To what extent did Khrushchev follow a policy of de-Stalinisation?

Khrushchev’s secret speech at the 20th Party Congress in February 1956 seemed to indicate that Khrushchev would be following a very different set of policies than those pursued by Stalin. In this speech, he acknowledged and openly criticised many of Stalin’s policies, much to the surprise of many of the delegates there. Khrushchev’s rule would indeed get rid of some of the worst excesses of Stalinisation which had come to mean terror, strong personal rule and a cult of personality, strong central control of industry and agriculture. However, it would also become clear that there were limits as to how far Khrushchev would go in the policy of de-Stalinisation.

Perhaps the most important aspect of de-Stalinisation was the ending of the terror. Thousands were let out of the gulags and the atmosphere of fear in which no-one could consider themselves to be safe, the denunciations and the system by which people were randomly arrested to fill the quotas for the gulag labour camps all came to an end. There was increased tolerance and greater freedom which was also extended to artists and writers who were now able to criticise the excesses of Stalinism. Solzhenitsyn managed to write ‘A day in the life of Ivan Dunseith’. The ‘cult’ of leadership that Stalin had created was ended; Stalin’s body was even moved from Lenin’s mausoleum.

Another key area in which Khrushchev followed a policy of de-Stalinisation was in the democratisation of the Communist Party. Between 1954 and 1964, Party membership grew from 6.9 million to 11 million and these new members included peasants and workers. In addition, Khrushchev revived ‘comrades’ courts’. These were led by ordinary members and they dealt with minor offences. As P Kenez writes, during his tenure the Soviet Union ceased to be totalitarian; his rule can better be explained as authoritarian.

Khrushchev also moved away from the central planning of the economy under Stalinism by transferring authority for economic planning to regional councils – he also narrowed the differences in pay between rich and poor and he decriminalised absenteeism from work. Linked to these changes were reforms in housing and education policy with a rapid housing programme which doubled the amount of homes in the USSR; this was a change of priorities from the days of Stalin.

However, there were definite limits to destalinization. When Boris Pasternak published Dr. Zhivago, Khrushchev was outraged and Pasternak was forbidden from travelling to Stockholm to receive the Nobel prize for literature that he had been awarded. There was still surveillance and no easing of pressure on religious groups. In fact, Orthodox churches were demolished in great numbers.

Perhaps the clearest sign that there were limits to de-Stalinisation came when other Communist States demanded greater independence and self-determination. Khrushchev’s speech had created expectations of change; in Poland, riots led to a change in leadership and this encouraged the Hungarians to push for independence. However
Hungarian demands went further than those of the Poles and when the Hungarian leader Imre Nagy announced his intention to leave the Warsaw pact, Khrushchev sent tanks into Hungary resulting in the deaths of about 200 000 with another 150 000 fleeing abroad. Thus it was clear that de-Stalinisation did not mean any greater independence for Communist states than might threaten the security of the USSR. In addition, de-Stalinisation did not bring any greater self-government for the nationalities within the USSR.

In conclusion, there were definite changes to the Soviet Union under Khrushchev and Stalinism was challenged in many areas – from the running of the economy to the ending of terror. As John Keen writes, ‘his greatest accomplishment was to end the reign of fear’ and it is perhaps indicative of the changed atmosphere that when the Politburo decided that Khrushchev had to go, this was done by a vote rather than a bullet in the head. However, although the terrible repression had ended, there were limits to de-Stalinisation. Censorship remained and de-Stalinisation certainly was not extended to Eastern Europe where Russia’s grip on events remained as strong as ever.