

“You Don’t Know Khrushchev Well”

The Ouster of the Soviet Leader as a Challenge
to Recent Scholarship on Authoritarian Politics

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Introduction: The Crisis of Authority

The rise of powerful autocratic leaders in Russia and China and the return of authoritarian practices in countries like Hungary that had seemed to be firmly democratic have led to a renewed interest in the nature of authoritarian politics. Scholars have attached particular importance to the question of how leaders are able to overcome threats to their power from within the elite. Quantitative analysis suggests that dictators are more likely to fall to challenges from inside the palace gates than to popular upheavals outside.¹

The removal of Nikita Khrushchev in October 1964 was one of the most important political events in the history of the Soviet Union, and the nature of his reign was vociferously debated by Sovietologists at the time.² More recently, political scientists have returned to Khrushchev’s fall as a useful case to theorize about the nature of authoritarian regimes more broadly.

Although the recent literature consists of diverse strands, the scholars who have contributed to it have several features in common. First, they agree that Khrushchev is best understood as a weak leader constrained either by power dynamics or by institutions. Second, they argue that Khrushchev did not

1. Milan Svoblik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

2. Before Khrushchev was removed, Sovietologists in the United States had been split between two camps. One school believed that Khrushchev had achieved dominance and had become essentially invulnerable, whereas another saw him as continually fighting and negotiating with powerful interests. For a discussion, see Carl A. Linden, *Khrushchev and the Soviet Leadership 1957–1964*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970); and Robert Conquest, *Power and Policy in the USSR: The Struggle for Stalin’s Succession, 1945–1960* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

understand the political environment in which he operated, with the implication that his defeat resulted from poor political judgment. Third, they believe that Khrushchev was ousted because his colleagues decided to punish him for unpopular policies or incompetence. Fourth, they concur that Khrushchev is best understood as the leader of an *authoritarian* regime as opposed to simply a *Marxist-Leninist* polity.

Yet William J. Tompson's glasnost-era analysis provided a version of Khrushchev's fall radically different from what this new scholarship predicts, and other biographers such as Geoffrey Swain and William Taubman have added to Tompson's early account. Now, a wide variety of new materials not previously exploited by Western scholars provides further important corroboration of several of Tompson's earlier conclusions and sheds new light on them, while also suggesting that some of his conclusions are in need of revision.³

These new sources can be usefully grouped into three categories. First, publishing companies such as Rossiiskaya Politicheskaya Entsiklopediya (ROSSPEN), Mezhdunarodnyi Fond "Demokratiya" (MFD), and Istoricheskaya Literatura (IstLit) have released document collections with previously unavailable archival materials. Unlike in China, where such books are subject to redactions or even falsified content, the volumes put out by these highly reputable Russian academic publishers were compiled by highly motivated archivists and other scholars who strive to bring as complete a picture of history into public view as possible. The published materials cover Khrushchev's entire career (a two-volume set), his political situation in 1964, and contemporaneous civil-military relations, as well as, and perhaps most importantly, the time of Leonid Brezhnev's rule as recorded in his diaries and work notes. Second, Russian scholars such as Yuliya Abramova, Oleg Khlevniuk, Nikita Petrov, Andrei Postnikov, and Andrei Sushkov have written books, articles, and dissertations with arguments and evidence that have yet to enter the Western historiography. Third, memoirs or diaries by individuals such as Petr Abrasimov, Nikolai Kamanin, and Yulii Kvitsinskii provide new information as well.

This article combines these sources with previously available material, especially the memoirs used in Tompson's 1991 article, to test the new theories used by political scientists to explain Khrushchev's political demise. Although these theories will be stated explicitly and addressed separately, they all fail to

3. William J. Tompson, "The Fall of Nikita Khrushchev," *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (1991), pp. 1,101-1,121; Geoffrey Swain, *Khrushchev* (London: Palgrave, 2016); and William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: Norton, 2003).

grasp the core dynamics surrounding Khrushchev's fall for the same reason: the special structural features of a specifically *Leninist* system.

Why does the failure to account for the special characteristics of Marxist-Leninist regimes lead to flawed theories? First, Marxist-Leninist systems are not popularity contests; rather, they provide leaders with powerful tools to control their potential competitors. Khrushchev's defeat was much more dependent on highly contingent events than popular political science theories predict. This failure to incorporate the decisive importance of the contingency inherent in Marxist-Leninist systems provides a highly misleading picture. Khrushchev was not removed because his deputies disagreed with his policies or wanted to punish his failures. Instead, the plotters tolerated Khrushchev despite their dissatisfaction until he *pushed* them to move first to save their political lives. Second, rules in Marxist-Leninist systems are simply too ambiguous and poorly enforced for institutions to have a meaningful role. The plotters did not use institutions to solve a collective action problem by rallying the elite to remove the top leader but won a game of maneuver that allowed a small group to resolve the matter as quickly as possible. As this article shows, institutions actually favored Khrushchev, not his opponents. The Soviet system severely constrained their ability to act collectively. Third, Khrushchev's behavior cannot be explained by "stupidity." The nature of power in Marxist-Leninist regimes is highly ambiguous even to the most seasoned leaders. All of these conclusions sit poorly with the dominant approaches to authoritarian regimes present in current political science literature.

Political Science and the Fall of Khrushchev

Not all political scientists share the same view of why Khrushchev was removed from power. However, at least three perspectives deserve special attention: the "weak Khrushchev" theory, the "institutional constraints" theory, and the "dumb Khrushchev" theory. All of these positions fail to come to grips with the special characteristics of Marxist-Leninist systems.

A commonality across the new generation of scholars studying authoritarian regimes is the idea that politics in such states is about exchange. A candidate for leader makes certain promises, and that individual wins the contest with the support of a decisive group (a "winning coalition") within the full leadership (the "selectorate"). If that leader then breaks the contract, he or she is, naturally, removed from power. This idea is most prominently associated with Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, who argue: "It is the

successful, reliable implementation of political promises to those who count that provides the basis for any incumbent's advantage."⁴

Building on this "selectorate" theory, Jessica L. P. Weeks incorporates the role of failure and incompetence, especially in foreign policy, into elite power struggles. Weeks argues that in some authoritarian regimes the winning coalition is secure enough that the group does not need to worry about defecting from an incompetent leader—they are safe no matter who the leader is. She contends: "Because regime insiders' political power did not depend entirely on the favor of the incumbent, they believed they could jettison an incompetent or reckless leader and survive politically, just as most of the members of Khrushchev's Presidium did when they ousted him as premier."⁵ De Mesquita and Smith believe that Khrushchev was removed because of broken political promises, whereas Weeks claims that he was removed for his failed decision-making as a leader. Both perspectives see him as weak.

To be fair, many experts on the Soviet Union shared similar conclusions about a weak Khrushchev constrained and then punished by opponents with different policy inclinations. Even during the Khrushchev era, Carl Linden stated that policy differences and resistance to Khrushchev could be divined by a close reading of published texts, concluding that Khrushchev was "dependent on the success of his policies."⁶ In 1969, Alec Nove believed Khrushchev "could not always ride rough-shod over the opinions of his colleagues" and that he was removed because of economic mismanagement and because his "ambitious campaigning ('hair-brained schemes'), his exaggerated promises, his arbitrary methods, [and] his disorganizing 'reorganizations' were too much."⁷ In 1971, Leonard Schapiro argued that Khrushchev's opponents were "moved by his policies."⁸ Ian D. Thatcher writes that "Khrushchev acted as a leader within the rules."⁹ Mary McAuley attributes Khrushchev's

4. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior Is Almost Always Good Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), p. 14.

5. Jessica L. P. Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 4.

6. Carl Linden, "Khrushchev and the Party Battle," *Problems of Communism*, Vol. 12, No. 5 (October 1963), p. 28. T. H. Rigby, however, in the same edition of *Problems of Communism* accurately states that no figure would openly dare to confront Khrushchev or act as member of an oppositional grouping while the Soviet leader remained in power. See Thomas H. Rigby, "The Extent and Limits of Authority," *Problems of Communism*, Vol. 12, No. 5 (October 1963), pp. 36–41.

7. Alec Nove, *An Economic History of the USSR* (London: Penguin Press, 1969), pp. 333, 368.

8. Leonard Schapiro, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p. 573.

9. Ian D. Thatcher, "Brezhnev as Leader," in Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle, eds., *Brezhnev Reconsidered* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 19.

downfall to his “erratic behavior” and “rumbling in the apparatus.”¹⁰ Philip G. Roeder similarly characterizes the Soviet Union as a polity in which “policy-makers needed the sustaining support of their bureaucratic constituencies.”¹¹ Robert V. Daniels concludes that neo-Stalinists “managed to break into the circular flow of power to undermine the leader bureaucratically” as early as 1961.¹² Like Weeks, James G. Richter also concludes foreign policy failures endangered Khrushchev.¹³ Swain’s biography of Khrushchev states similarly, “There is no doubt that the outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis weakened Khrushchev’s position.”¹⁴

As this article demonstrates through empirical evidence, however, these arguments and previous empirical analyses do not adequately explain politics during the late Khrushchev era. First, until the moment Khrushchev was ousted, he was an exceptionally powerful leader. He did not bargain or negotiate with potential competitors. Second, Khrushchev’s vulnerabilities were, to a significant extent, the result of bad luck. Disregarding these elements of contingency would inappropriately overstate the significance of broken promises or policy failures. Third, and most important, Khrushchev was not ultimately removed for either of those reasons but for a much narrower one. His deputies had tolerated broken promises and setbacks for years. Only the fear that Khrushchev intended to end their political lives forced them to take the highly risky step of moving first.

Another common theme among the new generation of political scientists is the importance of institutions, especially in Marxist-Leninist regimes.¹⁵ Milan Svoblik’s foundational work *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* criticizes “selectorate” theory for ignoring the problem of collective action and explicitly uses institutions to explain Khrushchev’s downfall. Although Svoblik is careful to make the point that institutions work only when the “balance of power”

10. Mary McAuley, *Soviet Politics 1917–1991* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 74.

11. Philip G. Roeder, *Red Sunset: The Failure of Soviet Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 7.

12. Robert V. Daniels, “Political Processes and Generational Change,” in Archie Brown, ed., *Political Leadership in the Soviet Union* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), p. 113.

13. “Political authority” here refers to the ability of a leader to provide a vision for the country that is widely endorsed by the leader’s associates. See James G. Richter, *Khrushchev’s Double Bind: International Pressures and Domestic Coalition Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

14. Swain, *Khrushchev*, p. 163.

15. Barbara Geddes, “What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?” *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1999), pp. 115–144; and Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, “Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats,” *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 11 (November 2007), pp. 1,279–1,301.

(somewhat ambiguously defined) is equal, he contends that institutions mitigated the collective action problem in the USSR. He claims that Stalin-era "institutional rules" served "as the foundation for the revived institutional 'collective leadership' after Stalin's death." According to Svolik, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in the post-Stalin era was dominated by the Central Committee, and Khrushchev was removed only "after his behavior became increasingly unilateral and unpredictable."¹⁶

Svolik's claims deserve special attention because his conclusions are supported by Tompson's account, the best extant comprehensive treatment of the coup to date. Tompson claims that an enormous number of people knew about the coup and that the support of the Central Committee was essential. He argues that "the territorial party elite and other officials making up the bulk of the Central Committee enjoyed far more power than was hitherto thought." The Central Committee's authority had been restored, Tompson asserted, and the plotters felt free to engage in conspiracy: "Knowing that the ultimate penalty was no longer enforced, they were that much more likely to play politics for very high stakes."¹⁷ Archie Brown and T. H. Rigby similarly contend that the CPSU Central Committee was the body that removed Khrushchev to put an end to his unpopular policies.¹⁸

Yet a close examination of the empirical evidence shows that the story of the late Khrushchev era was actually one of highly dysfunctional institutions. Institutions did not prevent Khrushchev from violating collective leadership in the first place. The plotters understood that institutions did not guarantee their survival if they confronted Khrushchev openly about their concerns. They knew that, if they lost, the punishment would be severe, and they acted only because they thought they were going to be removed anyway. Institutions made them vulnerable to accusations of factionalism and eliminated the possibility of the safest approach: arrest or assassination. The plotters did not "use" the Central Committee against Khrushchev and instead actively worked to prevent the body from playing a meaningful role. That is, the Marxist-Leninist structural context did not facilitate the conspiracy. To the extent that institutions had any effect on Khrushchev's opponents, it was in only one narrow way, spurring Khrushchev to refrain from fighting back to protect the party.

16. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, pp. 94–100.

17. Tompson, "The Fall of Nikita Khrushchev," p. 1,105.

18. Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), pp. 264–265; and T. H. Rigby, "The Soviet Political Executive, 1917–1986," in Brown, ed., *Political Leadership in the Soviet Union*, p. 40.

Despite differing areas of focus, recent analyses of authoritarian politics—those by de Mesquita and Smith, Weeks, and Svobik—all agree on one point, namely, that Khrushchev did not understand his situation. De Mesquita and Smith maintain that Khrushchev was a “well-intentioned leader” who “seems genuinely to have wanted to improve the lot of the Soviet people” but belongs in the “hall of shame” because he “wanted to do well and didn’t.”¹⁹ Weeks writes that “Khrushchev’s unwillingness to abide by the new rules of the game—or his failure to perceive what those rules really were—proved fatal to his hold on power.”²⁰ For Svobik, Khrushchev allegedly made the same mistake committed by the individuals who tried to remove him in 1957—a failure to understand that power had shifted to the Central Committee.²¹

These disparaging views of Khrushchev also neglect another core feature of Marxist-Leninist regimes—how even the most experienced leaders find it extraordinarily difficult to understand all aspects of their political environment. Khrushchev had a powerful authoritarian toolbox and good reasons to feel secure. Yet he was likely lulled into a false sense of security by the tendency of Marxist-Leninist regimes to generate misinformation. The problem was not that Khrushchev was obtuse but that he was facing unclear signals. Counterintuitively, Khrushchev’s understanding of his undeniable strengths is precisely what left him vulnerable to a coup.

Not a Popularity Contest

The new generation of authoritarian regimes scholars suggest that Khrushchev was a weak leader and that when he broke his political promises and displayed poor leadership, especially in foreign policy, he was removed. These contentions are not borne out by the empirical record. Three points are worth stressing. First, Khrushchev’s authoritarian toolbox allowed him to dominate other members in the elite. Hence, his position was about much more than popularity. Second, Khrushchev’s ouster was much more dependent on contingent factors than one would expect from a political science narrative of “unpopular policies and demonstrated incompetence leads to removal.” Third, the main factor behind Khrushchev’s removal was not policy differences or

19. Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, *The Dictator’s Handbook*, pp. 156–157.

20. Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace*, p. 161.

21. Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, p. 98.

failures but his increasingly aggressive position, which forced his opponents to fight for their political lives.

Khrushchev the Dominant

The suggestion that authoritarian systems are primarily about exchange fails to appreciate the extent to which Marxist-Leninist systems are "leader-friendly." Rivals had almost no leeway to express open dissatisfaction while Khrushchev was still in control—a situation that made it difficult for opponents to resist his actions, conspire to adopt a different platform, and explain why they had not spoken out sooner. Any discussions about Khrushchev's leadership role could easily have been labeled an act of "factionalism" and allowed Khrushchev to move first. He could have sown discord among his colleagues, developed parallel power structures, and rigged party meetings to guarantee a previously determined outcome. Khrushchev clearly did not feel that he was on the political defensive.

Prior to being removed Khrushchev had extraordinary control over the CPSU. During the 22nd Party Congress in 1961, one delegate wrote an anonymous letter to Khrushchev noting that the speeches by the CPSU Presidium members were full of sycophantic language.²² Even the most potentially unpopular decisions were swiftly enforced. When Khrushchev introduced a decision to split the party into two branches in 1962, he used a line from a novel by Ilya Il'f and Evgenii Petrov to describe his behavior: "There will be a parade, and the one commanding the parade will be me."²³ One observer noticed that the decision was publicly applauded and supported, although privately he did not hear "one good word about the new organization, only bewilderment and outright rejection."²⁴ Even when the conspiracy had already begun, on Khrushchev's birthday in April 1964, Brezhnev cried and embraced Khrushchev after reading a fawning congratulation letter signed by

22. "Anonimnaya zapiska delegata XXII s'ezda KPSS Nikite Sergeevichu Khrushchevu," 22 October 1961, in N. G. Tomilina, ed., *Boi s "ten'yu" Stalina: Prodolzhenie: Dokumenty i materialy ob istorii XXII s'ezda KPSS i vtorogo etapa destalinizatsii* (Moscow: Nestor-Istoriya, 2015), pp. 205–206.

23. "Stenograficheskaya zapis' vystupleniya N. S. Khrushcheva na zasedanii Prezidiuma TsK KPSS po voprosu ob uluchshenii partiinogo rukovodstva promyshlennost'yu i sel'skim khozyaistvom," 20 September 1962, in A. A. Fursenko, ed., *Prezidium TsK KPSS: 1954–1964: Chernoye protokol'nye zapisi zasedanii: Stenogrammy: Postanovleniya*, 3 vols., rev. ed., Vol. 1: *Chernoye protokol'nye zapisi zasedanii, Stenogrammy* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2004), p. 576.

24. Nikolai Barsukov, "The Rise to Power," in William Taubman, Sergei Khrushchev, and Abbott Gleason, eds., *Nikita Khrushchev* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 62.

all CPSU Presidium members and candidate members.²⁵ In a letter to the Central Committee in the mid-1960s, Vyacheslav Molotov asked:

Where, in which materials after 1957 and all the way up to October 1964 can be found even the slightest opposition to Khrushchev? There is nothing on a single one of the thousands of pages published over all these years from the CPSU Central Committee plenums, party congresses, dozens and hundreds of meetings at the highest level of both the all-union and republic scale.²⁶

This obsequious behavior persisted even though Khrushchev regularly humiliated other members of the elite, including former close allies from Ukraine.²⁷ At a CPSU Presidium meeting in August 1964, Khrushchev, after a dispute with Dmitrii Polyanskii, asked Aleksandr Shelepin, who ran the State Control Commission, to stick a memorandum into Polyanskii's nose. Polyanskii pleaded, "Don't put it in my nose. I'm a human being." When Khrushchev responded that he, too, was a human being, Polyanskii asked, "How can anyone speak with you? When an opinion is expressed by someone, immediately there is a conflict. Perhaps you have such an attitude toward me?" Khrushchev was blunt: "Apparently yes, I do not deny it . . . I cannot rely on you."²⁸

The rare cases when a subordinate contradicted Khrushchev demonstrate how dangerous such behavior could be. In 1960, at a Central Committee plenum, one individual criticized the Council of Ministers for not helping economic growth in a city. Khrushchev shouted at the man from behind, and the speaker was forced to end his speech early.²⁹ In 1962, Kirill Mazurov, who headed the Belorussian Communist Party, criticized Khrushchev's proposal to divide the party during a private conversation with the Soviet leader. Khrushchev, furious, summoned a car and left. The next day, Frol Kozlov called to inform Mazurov that Khrushchev had ordered that someone be prepared to replace him (Mazurov narrowly survived the incident).³⁰ Private

25. Sergei Khrushchev, *Pensioner soyuznogo znacheniya* (Moscow: Vremya, 2010), p. 27.

26. "Pis'mo V. M. Molotova v TsK KPSS (1964 g.)," *Voprosy istorii*, No. 3 (March 2012), p. 94.

27. Taubman, *Khrushchev*, pp. 578–619; and Nikolai Mitrokhin, "The Rise of Political Clans in the Era of Nikita Khrushchev: The First Phase, 1953–1959," in Jeremy Smith and Melanie Ilic, eds., *Khrushchev in the Kremlin: Policy and Government in the Soviet Union, 1953–1964* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 31.

28. "Nepravlenaya stenogramma zasedaniya Prezidiuma TsK KPSS po voprosam, vznikshim vo vremya poezdki N. S. Khrushcheva po sel'skokhozyaistvennym regionam SSSR," 19 August 1964, in A. N. Artizov et al., eds., *Nikita Khrushchev: 1964: Stenogrammy plenuma TsK KPSS i drugie dokumenty* (Moscow: MFD: Materik, 2007), p. 95.

29. P. A. Abrasimov, *Chetvert' veka poslom Sovetskogo Soyuza*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Natsional'noe obozrenie, 2007), p. 71.

30. S. M. Belov, B. D. Dolgotovich, and I. S. Karpenko, *Kirill Mazurov: Vospominaniya, vystupleniya, intervyu* (Minsk: Belorusskoe izdatel'skoe Tovarishchestvo "Khata," 1999), p. 15.

discussion, let alone open debate, was simply not tolerated under Khrushchev's leadership.

Because the plotters were so deeply implicated in Khrushchev's decision-making, they were open to attacks after they moved against the Soviet leader. At a seminar held in the Central Committee's agriculture department, questions were raised by party, state, and science officials about a Central Committee plenum on agricultural issues held in March 1965. A special note written in May 1965 included the more typical of those questions, such as:

Why were mistakes not recognized openly until many years after the people suffered an enormous loss? It turned out that Khrushchev, like Stalin, wanted his own cult and was a poor leader. This raises the question. Where was the CC Presidium? What attitude should we have to debate in the CC Presidium in 1957, when some of the leadership (Khrushchev) made a bet on new eastern virgin regions, and another part supported the investment in traditional regions, which the March plenum of the Central Committee highlighted?³¹

The plotters were also weakened by norms against factionalist activity that could threaten stability. When the so-called Anti-Party Group moved against Khrushchev in 1957, Marshal Ivan Konev criticized the group for damaging the unity of the party and the danger such behavior portended for national security.³² Charges of factionalist conspiracy worked successfully against the Anti-Party Group even though they held a majority on the Presidium. In 1964, Mikhail Suslov was afraid that the conspiracy might foment a split in the party or even society. When he was told of the plot, his lips turned blue and his mouth twitched: "What are you talking about?! There will be a civil war."³³

Khrushchev also had a multitude of organizational tools he could use to undermine potential competitors. He nominated a "primary" first deputy and a "secondary" first deputy as a balance to make sure no one individual on the CPSU Presidium became too powerful.³⁴ When a faction of Presidium members (Nikolai Ignatov, Averkii Aristov, and Ekaterina Furtseva) started

31. A. I. Shevel'kov, "Pochemu ya dolzhen verit' martovskomu plenumu TsK KPSS? 'Neudobnye' voprosy partiinomu rukovodstvu: Vesna 1965 g.," *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, No. 1 (2013), pp. 4–10.

32. "Plenum TsK KPSS: Iyun' 1957 goda: Stenograficheskii otchet: Zasedanie tret'e (vechernee, 24 iyunya)," 24 June 1957, in A. N. Yakovlev, ed., *Molotov, Malenkov, Kaganovich: 1957: Stenogramma iyun'skogo Plenuma TsK KPSS i drugie dokumenty* (Moscow: MFD, 1998), pp. 177–181.

33. Tompson, "The Fall of Nikita Khrushchev," p. 1103; and "Vospominaniya uchastnika sobytiia o neprostykh momentakh v istorii strany: O Khrushcheve, Brezhneve i drugikh," *Argumenty i fakty*, No. 2 (14 January 1989), pp. 5–6.

