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KHRUSHCHEV--A PERSONALITY SKETCH

One evening in November 1957, Nikita Khrushchev arrived at a diplomatic reception in Moscow in a particularly buoyant and garrulous mood. A few months earlier he had overcome the challenge of the so-called antiparty group and he had just stripped Marshal Zhukov of his military and political powers. As Western newsmen clustered around him on that occasion, Khrushchev related a fable which tells a great deal about the man and his image of himself:

"Once upon a time," Khrushchev began, "there were three men in prison: a social democrat, an anarchist, and a humble little Jew--a half-educated little fellow named Pinya. They decided to elect a cell leader to watch over distribution of food, tea, and tobacco. The anarchist, a big, burly fellow, was against such a lawful process as electing authority. To show his contempt for law and order, he proposed that the semi-educated Jew, Pinya, be elected. They elected Pinya.

"Things went well," Khrushchev continued, "and they decided to escape. But they realized that the first man to go through the tunnel would be shot at by the guard. They all turned to the big, brave anarchist, but he was afraid to go.

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Suddenly poor little Pinya drew himself up and said, 'Comrades, you elected me by democratic process as your leader. Therefore, I will go first.'

"The moral of the story," Khrushchev explained, "is that no matter how humble a man's beginning, he achieves the stature of the office to which he is elected.

"That little Pinya," he concluded, "that's me."

It is not clear whether the tale was meant as a parable approximating actual events, but it did reveal much about Khrushchev's mental reflexes: his consciousness of his humble origin, a frequently reiterated theme; his sense of personal accomplishment; confidence that his vigor, initiative, and capacity are equal to his station; jealousy of the prerogatives of that station; and a wry satisfaction with the cunning which had enabled him to gain the upper hand over a series of rivals who underrated him.

When Stalin died in 1953, Khrushchev was largely an unknown quantity outside the Soviet Union, seemingly a lesser-ranking figure than the better-known Molotov, Malenkov, Beria and Mikoyan. In the year or so that ensued he edged his way more and more onto the public stage but the picture he presented to foreign observers was not impressive--from all appearances he was an impetuous, obtuse, rough-talking man, with something of the buffoon and a good deal of the tosspot in him.

Before long, however, events would show that there was a great deal more to Khrushchev than the appearance suggested and that behind the exterior lay a shrewd native intelligence, an agile mind, drive, ambition, and ruthlessness. His own colleagues probably sold him short initially, but they undoubtedly knew from experience that he could not have escaped Stalin's murderous judgment if he had been witless or foolishly impulsive.

It now is clear that he had other qualities which had had only limited opportunity for expression under Stalin-- resourcefulness, audacity, a good sense of political timing and showmanship, and a touch of the gambler's instinct.

Humble Beginnings

Even without benefit of propaganda embroidery, the story of Khrushchev's rise to the Soviet pinnacle makes a model Communist success story. He was born in 1894 in the small village of Kalinovka, not far from where Great Russia meets the Ukraine, the son of a miner not long removed from the fields. His boyhood was spent in poverty and he recalls with pride that he worked successively as a shepherd and as a miner. He neither can nor wants to forget his humble beginnings and his speech is larded with peasant proverbs and even Biblical phrases which go back to that period. His origin is both a political asset and a point of pride with

him. Even to this day he is at his folksiest best in the fields of a collective farm dispensing advice to the assembled peasants on the best means of planting potatoes or corn.

His view of the world at large was probably formed definitively during those early years in the fields and mines--thereafter, he was more concerned with learning how things were done in his particular world, which very soon became a Soviet Communist world, and in finding ways to get ahead in that world than in philosophical introspection. He still alludes to the mines and their foreign ownership and it was there that he probably formed life-long, unflinching prejudices about the West and capitalism.

As a youth Khrushchev had no formal education. He was illiterate into his late 'teens. When the Bolshevik Revolution came he was 23, and he quickly found a promising avenue in the Communist party. The party gave him the rudiments of an education in an industrial school for workers--he must have supplemented this with dogged homework. He rose thereafter through successive party echelons, won the patronage of Lazar Kaganovich (whom he was to send into political oblivion in 1957) and by 1935 was chief of the Moscow party organization. By 1939 he was party boss of the Ukraine and a full member of the all-powerful Politburo. When Stalin died Khrushchev was one of the half-dozen most powerful men

in the Soviet Union and was well entrenched in the strategic Secretariat, which then and now controls the party's professional machinery.

Khrushchev met an occasional obstacle in his progress to the top--in 1947, when he was still in the Ukraine, and again in 1951 his career hit snags, if not serious setbacks. In both cases his recovery was quick, however, and from these circumstances he probably gathered new confidence and agility, sharpened his skill in the intricate maneuvers of Kremlin politics, and learned the value of looking ahead to the next battle rather than backward to the last reverse.

