Soviet Ambassador to Hungary (1954-57), he earned himself the nickname of "Butcher of Budapest," for ruthlessly suppressing the 1956 Hungarian Uprising with military force. He also suppressed the 1968 Prague Spring (an attempt for reform in Czechoslovakia), using "extreme measures."

By the time he became Secretary General in 1982, he had spent 15 years as head of the KGB under Brezhnev. He already had an impressive track record of doing away with political dissenters by using force, repression, psychiatric prisons, and pressure to emigrate. He opposed unauthorized gatherings and the expansion of human rights. Andropov was head of the Soviet Union for only 15 months, before dying in February, 1983. Interestingly, Vladimir Putin, who shares Andropov's KGB background, considers him to be a great patriot and reformer.



Konstantin Chernenko (1984-85)

Konstantin Chernenko had worked for the Soviet propaganda department before leading the Soviet Union. He wanted to reform education and propaganda, but died after just one year in office, in March of 1985.