34. A. V. Sushkov, *Prezidium TsK KPSS v 1957–1964 gg.: Lichnosti i vlast'* (Ekaterinburg: UrO RAN, 2009), p. 82.

to form, Khrushchev sought to instill conflicts between them.³⁵ When Nuritdin Mukhitdinov persuaded Kozlov and Aleksei Kirichenko, two feuding Presidium members, to resolve their differences, Khrushchev threatened to exile Mukhitdinov by sending him to the United Kingdom as ambassador.³⁶ Khrushchev was almost certainly trying to set Brezhnev and Nikolai Podgornyi against each other as competitors for the succession. In July 1963, Khrushchev told W. Averell Harriman that “Brezhnev was in line but that consideration would also be given to Podgorny.”³⁷

Khrushchev also simply removed officials who he thought were forming an incipient faction, including individuals who had helped him defeat the Anti-Party Group.³⁸ Aristov, Ignatov, and Furtseva were all suddenly removed from the leadership in 1961. As Andrei Sushkov, a senior researcher at the Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, concludes,

As time showed, the members of the CC Presidium reached appropriate conclusions about the personal qualities of Khrushchev, who for the first time in front of them without a twinge of conscience removed from his shoulders all responsibility and placed it on other leaders.³⁹

The sudden purge of Khrushchev’s former allies led to “the strongest psychological shock” among Presidium members.⁴⁰

As leader, Khrushchev could also effectively guarantee that full party meetings could not be used as a platform against him. He effectively prevented the Central Committee plenums from playing any meaningful role by drastically increasing the number of individuals who could attend them and by limiting real discussion. He also convened ad hoc bodies to express support for his policies. In September 1964, shortly before being ousted, Khrushchev held an irregular meeting attended by members of the CPSU Presidium and the USSR Council of Ministers, by republic and district party secretaries, and by figures involved in economic decision-making. The Soviet leader made an

35. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

37. Averell Harriman, “Memorandum for the President,” 19 October 1964, in Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library (LBJL), National Security File (NSF), Country File (CF), Box 219, USSR Cables 10/64–11/64.

38. Sushkov, *Prezidium TsK KPSS*, p. 187.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

important statement about shifting priority to consumer welfare.⁴¹ The U.S. State Department remarked in a memorandum that Khrushchev

was proclaiming policy before an irregularly constituted body, evidently without any previous action by a proper organ of decision—Presidium, Council of Ministers, or Central Committee. . . . The impression is strong that he found himself blocked in the regular channels of decision and was trying to circumvent them.⁴²

Khrushchev after his downfall was criticized for making Central Committee plenums “parade brouhaha” to “avoid possible criticism from CC members.”⁴³

Contingency

Political scientists shy away from explicitly saying that their theories are deterministic. Yet we should still question how much purchase their theories give us. One way of judging the explanatory power of a theory that posits a meaningful relationship between independent and dependent variables is to ask whether the type of political phenomenon under investigation is usually shaped by contingency. As Jonathan Bendor and Jacob N. Shapiro point out, certain types of political phenomena are shaped by contingency more than others.⁴⁴ But how do we measure contingency? An investigation into a single historical event can reveal that likely, possible, and unlikely outcome are all possibilities, as seen in the debate over how likely Adolf Hitler’s rise actually was.⁴⁵ How much an outcome is determined by structural causes is an empirical question. “Documents and other historical evidence can tell whether key actors in a critical juncture acted with a significant degree of freedom or

41. “Ob osnovnykh napravleniyakh v razrabotke plana razvitiya narodnogo khozyaistva na blizhaishii period,” *Pravda*, 2 October 1964, pp. 1-2.

42. “Thoughts on the Meaning of the Moscow Events,” U.S. State Department Memorandum for McGeorge Bundy, 22 October 1964, in LBJL, NSF, CF, Box 219, USSR Cables 10/64–11/64. I thank Simon Miles for sharing this document with me.

43. “Protokol No. 9 zasedaniya plenuma Tsentral’nogo komiteta Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soyuza ot 14 oktyabrya 1964 goda,” 14 October 1964, in Artizov et al., eds, *Nikita Khrushchev*, p. 242.

44. Jonathan Bendor and Jacob N. Shapiro, “Historical Contingencies in the Evolution of States and Their Militaries,” *World Politics*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (January 2019), pp. 126–161.

45. Henry Ashby Turner, *Hitler’s Thirty Days to Power: January 1933* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996); and Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: Profiles in Power* (London: Longman, 1991).

not.⁴⁶ Some outcomes are likely, whereas others are “not just determined but overdetermined.”⁴⁷

As the case of Khrushchev’s fall demonstrates, his defeat was shaped by a series of highly contingent events. First, if Khrushchev had moved just a bit faster, he would have further secured his position through organizational and personnel changes. Second, the sudden and unexpected death of a single individual who enjoyed a particularly powerful position made Khrushchev uniquely vulnerable.

Until October 1964, Khrushchev had been steadily building more resilience into his position. Mikhail Gorbachev later speculated that Khrushchev at that time was trying to destroy the party apparatus and build a new political base: with two first secretaries in every region, Khrushchev could easily have made drastic changes to the makeup of the Central Committee at the next Party Congress.⁴⁸ In the summer of 1964, Khrushchev started moving toward an even more aggressive assault: the elimination of party committees at the raion level, the realization of which “would in practice bring a serious strike on the position of the ruling party as a whole.”⁴⁹ The Russian historian Nikolai Barsukov argues that, despite Khrushchev’s hugely unpopular plans for more changes to the party structure, the next plenum would almost certainly still have approved those plans if he had still been in power.⁵⁰

Previous memoir accounts hint that, shortly before Khrushchev was removed, he had contemplated bringing back former allies who might be grateful for their rehabilitation. Those claims were questionable, but Brezhnev’s recently declassified work notes provide significant, albeit inconclusive, support for these earlier claims: those individuals were indeed mentioned in CPSU Presidium discussions around this time.

After Marshal Georgii Zhukov was removed from the leadership in 1957, he called and reproached Khrushchev: “You are losing your best

46. Giovanni Capocchia and R. Daniel Kelemen, “The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism,” *World Politics*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (April 2007), pp. 341–369.

47. Dietrich Rueschemeyer, “Can One or a Few Cases Yield Theoretical Gains?” in James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, eds., *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 315.

48. O. V. Khlevnyuk, “Rokovaya reforma N. S. Khrushcheva: Razdelenie partiinogo apparata i ego posledstviya. 1962–1964 gody,” *Rossiiskaya istoriya*, No. 4 (August 2012), p. 165.

49. A. V. Postnikov, “Dokumenty federal’nykh arkhivov o smene rukovodstva SSSR v oktyabre 1964 g. (istochnikovedcheskii analiz),” Ph.D. Diss., Vserossiiskii nauchno-issledovatel’skii institut dokumentovedeniya i arkhivnogo dela, Moscow, 2005.

50. Barsukov, “The Rise to Power,” p. 63.

friend."⁵¹ According to Brezhnev's notes, at a Presidium meeting on 28 March 1964, Khrushchev stated it was "not necessary to crucify" Zhukov, as he "played not a small role."⁵² In the summer of 1964, Khrushchev called Zhukov and said:

You know, it was difficult for me then to figure out what was going on inside your head, people would come to me and say: "Zhukov is a dangerous person, he ignores you, at any moment he can do whatever he wants. His authority in the army is too strong, apparently the 'crown of Eisenhower' does not give him peace." Now I am very busy. . . . When I return from vacation—we will meet and discuss matters as friends.⁵³

This evidence suggests that Khrushchev sought a rapprochement with Zhukov, who despised Defense Minister Rodion Malinovskii.⁵⁴

Khrushchev also indicated an interest in bringing back Ivan Serov, former head of the Soviet State Security Committee (KGB). Khrushchev defended Serov from his detractors as late as 24 November 1958, arguing that he had behaved loyally. But everything changed at the CPSU Presidium meeting on 3 December 1958 where the participants learned that Ignatov had lied over the phone when he claimed that Serov was not in his office. Suddenly it seemed that Ignatov and Serov might have had a private relationship detrimental to Khrushchev's interests. One Presidium member claimed that "Malinovskii was involved in this" (*byl Malinovskii pri etom dele*), but the rough notes from the meeting do not provide details.⁵⁵

At the same meeting in March 1964 when Khrushchev praised Zhukov, he also described Serov as an "honest person" who should be given work. Perhaps significantly, in February, Serov wrote a letter to Khrushchev complaining about "persecution" from Malinovskii and Nikolai Mironov, head of the CPSU Administrative Department—an innocuous sounding institution that oversaw the KGB, police, armed forces, procuracy, and courts. Could

51. "Plenum Tsentral'nogo Komiteta KPSS. Oktyabr' 1957 goda: Stenogramma: Zasedanie chetvertoe (vechernee, 29 oktyabrya)," 29 October 1957, in V. Naumov et al., eds., *Georgii Zhukov: Stenogramma oktyabr'skogo (1957 g.) plenuma TsK KPSS i drugie dokumenty* (Moscow: MFD, 2001), p. 379.

52. L. I. Brezhnev, *Rabochie i dnevnikovye zapisi*, Vol. 3, *Leonid Brezhnev: Rabochie i dnevnikovye zapisi: 1944–1964 gg.* (Moscow: Istoricheskaya literatura, 2016), p. 426.

53. "Pis'mo G. K. Zhukova v Prezidium TsK KPSS," 16 March 1965, in Naumov et al., eds., *Georgii Zhukov*, p. 539.

54. Anatolii Ponomarev, "Marshaly: Kak delili slavu posle 1945-go," *Rodina*, No. 1 (1995), p. 78.

55. "Protokol No. 194: Zasedanie 3 dekabrya 1958 g.," 3 December 1958, in Fursenko, ed., *Prezidium TsK KPSS*, Vol. 1, pp. 340–341. The quoted passage is "Malinovskii was involved in this."

Khrushchev have believed that Serov could help balance against these two figures, whose behavior would determine the outcome of an attempted coup?⁵⁶ Unfortunately for Khrushchev, the conspirators moved against him in October 1964—before he could bring back Zhukov and Serov.

Even though one scholar has briefly alluded to Kozlov as an opponent of Khrushchev, the reality is that Kozlov's untimely death was devastating for the Soviet leader.⁵⁷ Kozlov was Khrushchev's planned successor, and he held the position of CPSU Secretary managing the armed forces, military industry, and KGB. Kozlov admitted to another figure in the leadership that other members of the Presidium were afraid of him, fearing that at any moment he could use *kompromat* (compromising information) to remove them from their positions. But his workload proved too much—he had a stroke in 1963 and died in 1965. One party figure later said he was certain “that if Kozlov had still been alive, Khrushchev's opponents would have achieved nothing at the CC plenum in October 1964.”⁵⁸

Kozlov's incapacitation gave an opening to Mironov. According to one account, Mironov, who enjoyed great authority among the generals and KGB, served as “chief of staff” in preparing the Central Committee plenum that approved the Presidium's decision to remove Khrushchev from power.⁵⁹ Mironov called Nikolai Mesyatsev, a party apparatchik, a few days before the October plenum to ask: “Apparently Khrushchev will be removed from his positions, what is your attitude toward this?”⁶⁰ The positions of the KGB and military were absolutely crucial in Khrushchev's removal. If a Khrushchev supporter like Kozlov had controlled the CPSU Administrative Department, it is inconceivable that the plotters would have emerged victorious.

Not Broken Promises or Failed Policies but Political Encroachments

Khrushchev was associated with unpopular policies that became a political liability.⁶¹ To deny otherwise would be a rejection of undeniable evidence from

56. Brezhnev, *Rabochie i dnevnikovye zapisi*, Vol. 3, pp. 426, 449.

57. Vojtech Mastny, “The 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty: A Missed Opportunity for Détente?,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter 2008), pp. 3–25.