Practical Man Vs. Ideologist

Events were to prove that Khrushchev's temperament and training equipped him better for the post-Stalin power struggle than his colleagues and rivals. He belonged to the middle generation within the top Soviet leadership. Unlike Stalin, Molotov or Voroshilov he had not been steeped in the aura of the pre-Revolutionary party which was dominated by involuted ideological discussions and the elaboration of dogmas and slogans. Nor was he, like Malenkov and Beria, entirely a product of Stalin's central bureaucracy. From his years as overlord of the Ukraine and from his wartime experience as a political commissar on various military fronts he probably developed a degree of independent judgment as well as a capacity for personal leadership and initiative.

This background probably, also, reinforced the strong practical strain in Khrushchev. In this respect, he stood midway between Malenkov, whose whole experience made him an organizational manipulator, a puller of Stalin's strings, and Molotov, whose long party career and stubborn mental reflexes had made him a prisoner of dogma. Khrushchev neglected neither the organizational play nor the dogma, but was concerned with putting the two together to spell political success. He has campaigned incessantly against both the pure bureaucrat and the ivory-tower theorist.

Westerners who have seen the Khrushchev of today close-up have come up with different ideas about what "makes him tick." Some conclude that he is a pragmatic man through-and-through, the practical man who spouts Communist doctrine from habit rather than from conviction. Others have been shocked by the completeness of his commitment to that doctrine and see his outlook as rigidly framed by the ideas of Marx, Lenin and Stalin. He is, in fact, perfectly capable of tinkering with time-honored doctrines which appear to him awkward or outmoded (e.g., Lenin's doctrine on the inevitability of war), but he has, on the other hand, told Westerners repeatedly, probably with conviction, that their grandchildren will live under a Communist system.

Khrushchev is primarily a man of action rather than a man of thought. Marxist doctrine is more than a convenient instrument to him--his actions and outlook are guided by a system of thought which has enveloped him since early manhood, and which he undoubtedly believes holds the key to his own and his country's success. Nevertheless, he is plainly less doctrinaire than many of his fellow Communists outside the USSR, some of whom have, in fact, charged that he is a "practicist" who is allowing Marxist-Leninist theory to stagnate. To this he has replied, paraphrasing Goethe: "Theory, my friends is grey, but the eternal tree of life is evergreen."

Khrushchev--The Public Figure

In the years since Khrushchev established clear title to supremacy in the Soviet hierarchy both he and his propagandists have labored to enlarge his image as a world figure. As the "Khrushchev cult" has grown apace, Khrushchev has himself perceptibly taken on a new sense of authority and dignity. Partly for reason of health and partly for the sake of appearances, he has given up his public drinking bouts. His formal and informal statements and his public demeanor--even allowing for his raucous performance at the UN last fall--though still frequently blunt or intemperate usually show the mark of calculation, in contrast to some of his earlier headlong indiscretions.

Khrushchev is well aware that he has arrived as the Soviet Union's number-one man and a world figure, and he resents being treated otherwise. His jealousy of Marshal Zhukov's domestic popularity and world reputation undoubtedly figured in the disgrace of the famed military leader.

Khrushchev craves the respect of the outside world. On more than one occasion he has revealed an exaggerated sensitivity to imagined personal slights or reflections on his country's prestige, while, on the other side, he takes delight in private conversation in dropping the names of world statesmen with whom he has corresponded or who have sent him gifts. He angled for a long time for an invitation to visit the US partly, of course, for political reasons, but also because it would confer on him a new mark of international recognition and respect. In one sense, he feels that he himself and his nation, with which he has increasingly identified his own person, have acquired a station which entitle them to acceptance and respect, if not affection.

Although he must still balance and manipulate the sometimes divergent views and contending political influences which exist even within the tightly controlled Soviet system, Khrushchev has not had to reckon, since 1957, with the threat of a serious challenge to his authority. Because of this circumstance, Khrushchev has been able increasingly to move

into the role of paramount Soviet statesman. A handful of key lieutenants share among them many of his day-to-day executive responsibilities, permitting him to take the longer periods of rest which his health recommends (now 67, he has kidney and liver ailments and is grossly overweight). Ultimate authority is unquestionably his, however, and in matters of crucial concern to him--as for example, the current agricultural problem--he believes there is no substitute for personal intervention and direct command. A considerable turnover among important officials in the party and government hierarchy during the past two years provides evidence of Khrushchev's impatience with unsatisfactory performance on the part of subordinates and of his readiness and ability to take scalps. "Friendship is friendship and work is work," Khrushchev publicly informed a long-time political ally just before firing him in early 1960.

Until recently, Khrushchev's own people took him rather lightly. His homely public manners, his frequent excursions among the "masses," and his agricultural campaigns invited numerous jokes about his peasant attributes. Khrushchev the "corn man," to a people long accustomed to Stalin's regal reserve and cold, distant awesomeness, cut a somewhat comic figure. He is still held in contempt by

many members of the Russian intelligentsia, who are offended by his bumptious manners and are well aware that he has no use for pure intellectualism.

His practical streak tells him he must go on coddling his scientists and technologists, and he has more recently sought a kind of "cease-fire" with his sometimes fractious artists, novelists, and poets; but he has repeatedly warned them that they must "learn life" as the party views it or face a severe discipline.

