

Stalin Denounced by Nikita Khrushchev

February 25th, 1956

THE TWENTIETH CONGRESS OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY of the Soviet Union assembled in Moscow in the Great Hall of the Kremlin on February 14th, 1956. It was the first since the death of Josef Stalin in 1953, but almost nothing was said about the dead leader until, in closed session on the 25th, 1,500 delegates and many invited visitors listened to an amazing speech by Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the party, on 'The Personality Cult and its Consequences'.

Khrushchev denounced Stalin, the cult of personality he had fostered and the crimes he had perpetrated, including the execution, torture and imprisonment of loyal party members on false charges. He blamed Stalin for foreign policy errors, for the failings of Soviet agriculture, for ordering mass terror and for mistakes that had led to appalling loss of life in the Second World War and the German occupation of huge areas of Soviet territory.

Khrushchev's audience heard him in almost complete silence, broken only by astonished murmurs. The delegates did not dare even to look at each other as the party secretary piled one horrifying accusation on another for four solid hours. At the end there was no applause and the audience left in a state of shock.

Khrushchev (third from left) and other Communist leaders review a Red Square parade in 1956.



What Possible Consequences Could There Be From This Speech in Both The USSR and Eastern Europe?

One of those was young Alexander Solzhenitsyn, architect of *perestroika*, who returned to his roots. He sought the truth, but it was too late. Generations in the shadow of Stalin and linked to it. Now the past was laid bare. He had all lived by what was crumbling, never to be repeated.

It was an extraordinary thing for Khrushchev, who believed that he was 'speaking from the heart', a genuineness that others have pointed out. He tarred other party members, to the surprise of Khrushchev's admirers. The party and the system. A few months later...

the congress had called for measures 'for removing wholly and entirely the cult of the individual, foreign to Marxism-Leninism... in every aspect of party, governmental and ideological activity.'

The speech was reported in the foreign media the next day. In March the Central Committee had the text distributed to the party branches, where it was read out. Inside the Soviet Union it would help to create greater freedom, in time. Plenty of Stalinist henchmen and functionaries were still determined to resist de-Stalinization, but thousands of political prisoners were released and others posthumously rehabilitated. Abroad, Khrushchev's words cut the ground from under the feet of Communist party members and leftwing intel-