58. V. N. Novikov, “V gody rukovodstva N. S. Khrushcheva,” *Voprosy istorii*, No. 2 (February 1989), pp. 106, 114.

59. V. F. Nekrasov, *Apparat TsK KPSS v pogonakh i bez: Nekotorye voprosy oborony, gosbezopasnosti, pravookhranitel'noi deyatel'nosti v TsK KPSS (40-e–nachalo 90-kh godov XX veka)* (Moscow: Kuchkovo pole, 2010), p. 74; and Swain, *Khrushchev*, p. 187.

60. “V gody ‘Kul'tprosveta’: Beseda N. Kuznetsova s N. N. Mesyatsevym,” *Zhurnalists*, No. 1 (1989), p. 36.

61. Taubman, *Khrushchev*, p. 4.

the historical record. Those problems made Khrushchev's removal easier to accept for certain members of the Central Committee. However, even if such dissatisfaction existed, that sentiment was far from overwhelming, and it was not the prime motivator for the conspirators. Ultimately, they were forced to act against Khrushchev to save their political lives—not because they had any meaningful policy differences or believed he was incompetent.

The most unpopular policy associated with Khrushchev was his decision to split the party into industrial and agricultural segments. In a memorandum to the CPSU Presidium explaining this decision, Khrushchev argued that the party organizations too often had a "campaign character"; that is, their focus was either too much on industry and too little on agriculture, or vice versa. As economic tasks grew more complicated, party leaders would need to be able to spend more time on more specialized tasks. Two party committees were to be created in each oblast (at the republic level, a single Central Committee would remain, but two "bureaus" would be created).⁶² During discussions of Khrushchev's removal at party meetings throughout the USSR, the most common emotional refrain was criticism of his constant reorganizations, especially the split into agricultural and industrial *obkoms*.⁶³ Local party secretaries immediately tried to limit how much Khrushchev's new reorganizations were implemented in their locales.⁶⁴

However, according to recent scholarship by Khlevnyuk, the notion that this decision was fatal for Khrushchev's popularity is problematic. Khrushchev did not in fact lose all his potential support on the Central Committee. If the context of the final showdown had been different, Khrushchev might have been able to count on the Central Committee more reliably.

Khlevnyuk argues that the split did not include party bodies at the republic level. So, "in reality these measures did not have a serious impact on the

62. "Zapiska N. S. Khrushcheva v Prezidium TsK KPSS po perestroike rukovodstva partiinykh i sovet-skikh organov," 10 September 1962, in N. G. Tomilina, ed., *Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev: Dva tsveta vremeni: Dokumenty iz lichnogo fonda N. S. Khrushcheva*, Vol. 2 (Moscow: MFD, 2009), pp. 672–684.

63. "Zapiska sekretarya TsK KPSS V. Titova ob obsuzhdenii reshenii oktyabr'skogo (1964 g.) Plenuma TsK KPSS na sobraniyakh partiinogo aktiva i otklikakh trudyashchikhsya na Postanovlenie Plenuma TsK," 17 October 1964, in Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Noveishei Istorii (RGANI), Fond (F) 3, Opis' (Op.) 22, Delo (D.) 16, List (L.) 14.

64. "Dokladnaya zapiska sekretarei TsK KP Ukrainy i zamestitelei predsedatelya Soveta ministrov SSSR v TsK KP Ukrainy o perestroike partiinykh i sovet-skikh organov Ukrainsoi SSR," 15 October 1962, in O. V. Khlevnyuk et al., eds., *Regional'naya politika N. S. Khrushcheva: TsK KPSS i mestnye partiinye komitety: 1953–1964 gg.* (Moscow: Rossiiskaya politicheskaya entsiklopediya, 2009), pp. 457–467; and "Dokladnaya zapiska pervogo sekretarya Chitinskogo sel'skogo obkoma KPSS A. I. Smirnova N. S. Khrushchevu ob ob"edinenii promyshlennoi i sel'skoi partiinykh organizatsii Chitinskoi oblasti," 27 December 1963, in Khlevnyuk et al., eds., *Regional'naya politika N. S. Khrushcheva*, pp. 519–521.

position of the old republic leaders, and therefore did not meet special doubts in the regions.” With regard to party organizations at the *krai* and *oblast* levels (of which only 60 percent were affected), the cadres proved skilled in ensuring that the reforms were limited. Khlevnyuk writes: “It is obvious that the split of the apparat was a good way of reshuffling regional leaders. But Khrushchev used it only to an insignificant extent. The posts of the new ruling structures were basically filled by old leaders.”⁶⁵ The former leader of the region tended to dominate whoever was posted in the other committee in the same region. Thus, in Khlevnyuk’s view, the impact of the change was less far-reaching than often alleged:

The relatively restricted impact of the Khrushchev reform on the apparat was facilitated by three factors. First, the reform from the beginning was not of a radical nature. The apparat of a significant number of oblasts and autonomous republics remained untouched. Second, the split of oblast and krai structures was not accompanied with a noticeable cadre rotation. Third, the reform was conducted under the control of the leaders of the previous obkoms and kraikoms, both of which maintained their superior positions. . . . This tactic of conducting reorganization was the result of a compromise between the center and regional officials.⁶⁶

Other than the (perhaps limited) dissatisfaction with this split in the party, concrete policy differences between Khrushchev and his associates were few. Of course, it is possible that Khrushchev’s opponents simply pretended to agree with him, but the evidence suggests that policy differences were not their primary motivation. Svetlana Savranskaya and William Taubman conclude that, with regard to foreign policy, “there is an overall trend that characterizes the whole period—movement from the Cold War’s most dangerous episode, the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, to the high point of détente in 1975.”⁶⁷ Tompson, whose review of the memoir literature was exhaustive, writes:

one thing that is remarkable about the complaints listed by various Soviet sources on the coup is the relative lack of importance attached to foreign policy and defense issues. Few of the Soviet sources mention them and none seem to regard them as particularly important.⁶⁸

65. Khlevnyuk, “Rokovaya reforma N. S. Khrushcheva,” p. 177.

66. *Ibid.*

67. Svetlana Savranskaya and William Taubman, “Soviet Foreign Policy, 1962–1975,” in Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *Cambridge History of the Cold War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 134.

68. Tompson, “The Fall of Nikita Khrushchev,” p. 1109.

Differences on domestic policy were far from fundamental. Yakov Feygin, a historian of Soviet economic reforms, notes that at the time of Khrushchev's ouster "the new leadership, wracked by internal rivalries, had not yet defined exactly what would come after Khrushchev's tumultuous decade in power."⁶⁹ The plotters were not united by a common platform. Shortly before being removed from power, Khrushchev learned from his son Sergei some details about the plot. When, at his father's request, Sergei repeated the names of some of the plotters (Ignatov, Podgornyi, Brezhnev, and Shelepin), Khrushchev said: "No, it is not believable . . . Brezhnev, Podgornyi, Shelepin—they are completely different people. This cannot be. Ignatov—it is possible. . . . But what does he have in common with the others?"⁷⁰

Significantly, the deliberations at the CPSU Presidium meetings that criticized Khrushchev for his mistakes and forced him to resign focused mostly on his dictatorial style, not policy differences. Khrushchev's opponents cited his alleged violations of collective leadership and his "voluntarist" decisions. Many speakers emphasized that the party "line" was correct. Khrushchev himself said, "I consider you like-minded friends" and that "we have the same foundation."⁷¹

Chinese observers at the time concurred with the assessment that policy differences were not paramount. On 6 November 1974, during a meeting at Mao Zedong's home, Deng Xiaoping said that Brezhnev's report played down Khrushchev's mistakes:

Based on the little bit [in this report], Khrushchev should not step down. In other words, they did not dare to acknowledge directly that some important decisions in which they had originally participated were wrong. This is possibly their weak point. The new CPSU leaders worked together with Khrushchev when he was in power, and many of them were promoted by him. I suspect that making a clear break with Khrushchev's line is impossible [for them].⁷²

Mao agreed, arguing that the reason Khrushchev was removed was not his "line." At a meeting a few days later, Deng stated that Khrushchev's downfall

69. Yakov Feygin, "Reforming the Cold War State: Economic Thought, Internationalization, and the Politics of Soviet Reform, 1955–1985," Ph.D. Diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2017, p. 157.

70. Khrushchev, *Pensioner soyuznogo znacheniya*, pp. 47, 51–62; and Timothy J. Naftali and A. A. Fursenko, *Khrushchev's Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary* (New York: Norton, 2006), p. 534.

71. "Protokol [bez nomera]: Zasedanie 13–14 oktyabrya 1964 g.," 13–14 October 1964, in Fursenko, ed., *Prezidium TsK KPSS*, Vol. 1, pp. 862–872.

72. Wu Lengxi, *Shi nian lunzhan: 1956–1966 zhongsu guanxi huiyilu* (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1999), pp. 858–859.

was attributable not to policy differences but to his despotic tendencies and failures in agriculture. When Zhou Enlai was on a trip to Moscow that month, Suslov told him there would be some differences with Khrushchev. When Zhou asked for examples, Suslov could not give a straight answer.⁷³

Even though the evidence indicates that Khrushchev was not universally unpopular and that Khrushchev's detractors did not have fundamental policy differences with him, dissatisfaction was present. However, this unhappiness started long before Khrushchev was ousted. As early as November 1961, Nikolai Kamanin, then a Soviet Air Force officer in charge of training cosmonauts, wrote in his journal that "the people do not love Khrushchev"—a theme to which he returned several times. In February 1962, Kamanin complained about a lack of meat and other groceries in Moscow and referred to rumors in Minsk of an attempted coup against Khrushchev.⁷⁴ Yet, even though Kamanin had long made note of rumblings in society, he was caught by surprise when Khrushchev was removed: "I did not think it would be that fast. Brezhnev, Suslov, and Kosygin showed great bravery and outsmarted one of the cleverest people of the modern era."⁷⁵

Vladimir Semichastnyi, who was chairman of the KGB at the time of Khrushchev's ouster, maintains that an anti-Khrushchev group formed only around March 1964—many years after the onset of economic problems and also many years after such debacles as the split with China.⁷⁶ Why the sudden change? In 1991, Tompson hypothesized that one key reason for the move against Khrushchev was that he had planned to promote a younger generation before retiring. The new evidence strongly supports Tompson's conclusion and provides crucial new details.⁷⁷ As Mikoyan later said: "Now I think that Khrushchev himself provoked them, having promised after vacation to introduce suggestions on making the Presidium younger."⁷⁸

According to Brezhnev's rough notes, Khrushchev told him in February 1964 to think about moving Lithuanian party boss Antanas Sniečkus in order to "push forward younger people." Khrushchev said one possibility for Sniečkus was chairman of the Supreme Soviet—a position that Brezhnev, who

73. *Ibid.*, pp. 871, 879.

74. N. P. Kamanin, *Skrytyi kosmos*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: RTSoft, 2018), pp. 65, 92.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 445.

