'He made a success of his life but failed in his objectives', from Le Monde (14 September 1971)

Caption: On 14 September 1971, commenting on Nikita Khrushchev's death three days earlier, the French daily newspaper Le Monde looks back at the Soviet leader's political career.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Fauvet, Jacques. 14.09.1971, n° 8 294. Paris: Le Monde. "Il a réussi sa vie mais manqué son oeuvre", auteur:Féron, Bernard , p. 4.

URL:
http://www.cvce.eu/obj/he_made_a_success_of_his_life_but_failed_in_his_objectives_from_le_monde_14_september_1971-en-db8bd8da-af46-4bfe-9114-1502f59ec013.html

Last updated: 05/07/2016

He made a success of his life but failed in his objectives

If he had been versed in Latin, Khrushchev could have exclaimed on the day of his downfall ‘Qualis artifex pereo!’ As it happened, on 14 October 1964, the entire world had the feeling that a rare breed of statesman, a kind of showman or, at all events, a flamboyant character, had been cast into oblivion. The deposed individual was certainly not worthy to go down in history. He had neither the genius of Lenin nor the authority of Stalin. He inspired neither adoration nor even admiration. He aroused irritation as well as inspiring a certain amount of sympathy. He passed imperceptibly from the sublime to the ridiculous. He fretted more than he acted. At least, he had sufficient presence to impose his trademark on a large part of the universe, the famous ‘Mr K’ who graced the headlines of the Western press for a decade.

Foreigners ended up believing that he really was the incarnation of Soviet Russia. In Moscow, however, his fall was hardly noticed. The politician who had courted popularity languished under the indifference of his countrymen. Ordinary people reproached him for not keeping his promises. Intellectuals felt humiliated by having a rough, ‘nekulturny’ individual for a leader. Party officials accused him of shaking the system to its foundations. From one day to the next, the glorified individual fell into obscurity. The former Number One’s name was erased from Soviet books. The initiated — and others — nevertheless understood to whom *Pravda* was alluding when the Party newspaper denounced the ‘project makers’ who governed without rhyme or reason.

A product of the Workers’ University

He may have been something of a bumpkin, but he did have excuses for this. Nikita Sergeyevich, born in Kalinovka in Kursk Province, barely attended school. Some even claim that, at the age of 17, he still could not read. A shepherd, a miner, a militant revolutionary, he entered politics after the Bolshevik takeover. It was only then that he enrolled in the Communist Party, took part in the Civil War and attended the Workers’ University. At that time, talented young people had the chance to rise quickly up the hierarchy. Khrushchev rose slowly, laboriously, taking up such obscure posts as district secretary. At the age of 40, he finally began to stand out from the herd. The Stalinist purges had emptied the ranks of the administration of the State and of the party. Lazar Kaganovich, master of the capital and close collaborator of Stalin, noticed the zealous young official who unquestioningly served the dictator. He made him his assistant and, later, his successor as party head for Moscow City. That was in 1935. Three years later, the future ‘Mr K’ took over the leadership of the Ukrainian Communist Party and entered the Politburo as an alternate member. The following year, he was made a full member. He did what was expected of him: he completed the purges in Ukraine. Eventually, most of the party cadres had been executed or arrested. Stalin, meanwhile, regretted being unable to deport the entire population of Ukraine.

The Battle of Stalingrad

‘Mr K’ did not have time to put down roots in Kiev, and he left his post at the beginning of the war against Germany. He organised groups of partisans, returned to Russia, donned a general’s uniform and, as a political commissar, took part in the defence of Stalingrad. At the height of his splendour, his sycophants even claimed that the credit for the victory was due to him. Professional soldiers admitted that he had been very useful. They did not go quite as far as giving him the glorious title of Victor of Stalingrad.

With the return of peace, Khrushchev returned to Kiev. The task of reconstruction that was given to him proved to be heavy, too heavy for a man of limited experience. His patron, Lazar Kaganovich, came to his aid. Would the unsuccessful leader suffer the consequences of his failure! No, there were no negative repercussions. When Soviet order had been restored in Ukraine, Khrushchev was promoted to a higher position. In 1949, he reassumed his position as Moscow party leader and, most importantly, became a member of the Central Committee Secretariat. He was already showing a leaning towards agricultural reorganisation. For example, in 1951 he put forward an ambitious agro-towns scheme in *Pravda*. In order to reduce the disparities between industrial workers and peasants, he proposed moving rural communities to urban centres while simultaneously regrouping the kolkhozes. Other members of the Politburo, more in touch with the reality of the situation, reacted strongly. Should they upset the countryside at a time when the

country was facing so many difficulties? Should they waste immense resources in building agro-towns when the authorities were not in a position to house city dwellers? The designer of the grandiose scheme was repudiated. *Pravda* stated that the ideas of the member of the Central Committee Secretariat had been presented merely as suggestions in order to fuel debate, and did not have any practical implications. The incident was forgotten by everybody except the party concerned, who later made his principal opponent, Malenkov, pay dearly for the humiliation to which he had been submitted.

At all events, in March 1953 Khrushchev did not seem to be a key player. Attention was focused on Malenkov, Beria and Molotov. Who would have included among the serious candidates for Stalin's succession the member of the Politburo who presided over the funeral of the dictator? At the same time, one detail should not be overlooked. On 20 March of that year, a brief press release announced that Malenkov, the new President of the Council of Ministers, was resigning from his duties as Secretary of the Central Committee. The same piece stated that Khrushchev was resigning from his position as First Secretary of the City of Moscow in order to devote himself entirely to his work on the Central Committee. In a few short months, he would build up a power base.

