Evaluate the success of Khrushchev’s domestic policies

Nikita Khrushchev was the leader of the USSR between 1958 and 1964. His domestic policies saw a radical departure from those of his predecessor Joseph Stalin. Politically and socially, Khrushchev desired to extend to a limited degree civil liberties for Soviet citizens, de-centralise power, and create ‘socialism with a human face’, he also sought to drive religion out of Soviet public life. Economically, Khrushchev’s aims were to increase the production of consumer goods to boost Soviet living standards, to increase agricultural production and improve the lives of peasants and to invest in space technology to make the Soviet Union the leading country in space technology.

Khrushchev’s political and social policy aims centred on extending to a degree civil liberties and creating ‘socialism with a human face’ in the USSR, he achieved many successes in this area. His desire to expand civil liberties in the USSR and end the days of Stalinist repression began when he gave a secret speech to the politburo of the Communist Party on the 25th of February 1956 in which he denounced Stalin’s cult of personality and his reign of terror on the party. The speech was well received by the wider public, to whom it was leaked. Khrushchev’s leadership of the USSR began in 1958 saw the end of severe repression as thousands of political prisoners were released and previously banned artists such as the author Babel and composer Shostakovich were rehabilitated. Furthermore, Soviet citizens were given for the first time the right, albeit limited; to travel abroad and tourists were allowed to enter the USSR. Foreign music and books such as those by Ernest Hemmingway were permitted to be published. Even dissident works by Russian authors such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn A Day in the life of Ivan Denisovich were allowed to be published. This period of relaxation of censorship has been referred to as ‘the thaw’ after the 1954 play by Ilya Ehrenberg.

Under Khrushchev, thousands of political prisoners were released from the Gulag. In addition, Khrushchev focused on improving education particularly with regards to science, mathematics and engineering. Furthermore, Khrushchev sought to limit the power of the party, de-centralising political control to the local level. Historian L. Now notes Khrushchev’s success in ending the terror of the Stalin years, stating that unlike under Stalin, enemies in the Kremlin “were imprisoned rather than shot”.

However, Khrushchev’s goal to create a more liberal society in the USSR was not completely accomplished. Censorship of artists and dissent continued at a lower level, for example the Jewish author Pasternak was not allowed to publish his work ‘Dr.Zhivago’, and was denounced in the state paper Pravda following its publication in the West in 1957. Furthermore, Khrushchev’s Stalin speech was met with hostile reaction by many in the party, and in Stalin’s home country of Georgia was met with demonstrations that were only put down with force. In the gulags many rioted. Khrushchev’s atheist policies, such as closing down Churches, of which the number fell from 20,000 in 1960 to 8000 in 1964, and teaching atheism in schools, had a high human cost as hundreds of novices and nuns were violently arrested and thrown in labour camps by the secret police. Furthermore, Khrushchev’s angering of the party leadership, his attempts to decentralize, and the final straw was the suggestion that the ‘hammer and sickle’ would be separated, led to his disposal in October 1964, and a reversal of many of his policies followed and thus it could be said he ultimately failed to reform the USSR.

In industry, Khrushchev’s goal was to increase the production of consumer goods, de-centralise production, and invest in space technology to bring the USSR to the forefront of scientific achievement; he also sought an increase in industrial production. Towards this end, the sixth five-year plan was abandoned in 1959 and replaced with a new seven-year plan for the years 59-66 to focus on the production of plastics and natural gasses. Khrushchev was successful in removing
management of industry from Moscow to more localised Sovnarkhozes, of which there were 105 across the USSR. Khrushchev remarked that more consumer goods were needed for living standards in the USSR to catch up with the west, stating that one ‘can’t put theory in a soup, or wear Marxism’.

In 1955 to 1966, the number of refrigerators per person in the USSR increased from 4 to 44, and the number of washing machines from 1 to 77. The USSR also sustained an average GDP growth rate of 5.2% under Khrushchev. Perhaps the greatest success of Khrushchev was the USSR’s space technology, using captured German scientists, and investing heavily in science education, the USSR became a world leader in space technology, with over 4700 establishments dedicated to science in 1961. In October 1957, the USSR put the first satellite in space, Sputnik 1, and on April 16 1961, put the first man in orbit, Yuri Gagarin. These achievements massively increased the prestige of the USSR around the world as a scientific leader.

Despite successes in space and production of consumer goods, Khrushchev’s policies were not entirely successful. Many cosmonauts died violently in rocket tests and upon re-entering the Earth’s atmosphere in the course of the Soviet space program. Furthermore, the USSR lagged behind the west in consumer goods considerably. In 1966, the number of cars per thousand people in the USSR was 5, whilst in the US it was 400. Of the consumer goods that were available many were costly and of poor quality, cars for example were largely reserved for leading party officials. Further failure came in Khrushchev’s attempt to improve housing by ordering the construction of some 15 million pre-fabricated apartment buildings. These buildings were of poor quality and did not meet the needs of the people, many of whom ended up living in overcrowded conditions. This constituted a large failure on Khrushchev’s part to combat both corruption and low living standards.

Khrushchev’s agricultural policy was focused on improving the conditions of peasants and farmers and boosting agricultural production, the weakest area of the soviet economy. The troubled Soviet agriculture sector enjoyed some of its best years under Khrushchev. Prior to becoming the leader of the USSR, in 1954 Khrushchev led the virgin land scheme, which sought to boost agricultural production by cultivating vast unused swathes of land in Siberia and Kazakhstan, with over 20,000 young volunteers, mostly party cadres, the scheme was successful in its first years, between 54 and 58 the production of wheat increased from 80 million tonnes to over 140 million. Furthermore, Khrushchev merged the collective farms into state farms, giving large benefits to state farmers such as a higher wages and a pension, improving living conditions for workers who saw their wages double. He further stopped the confiscation of grain from private plots, increasing production. Overall Khrushchev saw a wholesale improvement in Soviet agriculture.

However, Khrushchev’s agricultural policies also saw large failures, although the virgin land scheme was initially successful in boosting agricultural output the gains decreased after 1958 as much of the newly cultivated land was not given the right amount of fertilisers and the wrong grains were used. Furthermore, many of the formerly enthusiastic party cadres who joined the programme as volunteers became disenfranchised by the living conditions of farmers and returned to the cities leaving the scheme without anyone doing the work. In addition, by 1964, the USSR was suffering from such acute grain shortages that it had to import gain from the West.

Khrushchev’s aims of creating a more open soviet society, boosting production of consumer goods and agriculture, de-centralising power as well as leading the Soviet Union in becoming the foremost world technological power were largely met. However, it should not be discounted that improvements in living standards were marginal, agricultural gains were eventually lost, and the US would overtake the USSR in space technology by the mid 1960s. Ultimately, Khrushchev was the most dynamic of the Soviet Union’s post war leaders who fought to improve the lives of ordinary
people and fight against the party elite, the eventual cause of his downfall. In the words of historian Philip Whitestead, Khrushchev was a “courageous leader” and his greatest success had been to begin the process of transforming a state that had been founded and developed by Stalin’s terror.