76. Valerii Larin, "35 let oktyabr'skoi revolyutsii," *Kommersant Vlast'*, No. 40 (12 October 1999), p. 50.

77. Tompson, "The Fall of Nikita Khrushchev," p. 1113.

78. Aleksandr Maisuryan, *Drugoi Brezhnev* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2004), p. 130; and Swain, *Khrushchev*, p. 184.

was three years younger than Sniečkus, held at the time.⁷⁹ The notes further mention that at a dinner lasting more than three hours on 7 July 1964, Khrushchev criticized "everyone": "Shelest understands nothing. . . . Voronov does not understand animal husbandry. . . . Send Shelest on vacation—make him sit and not interfere. . . . Polyanskii—you are a dangerous person—your situation must be changed." Brezhnev writes that Khrushchev, using foul language, remarked that "it is necessary to separate if we do not understand one another. I paid my dues—I am going to retire and fish." The notes of the meeting conclude with the phrase, "The mood among us was heavy."⁸⁰

A few days later, at a CPSU Central Committee plenum on 11 July, Khrushchev announced that Brezhnev would be removed from his position as chairman of the Supreme Soviet (the Soviet head of state) and replaced with Mikoyan. When the applause ended, Khrushchev disdainfully said to Brezhnev, "They are glad that you have been removed. Those who are not removed cannot be given new posts. It gladdens people that you were removed." To save face, Brezhnev said, "I don't think so. They are sending me off well." Then, Khrushchev proceeded to explain that this personnel change was necessary because of a need to raise the prestige of the Supreme Soviet and because the leader of the body had to be a more democratic figure. The obvious implication was that Brezhnev was incapable of raising the prestige of the body or acting democratically.⁸¹

At a CPSU Presidium meeting in August 1964, Khrushchev, while attacking Polyanskii, threatened that "this disagreement is forming into a sort of line"—a harsh accusation implying that Polyanskii was at risk of removal or worse. Kosygin was criticized as well: "Kosygin is not here. But this smells of Kosygin." Khrushchev indicated he had no plans to retreat: "Perhaps this is a matter of age, but I get upset, I worry, I react. Apparently, for as long as I am alive, I will react. There is nothing I can do about it."⁸²

Khrushchev again raised the possibility of major personnel reshuffles at a meeting on 17 September, referring to "three levels": young, middle-aged, and old.⁸³ According to Brezhnev's rough notes, Khrushchev said:

79. Brezhnev, *Rabochie i dnevnikovyie zapisi*, Vol. 3, p. 419.

80. *Ibid.*, pp. 431–432.

81. "Neppravlenaya stenogramma iyul'skogo (1964 g.) plenuma TsK KPSS," 11 July 1964, in Artizov et al., eds., *Nikita Khrushchev*, p. 53.

82. "Neppravlenaya stenogramma zasedaniya Prezidiuma TsK KPSS po voprosam, voznikshim vo vremya poezdki N. S. Khrushcheva po sel'skokhozyaistvennym regionam SSSR," pp. 94–97.

83. "Protokol No. 159: Zasedanie 17 sentyabrya 1964 g.," 17 September 1964, in Fursenko, ed., *Prezidium TsK KPSS*, Vol. 1, p. 858.

It is necessary to make further quiet tweaks in the composition of the CC—(future). Some [members] have matured. Some have become old. I am referring to the Presidium, [where] we have many who are allowed to take two month-long vacations [members of the Presidium over sixty years of age were allowed to take both summer and winter vacations]. This is not embellishment [*eto ne ukrashenie*]. I myself become tired within two hours.⁸⁴

Khrushchev raised the idea of creating a body of “inspectors” allowing senior Communists to continue to play a role, like the Group of Military Inspectors that existed in the Ministry of Defense.⁸⁵

On 1 October, Khrushchev met Petro Shelest in Simferopol. Khrushchev complained to him that the CPSU Presidium was a “society of old men” (*obshchestvo starikov*). He complained about Suslov, Podgornyi, and even Mikoyan, but especially Brezhnev, whom he described as an “empty person” (*pustym chelovekom*). Khrushchev said, “We will summon a plenum, and we will put each in his place, show them how everyone should work and where.” Shelest concludes that Brezhnev must have worried that if the plenum took place, he would be the first to be punished: “Therefore he was mortally afraid of the upcoming plenum, and he had only two options: to ‘force the matter’ with Khrushchev or to give up everything to him.”⁸⁶

According to Khrushchev’s son, his father spent his vacation thinking about the succession. Khrushchev allegedly wanted to avoid the struggles that ensued after Joseph Stalin’s death—an outcome that could be prevented only by introducing laws on leadership change. If every member of the Presidium knew what kind of term limits they faced, they would be willing to act more boldly without worrying about their flanks. Younger Central Committee members would see a future to their careers. Khrushchev also wanted to enlarge the size of the Presidium by adding younger people with initiative.⁸⁷ Brezhnev’s notes say that during the Presidium meetings where Khrushchev was criticized before his resignation, Brezhnev complained: “You recently started to introduce an idea—that the Presidium has aged and needs to be expanded. The Secretariat was [assigned] to find new members of the Presidium.”⁸⁸

84. Brezhnev, *Rabochie i dnevnikovye zapisi*, Vol. 3, p. 442.

85. Ibid.

86. P. E. Shelest, *Da ne sudimyy budete: Dnevnikovye zapisi, vospominaniya chlena Politbyuro TsK KPSS* (Moscow: edition q, 1995), p. 219.

87. Khrushchev, *Pensioner soyuznogo znacheniya*, p. 45.

88. L. I. Brezhnev, *Rabochie i dnevnikovye zapisi*, Vol. 1, *Leonid Brezhnev: Rabochie i dnevnikovye zapisi: 1964–1982 gg.* (Moscow: Istoricheskaya literatura, 2016), p. 40.

Moreover, the timing of one particular act on Brezhnev's part suggests that the extant dissatisfaction with Khrushchev was a necessary condition for the coup, but not a precipitating one. According to Yurii Korolev, who worked in the party apparatus, in September 1964, shortly before the coup, Brezhnev summoned a group of party workers and gave them the task of visiting the regions. In an "unclear fashion, through hints," Brezhnev told them to gauge how people were reacting to the split in the party into industrial and agricultural sectors. He was so cautious that he even assured them the administrative change "was a correct action." The group later reported to Brezhnev in careful terms, but the information was enough to allow him to make a move to save his own political career.⁸⁹

The Weakness of Institutions

Svolik argues that institutions in 1964 facilitated collective action and helped the plotters defeat Khrushchev through activation of the power of the Central Committee. Yet the evidence tells a different story. Institutions did not prevent Khrushchev from violating collective leadership in the first place. Indeed, institutions worked *against* the plotters. Even if norms against factionalism had not been so powerful, institutions themselves would have prevented the plotters from simply arresting or assassinating Khrushchev. Perhaps most revealingly, despite the potential charges they could use against Khrushchev, the conspirators *still* did not use established party rules or institutions to engineer his removal. Moreover, although Brezhnev and his allies believed that Khrushchev was unpopular enough to make a coup possible, they did not feel pressure from below and were unsure about the strength of that sentiment. Even after Khrushchev was summoned to Moscow, their plot was not assured of victory, and they feared that Khrushchev would still use the Central Committee *against them*, as he had done in June 1957. Anyone could use institutions to win—the game was not about using the rulebook fairly but about using it against someone else. Ultimately, the goal of Khrushchev's opponents was not to "activate" the Central Committee but to use it as a rubber stamp once their desired outcome was a *fait accompli*. Unsurprisingly, Ukrainian party boss Shelest describes Khrushchev's removal as "heinous political villainy committed surreptitiously, through conspiracy and intrigue" that was

89. S. N. Semanov, *Brezhnev: Pravitel' "zolatoogo veka"* (Moscow: Veche, 2007), pp. 102–103.

just like the palace intrigues of old.⁹⁰ Essentially, the only way that institutional norms helped the plotters is that they facilitated Khrushchev's decision not to fight back in a way that would threaten regime stability.

If institutions were actually resilient (as Svolik argues), the plotters would not have been put into a position in which they would have to resort to extra-institutional and risky means to fight for their political lives. They clearly did not believe institutions protected them, and they operated outside the CPSU Presidium and Central Committee. By all accounts, Brezhnev was terrified of Khrushchev. When Shelest suggested that instead of a coup they simply meet and discuss the situation, Brezhnev almost screamed: "I already told you, I do not believe in open conspiracies, whoever speaks first will be the first to be hurled out of the leadership."⁹¹ According to Moscow party boss Nikolai Egorychev, when Khrushchev told Mikoyan to investigate the evidence of a plot, Brezhnev started crying and said, "Kolya, Khrushchev knows everything. He will shoot all of us." When Egorychev told him they were not violating any party rules, Brezhnev responded: "You don't know Khrushchev well." Egorychev even had to take Brezhnev to a sink and tell him to clean himself up.⁹² Victor Louis, a Soviet journalist with long-standing ties to the KGB, claims that during preparation and implementation of the coup Brezhnev slept in his office in his clothes with a pistol under his pillow. Brezhnev's family allegedly waited with two packed cars at a dacha near Moscow in case they needed to flee to the Monino military airport.⁹³ Semichastnyi later claimed that Brezhnev's repeated delays to move against Khrushchev made Semichastnyi fear for the fate of the coup and for his own fate as well. Semichastnyi even believed that if Ignatov's bodyguard had not leaked the plot to Khrushchev's son (and thereby spurred Brezhnev into action before it was too late), the October plenum might never have happened.⁹⁴

Party norms, despite their clearly elastic nature, prevented the plotters from taking the easiest step to defeat Khrushchev: arresting or assassinating him. As Postnikov reveals, Shelest's written diaries, available at the Russian State Archive of Social-Political History (RGASPI), include a crucial detail

90. Shelest, *Da ne sudimyy budete*, p. 241.

91. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

92. N. A. Barsukov, "Beseda s Egorychevym N. G.," 19 September 1990, in V. A. Kozlov, ed., *Neizvestnaya Rossiya: XX vek*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Istoricheskoe nasledie, 1992), p. 291; Taubman, *Khrushchev*, p. 7; and Thatcher, "Brezhnev as Leader," p. 25.

93. Vyacheslav Kevorkov, *Viktor Lui: Chelovek s legendoi* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Sem' dnei," 2010), p. 152.

94. Larin, "35 let oktyabr'skoi revolyutsii," p. 50.

omitted from his published memoirs. Shelest writes that one of the options considered by the conspirators was to arrest Khrushchev on the road. They chose not to do this because they feared that Khrushchev's bodyguards would open fire, and also because "in case of arrest how would it be justified, motivated? . . . This is already treason, a coup. And the consequences are a liability." He also notes, however, that they came to this conclusion only after extended arguments and conversations. The fact that the conspirators even considered such an action demonstrates how much they were afraid of Khrushchev's power.⁹⁵

Brezhnev allegedly even wanted to murder Khrushchev. According to Semichastnyi's memoirs, Brezhnev asked the KGB to arrest Khrushchev after returning from Leningrad and isolate him, but Semichastnyi refused. Semichastnyi then says Brezhnev "directed the conversation to the possibility of the physical liquidation of Khrushchev" (*sklonil razgovor k vozmozhnosti fizicheskoi likvidatsii Khrushcheva*).⁹⁶ A former senior KGB operative claims that, in 1988, after reading Semichastnyi's account, Gorbachev called for an investigation into the matter. Reportedly, Semichastnyi was asked to write a formal analysis of the organization's experiments with poisons and Brezhnev's alleged instructions, but he declined.⁹⁷ The struggle for power was intense and operated with strange rules that worked against the plotters.

Khrushchev was unpopular but not universally disliked. Shelest writes: "It would be wrong to say that N. S. Khrushchev did not enjoy a certain authority and respect, popularity among the party and people. Saying otherwise would violate truth and history."⁹⁸ Therefore, the plotters simply could not rely on "institutions"—in fact, they broke the rules to rig the game. The danger was that Khrushchev's allies would use a Central Committee plenum to create an unpredictable situation.

95. Postnikov, "Dokumenty federal'nykh arkhivov o smene rukovodstva SSSR v oktyabre 1964 g.," pp. 80–81. For further background on Shelest's diaries and the differences between the published version and the written note pages, see Mark Kramer, "Ukraine and the Soviet-Czechoslovak Crisis of 1968 (Part 1): New Evidence from the Diary of Petro Shelest," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue No. 10 (March 1998), pp. 234–247; and Mark Kramer, "Foreign Policymaking and Party-State Relations in the Soviet Union during the Brezhnev Era," in Rüdiger Bergien and Jens Gieseke, eds., *Communist Parties Revisited: Sociocultural Approaches to Party Rule in the Soviet Bloc, 1956–1991* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), pp. 281–313.

