

Nikita khrushchevs fall from power history essay



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This extended essay seeks to evaluate to what extent could Nikita Khrushchev's fall from power be attributed to the fallout from the Cuban Missile Crisis? The scope of this essay is set from 1959 to 1964, the year which Khrushchev was removed from his positions in the Central Committee and the Council of Ministers. This essay will seek to determine firstly, how the outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, resulting in the degrading of Soviet image worldwide, led to Khrushchev's fall from power. Secondly, this essay examines how attempts at domestic reforms, most notably de-Stalinisation, resulting in a split in the party between hardliners and Khrushchev, led to his removal from power. I will compare these two factors of domestic reform and the Cuban Missile Crisis, and explore which was responsible to a large extent for Nikita Khrushchev's fall from power. Ultimately, it was Khrushchev's reforms that angered Communist Party hardliners who felt that the reforms would undercut socialist ideology, and to cause them to lose their status and privileges in society that was the key factor in Khrushchev's fall from power. Opposition to Khrushchev was already strongly present in the Soviet Union before the Cuban Missile Crisis. The crisis was merely a catalyst that was used by the hardliners in the party as additional ammunition against Khrushchev. The impact of the crisis, cumulated with the already present opposition to Khrushchev's reforms, resulted in the political elite losing faith in Khrushchev's ability to run the Soviet Union and led to the Presidium and the Central Committee voting to retire Khrushchev on 14 October 1964. Thus this essay will conclude that Nikita Khrushchev's fall from power can be attributed to the fallout from the

Cuban Missile Crisis to a smaller extent, but instead can be attributed to opposition to his reforms to a larger extent.

Introduction

Nikita Khrushchev was the leader of the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964. Khrushchev was responsible for the partial 'de-Stalinization' of the Soviet Union and for several liberal reforms in areas of domestic policy, as well as leading the Soviet Union through the Cuban Missile Crisis. However, Khrushchev's party colleagues removed him from power in 1964.

The cause of Khrushchev's downfall is a contentious issue among historians. Some historians such as Martin Page argue that it was an unhappiness among party hardliners with his reforms that led to him losing power.[1] Upon coming to power in 1953, Khrushchev embarked on a policy of 'de-Stalinisation.'

Khrushchev felt that Stalin's policies were 'extreme' and that the present system allowed severe 'abuse(s) of power.' Also, he deemed the cult of personality of the leader to be a 'negative influence' on society and 'violating' socialist ideology. Khrushchev was also very sympathetic towards the peasants and the workers as he himself had come from a poor background and worked as a railwayman and a miner, before joining the Communist Party. Thus, Khrushchev wanted to implement policies that would benefit the workers and the peasants.

Under this policy, the Stalinist political system was eliminated and Khrushchev imposed many reforms in its place. This caused a split in the

Communist Party with the military and political elite highly objecting to these changes in system and thus opposed Khrushchev.

However, other historians such as Paul Du Quenoy argue that it was in fact the degrading of Soviet image worldwide that caused Khrushchev to be ousted.[2] In the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, Khrushchev had ordered nuclear missiles to be placed on Cuba in order to counter those which the United States had placed on Turkey. However, when the United States discovered the missile bases which were being constructed, President Kennedy authorized a blockade on Cuba, preventing any missiles from being delivered. The standoff resulted in Khrushchev backing down and removing the missile bases on Cuba. The perception was that Khrushchev had lost his battle of wits with Kennedy, causing a major humiliation for the Soviet Union worldwide and embarrassment among the Soviet leadership at Khrushchev's actions. Khrushchev's opponents used this to call for his removal from power.

This extended essay as such, taking all these viewpoints into consideration, seeks to evaluate to what extent can Nikita Khrushchev's fall from power be attributed to the fallout from the Cuban Missile Crisis?

Role played by the Cuban Missile Crisis in Nikita Khrushchev's fall from power in 1964

Khrushchev's handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis led to his eventual downfall. In the resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis, John Kennedy agreed to remove all the United States' Jupiter missiles placed in Turkey, in exchange for Khrushchev removing all missiles in Cuba. However, the

removal of the missiles from NATO bases in Turkey was kept secret from the public.[3] Consequently, the Soviet Union was deemed to have lost the conflict. There was the perception that Khrushchev had been humiliated by Kennedy in the crisis between the two superpowers. The Soviet leadership took the Cuban outcome as “ a blow to its prestige bordering on humiliation”[4] and this led to the embarrassment of the Soviet leaders at both Khrushchev’s incompetence for causing the crisis in the first place and his eventual concessions to the United States.[5] Many in the Soviet leadership could not tolerate a leader who had lost his battle of wits against the United States.[6]

Khrushchev’s rivals used the opportunity to propose to the Central Committee of the party that Khrushchev should ‘ retire’ due to his “ personal mannerisms” that had embarrassed the Communist party in front of the entire world.[7] This played a part in Khrushchev’s fall from power two years later.