Two years ago, taking note of the fact that the Hungarian revolution got its start among a small group of intellectuals, he told a gathering of Soviet writers: "If the Hungarian Government had shot a few writers it wouldn't have run into that trouble.... I might remark that in a similar case my hand would not tremble."

Despite such tough talk, Khrushchev pictures himself as a genuine "man of the people" who leads through persuasion rather than terror, who knows what the people want, and who will give them what he thinks necessary and possible. Without surrendering any of the essential elements of personal dictatorship, Khrushchev has, through his demagogic gifts and political perception, managed to develop a fair degree of genuine popularity.

Khrushchev--Face to Face

A strong urge to see for himself and to bring his own personality to bear has made Khrushchev, in recent years, one of the most widely-travelled and most-frequently met of the world's leaders. From his countless meetings with foreign statesmen and citizens he has acquired a reputation as a formidable figure in face-to-face encounter. Eric Johnston remarked after a long-private session with him: "He is one of the fastest thinkers I have ever met." Joseph Alsop concluded: "I thought him one of the most intellectually powerful, tough, pragmatic, and energetic-minded men I have ever run into."

There is no doubt that Khrushchev, in such circumstances, is capable of an impressive performance--supple, acute and comprehensive. But out of a study of a great number of these meetings certain other conclusions emerge. There is almost universal agreement that Khrushchev is unusually well-informed on a wide range of subjects. This may be due, however, neither to a phenomenal memory nor voracious reading. While he grasps essential facts quickly and uses them effectively, he appears to rely heavily on briefings. During his visit to the U.S. in 1959 these were supplied to him by a group of personal assistants who function as a private secretariat, speech-writing crew, and

information channel. On that occasion the members of this entourage included G. T. Shuisky, A. S. Shevchenko, Oleg Troyanovsky, Khrushchev's interpreter, and Aleksey Adzhubey, Khrushchev's son-in-law.

Whatever his reliance on staff work, Khrushchev has not always lived up to his reputation for factual grasp and debating skill, particularly during his American tour. One source who talked with Khrushchev at a dinner in Washington at that time remarked: "When I talked to Khrushchev some months ago, I thought he was one of the best informed men I have ever met and I was greatly impressed by his sharp answers to questions. At the dinner, however, it seemed to me he handled questions very poorly." Similarly, one of the people who was on hand for a meeting with Khrushchev in Ambassador Harriman's New York residence reported: "He gave the impression of being very tired. I found him less alert than usual. Certainly, he was repeatedly fumbling for words. Nor did he answer some of the questions put to him, although there were rather limited in number and scope."

In the great majority of cases, however, Khrushchev has appeared to be remarkably stimulated by a "give-and-take" situation and even seems to gain satisfaction from outlasting others in conversation. He is undoubtedly at

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his best extempore and can be roused to garrulity by a responsive audience. He often takes obvious pleasure in playing on a suitable audience or vis-a-vis.

Without exception Americans who have interviewed Khrushchev come away with distinct impressions of the man even though they have dealt with him through interpreters. This cannot be attributed to interpreter skill alone. Interviewers invariably feel they are speaking directly to Khrushchev and that he seems to understand them before the remarks are translated. Thus his personality has more impact than his words.

There is an inclination to call Khrushchev an excellent role player, which means, in psychological parlance, that he can alter his behavior to fit many situations. Actually, Khrushchev excels as a "character actor," for his skill is not in adapting to meet new situations, but in forcing situations to conform to the role he can play. He has often achieved psychological advantage with this technique. For instance, while preparing to film the program, "Face the Nation," the CBS staff in Moscow was never quite sure that Khrushchev would approve the program. As a journalistic coup, the program was extremely important since it was to be the first "free press" conference with Khrushchev. At the last moment, Khrushchev entered the room and in effect said: "Shut everything off." He then

launched into what was called a tirade against the methods of the American press. Just when the production seemed doomed, Khrushchev told the production crew to proceed and became completely charming for the interview. Throughout the program, the reporters, not Khrushchev, were on the defensive.

This tactic, with variations, was used effectively during his American visit. Putting other persons on the defensive by forcing them to become unduly preoccupied with their own role-playing, is one of his primary methods of psychological manipulation. He has the uncanny ability of making people depart evaluating their own performance rather than describing his.

From all indications, Khrushchev is a person with little capacity for detecting nuances and subtleties. He is a man of action and decision when he can see issues clearly, as black or white, but becomes confused and hostile when confronted by shades of grey. He has the self-confidence of a man who knows what is right and what is wrong and is relatively invulnerable to subtle persuasion or moderately involved intellectual reasoning. It is this quality that makes him appear dedicated to Communist ideology, when in reality he may be dedicated primarily to Communist progress. His spontaneous reasoning

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always includes direct references to progress and production and never to principle or ideology, except in the most literal and catechistic form. This may account for the assumption that he subscribes to the principle that the end justifies the means. Actually, he lacks the philosophical sensitivity to understand such a principle. In all probability, he regards himself as a man of good intentions fighting for a just cause and, with his pragmatic viewpoint, is completely incapable of preceiving that any system which can produce such obvious "good" could have evolved from an ideology that is "bad." In short, his dedication to communism derives much more from faith in the system than in an understanding of it.

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