96. Vladimir Semichastnyi, *Bespokoinoe serdtse* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2002), pp. 351–352; and Tompson, "The Fall of Nikita Khrushchev," p. 1106.

97. Pavel Sudoplatov, *Special Tasks: The Memoirs of an Unwanted Witness—A Soviet Spymaster* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), p. 284.

98. Shelest, *Da ne sudimy budete*, p. 214.

On 14 October, after the move against Khrushchev began, a Central Committee member wrote a memorandum: “The Presidium is meeting, something is going on. I agree that something must be said about deficiencies, but it is wrong to resort to extreme measures. . . Brezhnev is vain and power-hungry.” That writer was summoned to a “certain place” so her activities could be controlled.⁹⁹ Another Khrushchev supporter, Leonid Efremov, was sent to remote Kyzyl to give an award, thus preventing him from participating in the plenum.¹⁰⁰

According to Semichastnyi, when the CPSU Presidium was meeting on 13 October, he received phone calls from members of the CPSU Central Committee and members of the USSR Presidium of the Supreme Soviet who said to him: “Why are you sitting [doing nothing], they are removing Khrushchev, and you are inactive!” Semichastnyi called Brezhnev to warn him that the discussion in the CPSU Presidium must not be allowed to drag on: “there could be unpredictable actions: there is a lot of excitement around.”¹⁰¹ He also warned Brezhnev that “if a group of members of the CC come, I won’t be able to stop them. I cannot use physical violence against them. Some will come to save you, others will come to save Khrushchev.” When Brezhnev exclaimed this must not be allowed to happen, Semichastnyi asked: “And you . . . will do what? Refuse to allow them to appear in the waiting room?” He emphasized that one side was asking him, as head of the KGB, to “call you [Brezhnev] to order” (*prizval vas k poryadku*). Semichastnyi later told an interviewer, “It’s unlikely I would have been able to hold on through the second night as the demands to arrest Brezhnev and the other plotters against Khrushchev were getting more insistent.”

When Polyanskii’s speech at the Presidium meeting went on too long, Kosygin interrupted: “we should not talk so long, otherwise we will be waiting until like it was in 1957, the members of the CC will come and carry us all out of here.”¹⁰² According to Khrushchev’s son, CPSU Presidium members wanted to prevent Khrushchev from persuading any of them to defect from the coup. Hence, they agreed not to answer their telephones.¹⁰³ Far from activating institutions, the plotters did their best to ignore and neutralize them.

99. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

100. “Kak snimali Khrushcheva: Beseda s uchastnikom tekhnicheskoi sobytii,” *Dialog*, No. 7 (1993), p. 48.

101. N. A. Barsukov, “Beseda s Shelepinyim A. N. i Semichastnyim V. E.,” 27 March and 22 May 1989, in Kozlov, ed., *Neizvestnaya Rossiya*, p. 278.

102. “Kak snimali Khrushcheva,” p. 52.

103. Khrushchev, *Pensioner soyuznogo znacheniya*, p. 90.

If institutions were working properly, a real debate should have occurred when the CPSU Central Committee finally met after the CPSU Presidium meetings. During these meetings, Khrushchev asked to be allowed to address the plenum, something he was entitled to do under party rules. However, Brezhnev interrupted him emphatically: "This will not happen."¹⁰⁴ When the Central Committee plenum began, Brezhnev stressed that the decision to remove Khrushchev should be approved immediately, without discussion. Polyanskii proposed that Brezhnev be named CPSU First Secretary, and the decision was confirmed not by a secret ballot but by a show of hands.¹⁰⁵ The entire plenum ended quickly, serving essentially as a rubber stamp for the CPSU Presidium's decision. Semichastnyi and Egorychev both later attested (in interviews with Yurii Aksyutin) that everything was rushed through because they were afraid that discussions would spiral out of control, that Brezhnev himself might be criticized, and that other CPSU Presidium members would be vulnerable if a free discussion took place about mistakes during the Khrushchev era.¹⁰⁶ When a KGB operative later asked Andropov why no debate had occurred at the plenum after Suslov's presentation, Andropov answered: "And did you not count how many members of the plenum had been appointed during the Khrushchev era?"¹⁰⁷ According to Tompson, Gennadii Voronov, who in 1964 was chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, believed that, "if Khrushchev had defended himself at the plenum, his supporters would have rallied to his defense and things might well have got out of hand."¹⁰⁸ Polyanskii prepared a much harsher speech toward Khrushchev in case the latter insisted on speaking to the plenum or the proceedings somehow began to slip out of control of the conspirators.¹⁰⁹ Luckily for them, it turned out to be unnecessary.

Evidence for the extent to which rules were being violated can be seen through a close read of the different records of the October 1964 Central Committee plenum in the archives: one contains the verbatim transcript

104. "Vospominaniya uchastnika sobytii o neprostrykh momentakh v istorii strany"; and Tompson, "The Fall of Nikita Khrushchev," p. 1113.

105. "Neppravlenaya stenogramma oktyabr'skogo (1964 g.) plenuma TsK KPSS," 14 October 1964, in Artizov et al., eds., *Nikita Khrushchev*, pp. 237–238.

106. Yu. V. Aksyutin, *Khrushchevskaya "ottepel'" i obshchestvennye nastroyeniya v SSSR v 1953–1964 gg.* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2004), p. 574.

107. A. E. Bovin, *XX vek kak zhizn': Vospominaniya* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2003), p. 124.

108. Tompson, "The Fall of Nikita Khrushchev," p. 1115.

109. "'Takovy, tovarishchi, fakty' (Doklad Prezidiuma TsK KPSS na oktyabr'skom Plenumе TsK KPSS (variant))," *Istochnik*, No. 2 (1998), pp. 101–125. This document includes the line "We believe it would be most reasonable to behave so that comrade Khrushchev himself resigned from his positions."

(*nepravlennaya stenogramma*) and the other is an edited version (*stenograficheskii otchet*) that was disseminated as the official version. First, according to the edited version, participants of the plenum spontaneously spoke out against having an open debate, whereas the verbatim transcript shows that in fact Brezhnev was the one who instructed the Central Committee to vote without any debate. Second, according to the edited version, Suslov told the plenum that Khrushchev had decided he did not want to speak—something that was clearly untrue. Third, the edited version claims that Brezhnev’s candidacy to be CPSU First Secretary was proposed spontaneously by the participants of the plenum, whereas the verbatim transcript makes clear that Brezhnev was nominated right away by Podgornyi and that no discussion about the nomination took place. Podgornyi simply asked, “Are there any other proposals?” and he then immediately said there were none.¹¹⁰

Memoir accounts provide further details about how the plenum was undermined. According to Mukhitdinov, when Marshal Semen Timoshenko heard Podgornyi’s proposal in favor of Brezhnev, the marshal said: “Who? Lenya as first secretary? Geez . . .” By the time Timoshenko raised his hand to request the right to speak, the plenum had already decided not to open the proposal up for discussion.¹¹¹ When the decision not to allow discussion was announced, “there was an uproar in the hall, different shouts were heard,” according to an eyewitness.¹¹² Semichastnyi was “deeply surprised” when Brezhnev announced there would be no debate. Just two hours earlier, the CPSU Presidium members had agreed to hold an open debate, and Semichastnyi did not realize that Brezhnev would annul that decision. He surmised that Brezhnev and the other plotters must have worried “it was still unclear what they would hear in their own direction” if a debate took place.¹¹³ The questionable nature of Brezhnev’s behavior was visible even to those who did not attend the plenum. Kamanin wrote in his journal,

The removal of Khrushchev can only be welcomed—this is a benefit to the USSR and the socialist camp—but it would be stupid not to see that such coups damage the authority of our political system. Our country lacks strong constitutional laws.¹¹⁴

110. Postnikov, “Dokumenty federal’nykh arkhivov o smene rukovodstva SSSR v oktyabre 1964 g.,” pp. 231–236.

111. *Ibid.*

112. Abrasimov, *Chetvert’ veka poslom Sovetskogo Soyuzza*, p. 72.

113. Larin, “35 let oktyabr’skoi revolyutsii,” p. 50.

114. Kamanin, *Skrytyi kosmos*, Vol. 1, p. 445.

Why did Khrushchev not fight back? Even now, decades later, Khrushchev's thinking remains murky. However, here we do see institutions playing a role, although not in the way predicted by Svolik. Khrushchev apparently felt that his opponents were relatively unified and that a fight therefore would not be worthwhile. He also apparently sensed that fighting back would have required acts that threatened regime stability and raised questions about his legitimacy as leader.

On the eve of the plot, Khrushchev evidently finally started to suspect something was up. In September, Vasilii Galyukov, former bodyguard of Ignatov (one of the plotters), told Khrushchev's son Sergei about a plot against his father. Galyukov provided specific details regarding conversations between Ignatov and Brezhnev about feeling out whether other individuals would support a move against Khrushchev. Khrushchev disclosed this revelation to Podgornyi, who laughed and denied it was true. Khrushchev decided he would leave Moscow two days later, on 30 September, to go on vacation in the south, but he did tell Mikoyan to speak with Galyukov.¹¹⁵ According to Ignatov, Khrushchev said to the members of the CPSU Presidium: "You are planning something against me, friends. Look here, if something is up I will smash you like puppies." When they all vowed that such a thing was impossible, Khrushchev told Mikoyan to investigate.¹¹⁶ On 29 September, in a conversation with the Indonesian leader Sukarno, Khrushchev even joked that "my friends want to evacuate me from Moscow so I go on vacation, because they still have some shreds of conscience." According to Khrushchev, he was given a short stay because of a demand to meet Sukarno, but then they said, "OK, but tomorrow you must get the hell out of Moscow."¹¹⁷

On 3 October, Mikoyan arrived in the Georgian resort town of Pitsunda bringing rough notes of a conversation with Galyukov. Both Khrushchev and Mikoyan spoke with Evgenii Vorob'ev, party secretary of Krasnodar, whom Galyukov had named as one of the conspirators. Vorob'ev denied any intriguing.¹¹⁸ Khrushchev did not act immediately, perhaps because he knew that Brezhnev was in Berlin and Podgornyi was flying to Chişinău in Moldova on 9 October. But on 11 October, according to Polyanskii, Khrushchev called

115. Khrushchev, *Pensioner soyuznogo znacheniya*, pp. 47, 51–62; and Naftali and Fursenko, *Khrushchev's Cold War*, p. 534.

116. Semanov, *Brezhnev*, p. 108.

117. "Zapis' besedy N. S. Khrushcheva s Sukarno," 29 September 1964, in Artizov et al., eds., *Nikita Khrushchev*, p. 151.