The reshuffle which took place immediately after the death of Stalin pleased some of the prominent members who, in late 1952, might have dreaded being sidelined, and embittered the new members who had been promoted to the Presidium (Politburo) in October 1952 in order to replace the older members, and who saw themselves as being excluded from power and sent to the provinces. 'Mr K' encouraged their resentment and promised them revenge. While his rival, Malenkov, depended increasingly on the government machine, Khrushchev restored the supremacy of the party and its officials. Six months later, this offensive bore its first fruit. The Central Committee's September session appointed Nikita Sergeyevich First Secretary. He immediately launched the first public attack on Stalin's agricultural policy. From this moment on, he appeared as a de-Staliniser and came up against the violent hostility of his rivals on this issue.

This version of events is, however, open to debate. De-Stalinisation in the USSR began as early as March 1953, when the new order quickly overturned the final rulings of the dictator. Beria seemed to spearhead the Stalinist revival. In actual fact, nearly all the members of the Politburo sought internal and external détente in order to consolidate their power. Khrushchev was the first to criticise the vanished idol without beating about the bush. In so doing, he hoped to put his rivals into an awkward situation. Yet he had not been less Stalinist than the others. Was he not risking a loss of credibility by destroying the object of his worship?

For two years, he dithered as to which tactic to use. While Malenkov promised his countrymen an abundance of goods, the First Secretary repeated the dogma of the absolute priority of heavy industry. Consumers should tighten their belts in order to equip the USSR and provide assistance to … China. During this time, 'Mr K' was a sort of guarantor of party orthodoxy, the man who was ready to sacrifice Soviet comfort to bolster the Socialist cause. He mounted his assault by attacking his rivals on the left, even if it meant changing tack as soon as the objective had been achieved, a tactic learnt from Stalin.

The 1956 secret report

His first victory was also that of the system. Khrushchev wasted no time. Having secured Malenkov's resignation, he removed the former Council President's men from key positions, installed his own protégés and made serious preparations for the 20th Congress of the Communist Party that would, he hoped, turn Stalin's succession to his advantage. However, although he had weakened his rivals, he was still incapable of eliminating them. The existing powers came into balance. It was then that the First Secretary demonstrated his audacity. At a secret session of the Congress, he unveiled his famous report on the 'cult of personality'. He revealed to militant Socialists some of the facts known to the anti-Communists for a long time.

The Congress did not change the balance of the top leadership, except for the fact that Khrushchev managed to get some of his friends appointed to the Presidium as alternate members. The old order, humiliated but still in position, waited for an opportunity to make the First Secretary pay for his insolence. They came within an ace of victory in late 1956. The secret report had caused uproar in Hungary and Poland.

Reconciliation with Marshal Tito had whetted the appetite for independence among the people's democracies. The Soviet zone of influence was threatened. Molotov and Malenkov were once again centre stage, while the First Secretary hovered in the wings.

It seems that Khrushchev was saved by China. Mr Chou En-lai made a trip to Europe, gave good advice to all and sundry and let it be known that, despite his mistakes, 'Mr K' was, in the eyes of the Chinese Government, the best of the Soviet leaders. From that moment on, the First Secretary rediscovered the confidence that he had lost at the peak of the crisis. He began to get involved in everything, outlining his theories on the organisation of industry and imposing total administrative reform on the government.

The repercussions of the Cuba Crisis

'Mr K''s rivals in the Presidium formed a coalition in June 1957. They became the majority. They could quite easily have deposed the First Secretary if they had struck while the iron was hot. They made the mistake of allowing the apparently defeated Khrushchev enough time to prepare his counter-attack by calling a session of the Central Committee that would reverse the situation. The majority of the Presidium was accused of forming an anti-party group. Khrushchev really became Number One.

For six years, most observers thought that 'Mr K''s authority was unquestioned. He publicly reprimanded his underlings without worrying about a negative backlash, he abused the administrators, shaped and reshaped the structures of the regime and set out in quest of new worlds to conquer. He sought to impose Communism by seduction. He became an object of fascination in the United States and elsewhere, scandalising the UN by banging his shoe on the table. He was never short of a wonderful new project and was never defeated by the failures that, nevertheless, accumulated around him. Little by little, he adopted the policies of Malenkov. He fell out irrevocably with the Chinese and felt the neo-Stalinist tide rise as far as his own inner circle. It was to ward off this very threat that he launched an attack on Stalin in 1961 (at the 22nd Congress). He worried the conservatives but showed the hopes of the liberals to be unfounded. He clashed with party officials — for the most part his former protégés — who desired employment stability and distrusted the policy of continual reform. Without even realising it, he had lost his mass following because his deeds did not reflect his words. He had played with fire by unleashing the Berlin crisis and, above all, by sending missiles to Cuba. To avoid the worst, he had been forced to beat a retreat.

He put this failure to the best possible use. Since he had been forced to retreat before the Americans he decided to come to an agreement with them, to ensure world peace together with Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. He believed himself to be untouchable, even though his position had been undermined. At the end of his career, he took longer and longer holidays, absenting himself from Moscow in order to reflect, and did not hear the rumblings of insurrection around the Kremlin. Forty-eight hours before his fall, speaking of General de Gaulle, he told Mr Palewski: 'A statesman stays in power until he dies!'

From time to time over the last few years, foreign correspondents in Moscow came across a pensioner who was visiting an exhibition of paintings or going to vote. The old man exchanged a few platitudes with them and returned to his enforced leisure. Did he use this free time to review his life and his achievements? No doubt he must still have been amazed that he, a one-time shepherd, had managed for ten years to install himself at the head of the world's second major power. Perhaps he also realised that merely denouncing the personality cult was not enough to bring about de-Stalinisation. Khrushchev made a success of his life, and, while he was in power, he left his mark on world events, but all things considered, he failed in his objectives.

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