Khrushchev also lost his support among foreign allies as a result of the Cuban Missile Crisis. By agreeing to a deal with the United States, Khrushchev had discredited his commitments to his allies.[8] The two Communist allies of the Soviet Union, Cuba and China, were infuriated by Khrushchev’s concessions to the United States. Castro, the leader of Cuba, was furious with Khrushchev for not consulting with him at all about the resolution of the crisis. Castro was not even aware that the crisis was over until he heard Khrushchev’s announcement on the radio.[9]

The already stormy relationship between the Soviet Union and China began to deteriorate further, with Chinese newspapers publishing "aggressively anti-Soviet articles" and bitter criticisms being traded between the two countries. The situation got even worse when a summit meeting in July 1963 was abandoned when China walked out of the discussion halfway. Trade between the Soviet Union and China dwindled until the point where the Chinese government stopped just short of a declaration of a "complete break" between them and the Soviet Union.[10]

The international prestige of the Soviet Union, along with Khrushchev's reputation, was ruined. Khrushchev had not only been humiliated within his own party, but also among his international allies. Khrushchev's rivals used this against him when calling for his removal from power.

Role played by opposition to domestic reforms in Nikita Khrushchev's fall from power in 1964

However, it was also the already present opposition to Khrushchev's reforms that resulted in him losing power. In the process of 'de-Stalinisation', Khrushchev "made the most far-reaching attempt in Soviet history to dismantle the worst institutions of Stalinism and reform the conservative, entrenched bureaucracy"[11]. He frequently imposed policies that reduced the bureaucracy's special privileges. For example, in 1962 he abolished the monthly bonuses that high officials routinely received.[12] Also, the rotation of offices was introduced, whereby one-third of the membership of each committee had to be replaced at each election. As a result, "party officials resented their loss of privileges and the job insecurity", thus causing them to switch support to Khrushchev's rivals such as Leonid Brezhnev.

[13] Additionally, Khrushchev proposed to divide the Communist party into agricultural and industrial sectors, rather than along administrative lines. This drastically reduced the domains of party officials and this “ was very unpopular” among them.[14] As a result of alienating officials in this manner, a split was formed in the Communist Party between Khrushchev and hardliners who wanted Stalin’s policies to remain. These hardliners actively opposed Khrushchev and were plotting to remove him from power, ensuring his eventual political downfall.

Additionally, failed economic policies imposed by Khrushchev were also one of his domestic reasons why he was ousted from power. Khrushchev made many bold but rash promises regarding the country’s economy, such as surpassing the total western output of dairy products within 3 years[15], which were not fulfilled. One of Khrushchev’s biggest agriculture failures was the Virgin Lands Campaign. The Virgin Lands Campaign, started in 1956, was intended to open up previously unseeded land for the harvesting of wheat. [16] Despite its initial success, by 1960 soil erosion had left the fields barren and there was a sharp drop in grain output. The Soviet Union was forced to buy grain from the West, humiliating Khrushchev among his fellow colleagues. The failed campaign resulted in a drought and food shortage in 1963[17], causing widespread unhappiness among the population.

Another instance of Khrushchev’s failures was the conversion of the Kolkhoz (collective farms) into the much larger sovkhoz (state farms). The number of collective farms declined under Khrushchev from 125, 000 to 69, 100. Under this reorganisation, the Machine Tractor Stations, which was a state controlled initiative which rented out machinery to the farms, was abolished.

[18] There was no other alternative given and as a result peasants had no choice but to purchase the expensive machinery which their farms needed. The poorer of peasants were not able to maintain the machines and thus agricultural stagnation set in during the 1960s. Consequently, " farm production suffered irreparable damage"[19], and there was widespread confusion and disorganisation among the peasantry.

As a result of Khrushchev's failed policies, in his years of power from 1953 to 1964, the annual average increase in Gross National Product of the Soviet Union was lagging behind the western countries.[20]

Khrushchev's colleagues saw him as incompetent, dismissing his attempts at reform as ' hare-brained schemes, half-baked conclusions, and hasty decisions.'[21] They felt that his reforms were taking the Soviet Union backwards, instead of forwards. It was not just the party elite that was unhappy at Khrushchev's economic reforms, but also the peasants and workers who were directly affected by it. Khrushchev lost support not only among his colleagues but also among the common people. The people began throwing their support behind Khrushchev's rivals, who were the hardliners that opposed the failed economic reforms. Khrushchev's rivals such as Brezhnev now had popular support that enabled them to oust Khrushchev from power in 1964, without fearing about unhappiness at the decision from the general population.[22]