118. "Zapis' besedy A. I. Mikoyana s V. I. Galyukovym, sdelannaya S. N. Khrushchevym," n.d. (no later than 2 October 1964), in Artizov et al., eds., *Nikita Khrushchev*, pp. 154–160; and Taubman, *Khrushchev*, p. 7.

him (he had been left behind to manage daily affairs) to say that he knew about the conspiracy and promised to return in three or four days and “give them hell” (*kuz'kinu mat*).¹¹⁹

Gaston Palewski, a personal envoy of Charles de Gaulle, met Khrushchev shortly before the Soviet leader left for Moscow and was removed from power. On 9 October, Kosygin told Palewski that he could meet Khrushchev at 11:00 a.m. on 13 October. On 12 October, Palewski was told he should stay for lunch. He arrived in Sochi the same day. At 11:00 p.m., he was woken up and told that Khrushchev would instead see him at 9:30 a.m. and lunch was cancelled. During the meeting, Khrushchev “made an allusion to the president of the French Republic and noted that ‘only death was likely to put an end to the activity of a statesman.’” According to Palewski, Khrushchev was “in excellent form and gave no sign of suffering from age or ill health.” Palewski told Harry Hohler, the British first minister in Paris, that his conclusion was “Mr. Khrushchev was fore-warned but was confident that he could deal with the opposition.”¹²⁰

Khrushchev, however, accepted the CPSU Presidium’s decision. Sergei Khrushchev later concluded that his father believed the rumors were probably true but decided not to act on them because he “was immensely tired in a moral and physical sense.” After Khrushchev’s 70th birthday in April, he allegedly spoke seriously about retiring. If Khrushchev had decided to battle against his associates on the Presidium, it would have meant fighting against those same individuals he had promoted to the top over the previous seven years.¹²¹ Moreover, Khrushchev would not have felt a need to protect a particular policy agenda—he was not facing a coherent opposition platform. At a Presidium meeting on 14 October, Khrushchev said, “I told comrade Mikoyan—I will not fight, we share the same foundation [*osnova odna*]. Why would I look for paints and smear you?”¹²²

However, Khrushchev may also have believed it was worthwhile to involve the CPSU in another power struggle for one final reorganization of the leadership to affirm his legacy and set the stage for a prolonged

119. Artizov et al., eds., *Nikita Khrushchev*, p. 10.

120. Naftali and Fursenko, *Khrushchev’s Cold War*, pp. 535–536; “M. Baudet, Ambassadeur de France à Moscou, à M. Couve de Murville, Ministre des Affaires étrangères,” 16 October 1964, in *Documents diplomatiques français, 1964*, Vol. 2, *1er juillet–31 décembre* (Brussels: P.I.E.-Peter Lang S.A., 2002), p. 334; “H. A. F. Hohler to H. F. T. Smith,” 21 October 1964, in The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNAUK), Foreign Office (FO) 371/177665; and “Miscellaneous Information concerning the Coup against Mr. Khrushchev,” in TNAUK, FO 371/177666.

121. Khrushchev, *Pensioner soyuznogo znacheniya*, pp. 74–75.

122. “Protokol [bez nomera] (prodolzhenie): Zasedanie ot 14 oktyabrya,” p. 872.

(semi)-retirement. Brezhnev wanted to act in a way that guaranteed victory while minimizing the extent to which party norms were violated. If a coup went too far (e.g., if it involved the arrest of Khrushchev), that would damage the prestige of the new leadership. Actions that might destabilize the regime were especially taboo.

For Khrushchev to defeat his opponents, he would likely have had to rely on the military or KGB, including senior officials below the top leadership (e.g., regional commanders). He would have had to explain why a potential majority of the CPSU Presidium was "anti-party." The struggle would have damaged the very norms—on removing the power ministries from politics and an institutionalized succession—that Khrushchev wanted to introduce. Going quietly, moreover, would enhance Khrushchev's legacy. Khrushchev told the Presidium on 14 October "I am glad that, finally, the party has matured and can control any individual."¹²³

If that consideration did indeed shape Khrushchev's thinking, it means that institutions played at least some role—albeit in a way not predicted by Svolik. However, such behavior contradicts another core assumption of much of the political science on authoritarian regimes: individuals as power maximizers. Yet Khrushchev's behavior was far from unique. Consider the case of Hua Guofeng, Mao Zedong's designated successor, who said,

If the party had another internal struggle, the regular people would suffer. I stubbornly resigned from all positions. I told Marshal Ye [Jianying] before I did it. Some said I was a fool. Some said I was too honest. I do not regret it.¹²⁴

The good of the party as an institution played a role in Hua's thinking, and, despite Khrushchev's clear love for power, may also have affected the Soviet leader's considerations as well.

The Ambiguity of Power in Marxist-Leninist Systems

Why did Khrushchev fail to understand that his actions would lead to his removal by deputies frightened about their political lives? Characterizing his behavior as a stupid mistake simply does not do justice to the Soviet leader—he was an exceptionally cunning individual. What explains this puzzle? First, leaders operate in an environment in which signals are not always obvious:

123. Ibid.

124. Li Haiwen, "Hua Guofeng tan shi zhuan xie zuo," *Yanbuang chungqiu*, No. 4 (2015).

“Not only rational leaders, but rational experts, can look at the same information, and in the absence of any private information, come to different conclusions about expected outcomes.”¹²⁵ Marxist-Leninist systems are particularly hard to judge, and even top figures regularly misinterpret signals. Second, Khrushchev did have many reasons to be confident. Counterintuitively, it was precisely because he had so many reasons to be confident that his competitors were able to seize the rare opportunity to make a move.

Khrushchev was a skilled political operator. He had already engineered the defeat of figures such as Lavrentii Beria (who controlled the state security organs), Georgii Malenkov (Stalin’s heir-apparent and initial successor), Molotov (Stalin’s former right-hand man), and Zhukov (the legendary wartime marshal who seized Berlin). The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) believed that Khrushchev was marked by “a shrewd native intelligence, an agile mind, drive, ambition, and ruthlessness.”¹²⁶ Semichastnyi later said in an interview that Khrushchev “had crushed the likes of Malenkov and Molotov—all of them. As the saying goes, nature and his mama provided him with everything he needed: firmness of will, quick-wittedness and capacity for fast, careful thinking.”¹²⁷

Yet no one, including Khrushchev, had a clear idea about what was going on in the last years of Khrushchev’s rule. Stories of alleged plots were common, and even high-ranking figures often misjudged the political situation. As early as 1962, one individual found Molotov, who was serving as an envoy to the International Atomic Energy Agency, dancing with his wife. Molotov explained, “I am in a good mood today. They removed Khrushchev.”¹²⁸

Foreign observers reached very different conclusions about Khrushchev’s position. In March 1964, both the CIA and Mao Zedong raised the possibility that Khrushchev would be removed from office.¹²⁹ However, Walter Ulbricht, the leader of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) who regularly met with Soviet officials and had greater insight into Khrushchev’s inner circle, did not realize opposition was growing. Brezhnev was in the GDR on the

125. Jonathan Kirshner, “Rationalist Explanations for War?” *Security Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (September 2000), p. 148.

126. Frederick Kempe, *Berlin 1961: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Most Dangerous Place on Earth* (New York: Berkeley Publishing Group, 2011), p. 6.

127. Taubman, *Khrushchev*, p. 8.

128. Emiliya Gromyko-Piradova, *A. A. Gromyko i vek peremen: Vospominaniya docheri ob Andree Andreeviche Gromyko, ego sem’e i epokhe, v kotoruyu on zhil* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 2009), p. 165.

129. Simon Miles, “Envisioning Détente: The Johnson Administration and the October 1964 Khrushchev Ouster,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (September 2016), p. 727; and Wu Lengxi, *Shi nian lunzhan: 1956–1966 zhongguo guanxi huiyilu*, p. 738.

eve of the coup and did not return to the USSR until his colleagues alerted him that everything was prepared. Ulbricht escorted Brezhnev to Schönefeld Airport and told the man who was about to replace Khrushchev: "Send my warmest greetings to my dear friend Nikita Sergeevich."¹³⁰

Khrushchev himself understood how hard it was to read politics in Marxist-Leninist regimes:

Politics is like the old joke about the two Jews traveling on a train. One asks the other: "So, where are you going?" "I'm going to Zhytomyr." "What a sly fox," thinks the first Jew. "I know he's really going to Zhytomyr, but he told me Zhytomyr to make me think he's going to Zhmerynka."¹³¹

Perhaps one of the most significant factors causing Khrushchev to overestimate his strength is that he had good reason to believe two individuals who operated key nodes in the Marxist-Leninist power structure would support him: Semichastnyi in the KGB and Malinovskii in the military. The importance of the KGB and armed forces for the outcome can be seen in how their positions affected the attitude of key Presidium members. The memoirs of Vladimir Novikov include the following passage:

I asked: 'What, are they planning to remove Khrushchev?' [Dmitrii] Ustinov confirmed this. I had a question, how would the military and KGB feel about this? I received an answer: everything is in order here, there will be complete support. Then I agreed.¹³²

When Kosygin was told about the plot, he asked, "Who is the army and state security with?" Upon learning that Malinovskii and Semichastnyi were "aware of the course of events" (*v kurse dela*), Kosygin also agreed.¹³³ Suslov also asked who the military and KGB supported before giving an answer.¹³⁴ Therefore, three crucial figures made a decision only after learning the lineup among the power ministries.

If Khrushchev had been able to maintain Semichastnyi's loyalty, the coup would almost certainly have gone a very different way. The former KGB head

130. Yu. A. Kvitsinskii, *Vremya i sluchai: Zametki professionala* (Moscow: OLMA-PRESS, 1999), p. 209.

131. A. D. Sakharov, *Vospominaniya*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Vremya, 1989), Vol. 1, p. 481.

132. Novikov, "V gody rukovodstva N. S. Khrushcheva," p. 115.

133. Yurii Aksyutin, "Oktyabr' 1964 goda: 'V Moskve khoroshaya pogoda,'" in Yu. V. Aksyutin, comp., *L. I. Brezhnev: Materialy k biografii* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1991), p. 51; and Tompson, "The Fall of Nikita Khrushchev," p. 1107.

134. Yu. A. Abramova, "Vzaimootnosheniya rukovodstva KPSS i sovetskoii armii v period khrushchevskoi 'otpepli,' 1953–1964 gg.," Ph.D. Diss., Moskovskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, Moscow, 2000, p. 159.

writes in his memoirs that Brezhnev and Podgornyi understood that if they had not guaranteed the support of the KGB they would have been unable to remove Khrushchev. Semichastnyi played an important role in guaranteeing that support.¹³⁵ On 12 October, the day the conspirators moved against Khrushchev, Brezhnev called Semichastnyi's office at Lubyanka, the KGB headquarters, every hour to ask for an update.¹³⁶ Attempts by the party secretary of Ukraine to call Khrushchev in the south to warn him about the coup were blocked.¹³⁷ When Khrushchev arrived in Moscow after being summoned by the conspirators, he was met by Semichastnyi with several KGB operatives.¹³⁸ Shelest remarked that Khrushchev, still officially First Secretary of the CPSU and chairman of the Council of Ministers, was not even allowed to call his wife.¹³⁹ One former member of the KGB's Ninth Directorate, which was in charge of bodyguard services, recalls that for three days they had been on full alert in case of unrest in the army or special forces. The commander of Brezhnev's personal guard spent these nights at Brezhnev's door with an automatic weapon in his hands.¹⁴⁰

Khrushchev had reason to be surprised by this turn of events, having gone to great lengths to remove the KGB from politics. In the summer of 1957, Khrushchev gave a toast in which he said to then head of the KGB Serov,

The KGB is our eyes and ears, but if it looks in the wrong direction, then we will tear out their eyes, their ears we will rip off, and we will act as Taras Bul'ba said: it was I who gave birth to you, and it is I who will kill you.¹⁴¹

In October 1957, Khrushchev told Semichastnyi that the examples of Beria and Zhukov had caused party leaders to conclude that the KGB chairman and the minister of defense should not be members of the Presidium. If they were to become members, he said, "this will bring them much more power, and they do not always use it appropriately."¹⁴²

135. Semichastnyi, *Bespokoinoe serdtse*, p. 349.

136. *Ibid.*, p. 360.

137. Semanov, *Brezhnev*, p. 121.

138. A. Yakovlev, *Omut pamyati* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000), pp. 152–153.

139. Shelest, *Da ne sudimy budete*, p. 231.

140. V. Medvedev, *Chelovek za spinoi* (Moscow: RUSSLIT, 1994), p. 23.

141. Nikita Petrov, *Periyi predsedatel' KGB Ivan Serov* (Moscow: Materik, 2005), p. 338.

142. Abramova, "Vzaimootnosheniya rukovodstva KPSS i sovetской armii v period khrushchevskoi 'ottpeli,' 1953–1964 gg.," p. 289.

On 24 February 1959, Khrushchev publicly declared his intention to reduce the size of the state security organs.¹⁴³ He had to nominate figures from the party apparatus, such as Shelepin and Semichastnyi, to run the KGB. These two individuals were chosen because they lacked background in that organization. Khrushchev told Shelepin that his mission was to restore the KGB party style and methods of work: "I have one favor: do everything you can to ensure that they do not eavesdrop on me."¹⁴⁴ Semichastnyi, who had no experience in state security, was stunned when Khrushchev told him he would replace Shelepin as head of the KGB. Khrushchev cut him off, explaining that Shelepin had been picked precisely for that reason: the KGB did not need a specialist but instead someone who "would understand well why these organs exist and execute in them the policy of the party" and continue to enact reforms.¹⁴⁵

In an interview many years later, Semichastnyi expressed some guilt about his behavior, remarking, "even now, many years afterward, it is not very pleasurable for me to recall this history. Indeed, I am in fact his protégé."¹⁴⁶ Crucially, until Khrushchev was removed, his control over the state security organs had been nearly absolute. Semichastnyi told Brezhnev, "If you draw things out [news of the plot] will reach Khrushchev. And he will order me to arrest all of you. And I will indeed arrest you, Leonid Il'ich, do not doubt this."¹⁴⁷

Unlike the KGB, the military did not actively take part in Khrushchev's removal. As the Russian historian Yuliya Abramova has argued, the role of the armed forces was "more passive than active."¹⁴⁸ Yet this passivity was necessary for the plot to succeed and is especially notable in light of the crucial role the military played in the power struggles of 1953 and 1957.

Semichastnyi later spoke about the need to guarantee Defense Minister Malinovskii's support for the coup:

143. A. I. Kokurin and N. V. Petrov, eds., *Lubyanka: Organy VChK–OGPU–NKVD–NKGB–MGB–MVD–KGB: 1917–1991: Spravochnik*, ed. A. N. Yakovlev (Moscow: MFD, 2003), pp. 156–157.

144. Aleksandr Shelepin, "Istoriya—uchitel' surovyi," *Trud* (Moscow), 14 March 1991.

145. V. Semichastnyi, "Nezabyvaemoe," in Yu. V. Aksyutin, comp., *Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev: Materialy k biografii* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1989), pp. 52–53.

146. Larin, "35 let oktyabr'skoi revolyutsii," p. 50.

147. *Ibid.*

148. Abramova, "Vzaimootnosheniya rukovodstva KPSS i sovetskoi armii v period khrushchevskoi 'otpepli,' 1953–1964 gg.," p. 161.

No one wanted to end up in the position of Molotov, Malenkov, Kaganovich, and Shepilov, who joined them. Khrushchev was after all the commander-in-chief, and although a direct clash with him was highly unlikely, nevertheless this possibility could not be excluded until the last minute.¹⁴⁹

Brezhnev was wary of meeting with Malinovskii and waited until the last moment to speak with him: “If R. Ya. Malinovskii had not supported the plan, everything would have become extremely complicated [*chrezvychaino oslozhenilos’ by*].” Most interestingly, “on the eve of the conspiracy L. I. Brezhnev went to the GDR and returned only after Malinovskii gave his consent [to the plot] on 10 October.”¹⁵⁰

On 12 October, at 4:00 p.m., Marshal Konev called *Pravda* and demanded changes be made to his upcoming article on the commemoration of the liberation of Ukraine: all paragraphs on Khrushchev were to be removed.¹⁵¹ General Afanasii Beloborodov, commander of the Moscow Military District, also supported the removal of Khrushchev. The KGB’s military counterintelligence units were ordered to follow even the slightest movements in the Soviet Army and to inform the KGB immediately if troops moved toward Moscow.¹⁵² The general commanding the Transcaucasian Military District escorted Khrushchev from his vacation home to the airport, which was clearly meant to ensure Khrushchev’s departure.¹⁵³ Military cadets were sitting on the floor of the coatroom at the entrance to the Central Committee plenum.¹⁵⁴ Victor Louis later recalled having seen a convoy of military trucks, approximately four kilometers long, approaching Moscow on the Minsk Highway during the coup.¹⁵⁵

Just as in the case of Semichastnyi, Khrushchev had some reason to believe Malinovskii would support him. Until October 1964, Malinovskii had been Khrushchev’s reliable ally in the Soviet Army. Malinovskii’s toadyism and Khrushchev’s control over the armed forces is visible in an extraordinary letter from Marshal Vasilii Chuikov to the Presidium on “the abnormal situation” in the Ministry of Defense—a situation that had in his mind become particularly poor at the end of 1962. This document shows the extent to which

149. Semichastnyi, *Bespokoinoe serdtse*, p. 350.

150. *Ibid.*, p. 358.

151. Oleg Ignat’ev, “Shamany, vozhdii, partizany,” *Pravda* 5 (Moscow), 17 May 1996.

152. Semichastnyi, *Bespokoinoe serdtse*, pp. 358–360.

153. Khrushchev, *Pensionier soyuznogo znacheniya*, p. 86; and Taubman, *Khrushchev*, p. 9.

154. Yakovlev, *Omut pamyati*, p. 154.

155. Kevorkov, *Viktor Lui*, p. 147.

Malinovskii had, until the coup, served as Khrushchev's loyalist in the armed forces.

Chuikov maintains that, "using the patronage of N. S. Khrushchev, Comrades Malinovskii and [Andrei] Grechko . . . in an unchecked fashion managed the ministry, and in many cases acted in an arbitrary way." The Main Military Council, which was supposed to meet at least once a quarter, had met for the last time in February 1963, a year and a half before Chuikov's letter. But, according to Chuikov, even at that meeting the only discussion concerned a non-serious issue, and major issues that demanded collective discussion of the top military commanders were ignored. A similar state of affairs allegedly existed in the Collegium of the Ministry of Defense, where any ideas "unfavorable" to Malinovskii and Grechko were seen as undermining "one-man command" and the authority of the minister. Therefore, all decisions were taken entirely by the minister "without accounting for the members of the Council or Collegium." Issues were determined behind closed doors with no discussion. Malinovskii's obsequiousness toward Khrushchev had extended to interpretations of the war against Nazi Germany. "The matter reached the extent that assertions were made that we are indebted for almost all victories to Khrushchev, Malinovskii, and those with them."¹⁵⁶

Sergei Khrushchev writes in his memoirs that his father "had every reason to count on" Malinovskii. In 1943, Khrushchev allegedly saved Malinovskii from Stalin's wrath.¹⁵⁷ A CIA cable of 27 October 1964 notes that "on the whole Malinovskii is regarded as a Khrushchev man."¹⁵⁸ Although Malinovskii told the plotters the military would not get involved, Semichastnyi said "we were sure of its [the army's] support."¹⁵⁹

Therefore, Khrushchev had good reason to believe he was in a secure position. Perhaps that was precisely why he was vulnerable. Ignatov holds this position, remarking, "Of course, Khrushchev's self-confidence greatly betrayed him. He was, without a doubt, a real man with extreme cunning, but here he slipped up. Otherwise Brezhnev and company would have been smashed."¹⁶⁰

156. "Pis'mo V. I. Chuikova v Prezidium TsK KPSS o nenormal'nom polozhenii v Ministerstve oborony SSSR," 21 October 1964, in S. V. Kudryashov, ed., *Vestnik Arkhiva Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii: Sovetskaya Armiya: Gody reform i ispytaniĭ*, Vol. 2 (Moscow: IstLit, 2018), pp. 203–207.

157. Khrushchev, *Pensioner soyuznogo znacheniya*, p. 74; and Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), pp. 202–205.

158. "Comments of Soviet Official on Khrushchev Downfall and Behind the Scenes Struggles Leading to His Removal," CIA Intelligence Information Cable, 27 October 1964, in LBJL, NSF, CF, Box 219, USSR Cables 10/64–11/64. I thank Simon Miles for sharing this document with me.

159. Larin, "35 let oktyabr'skoi revolyutsii."

160. Semanov, *Brezhnev*, p. 108.

Semichastnyi similarly concludes that “Khrushchev was so sure of himself and was so sure that he completely controlled the situation in the country, he simply did not believe” that a coup was possible.¹⁶¹ As Tompson writes:

Khrushchev at various points seems either to have placed too much trust in his colleagues or simply to have underestimated their ability to mount a challenge to his leadership. Having defeated Malenkov, Molotov, Kaganovich and others, he is unlikely to have trembled with fear at the news that N. G. Ignatov was plotting against him.¹⁶²

Conclusion

The way Khrushchev achieved victory over his opponents in 1957 and was removed from power in 1964 is sometimes seen as a prologue to the stagnation of the Brezhnev era. In both cases, the interests of the regions as expressed in the Central Committee had triumphed over the leadership at the top, and the top leadership had been selected in an ad-hoc way. As one group of Russian historians and archivists argues,

The removal of Khrushchev in October 1964 became a fact of great political importance, which had significant impact on the political consciousness of both the highest Soviet leaders as well as the Soviet bureaucracy more generally. The entrenched party-state “nomenklatura” for the second time in a relatively short period demonstrated that it had real power in resolving the most important question—about the highest positions of power in the country. This circumstance played its role in the gradual change in the center’s regional policy in the 1970s, in the proclaimed focus on the guarantee of so-called stability in cadres—the immovability of cadres and the weakening of centralized control over regional leaders.¹⁶³

However, the evidence provided in this article suggests a somewhat different interpretation. Some level of dissatisfaction within the Central Committee was a necessary condition for the coup to succeed, Brezhnev and the other conspirators deliberately prevented the Central Committee from participating in those discussions. CPSU Presidium members acted mainly for reasons of self-preservation, not for the interests of the Central Committee.

161. Larin, “35 let oktyabr’skoi revolyutsii,” p. 50.

162. Tompson, “The Fall of Nikita Khrushchev,” p. 1104.

163. Khlevnyuk et al., eds., *Regional’naya politika N. S. Khrushcheva*, p. 17.

Still, it would be easy to draw less nuanced conclusions. According to Gorbachev's close ally Aleksandr Yakovlev, even decades later, Gorbachev did not move aggressively with reforms because of a fear the party elite would remove him as they had removed Khrushchev in 1964. Yakovlev did not share Gorbachev's evaluation of the situation, believing instead that the old guard "were wretched cowards" who had "been shaking in fear since Stalin's time" and that these conservative figures would acquiesce if Gorbachev rapidly promoted younger liberals into the leadership. Anatolii Chernyaev similarly felt that the Central Committee would have approved if Gorbachev had removed conservative figures like Egor Ligachev.¹⁶⁴

These findings suggest that "powerful" and "weak" are problematic labels for authoritarian leaders. At least sometimes, even the highest leaders have little understanding of their own position—not because they are foolish, but because their position is inherently ambiguous. Scholars and policymakers might be better served to disaggregate the structural features that both favor and weaken a leader, while also identifying what counterfactuals would make one of those forces decisive. At the very least, we should be skeptical of arguments that authoritarian politics is a simple popularity contest. The inability to determine what precise constellation of variables would cause a leader's defeat even *most* of the time may strike political scientists as unsatisfying. Yet the finding that a particular phenomenon is marked by high levels of contingency (and why) should be just as valuable—especially when the evidence strongly bears out that finding.¹⁶⁵

164. William Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017), pp. 245–246, 350, 691.

165. On this point, see Joseph Torigian, "A New Case for the Study of Individual Events in Political Science," *Global Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (December 2021), pp. 1–11.