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Economic Strategies in the “Khrushchev Decade”: Illusions and Disappointments¹

The article is devoted to an analysis of the USSR's socioeconomic development strategy during the “Khrushchev decade” and an assessment of its practical results. Based on an interpretation of the key factors and determinants of strategy formation, the authors clarify a number of controversial issues existing in historiography and attempt to explain systemic failures in achieving the stated goals. The role and significance of ideological, institutional, structural-production and personal aspects in choosing the paths, methods and mechanisms of the chosen strategy are articulated. When interpreting specific historical material, key theoretical provisions of the concepts of post-industrial development, catch-up modernization and the administrative-bureaucratic market are used, which are significant for the analysis of the fundamental principles of practical politics and the reconstruction of the real process of economic management. It is concluded that the policy of the Khrushchev leadership, in addition to its inability to ensure the acceleration of socioeconomic development, had one important, albeit unforeseen, consequence. It contributed to the transformation of the Stalinist “command” economy into an “economy of approvals” with its inherent reproduction of “institutional traps”, insusceptibility to innovation and fading dynamics. The latter, in the long term, ensured the preservation of the country's previous model of economic development, contributed to the formation of negative trends in the further evolution of the Soviet economy and played a decisive role in the subsequent collapse of the USSR.

Keywords: USSR, strategy of socioeconomic development, “Khrushchev decade”, catch-up modernization, model of bureaucratic bargaining

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The “Khrushchev decade” stands out as a dynamic, eventful, and contentious chapter in Soviet history. Initially hailed as a “great” period in official ideology, it later incurred criticism as a time of political and economic “voluntarism” following Nikita S. Khrushchev’s resignation from the leadership of the CPSU and the state in October 1964. Despite subsequent attempts to consign Khrushchev’s historical role to obscurity, a comprehensive understanding of late Soviet society demands an in-depth analysis of this pivotal era. This period is marked by a decisive shift from the totalitarian Stalinist political model to a more liberal authoritarian regime during the “Thaw”. Not less important is the fact that these years symbolized the first significant revision of Stalin’s economic strategy. A nuanced exploration of this era necessitates the examination of political, ideological, institutional, structural, and personal factors influencing the selection of paths, methods, and mechanisms to achieve socioeconomic goals. This analysis must consider the alignment of tasks with results, the relevance of formal and informal economic institutions, and their appropriateness in addressing contemporary challenges, especially concerning the creation of new technological structures and the transition to a post-industrial model of development.

Khrushchev’s economic policy during his tenure was notably ambitious and prominently communicated to all societal strata, but its implementation did not yield the expected results. This article seeks to elucidate various aspects within the historiographical discourse, offering the authors’ interpretation of the underlying causes contributing to the failures of the ambitious economic development strategies during the “Khrushchev era.” The authors acknowledge that their attempt is not the first nor the final one, refraining from claiming an exhaustive scope.

First of all, it should be noted that the “Khrushchev decade” embodied numerous achievements in industry, science, and technology, alongside notable failures in economics and geopolitics. At first sight, it gives a sense of more successes than setbacks. The period witnessed rapid development in national industry, structural improvements, and increased efficiency in resource utilization. Scientific and technological progress placed the Soviet Union among global leaders in atomic energy, rocket and space technology, and military radio electronics. The technical equipment of production in the “civil sectors” of the economy increased noticeably. Even agriculture, traditionally considered the “Achilles heel” of the Soviet economy, experienced productivity growth in the 1950s, contributing to a rise in per capita food consumption. In terms of economic growth rates,

the USSR, along with Germany and Japan, was ahead of other developed countries, including the USA and Great Britain.

Material life indicators also demonstrated improvement, with enhanced access to industrial goods, modern household appliances, expanded housing availability, and a broader network of healthcare, cultural, and educational institutions. Consumption of food products increased. Life expectancy saw a significant growth. Socioeconomic development data indicated a narrowing gap with leading Western countries by the mid-1960s, with per capita gross domestic product reaching 40–45% of U.S. figures, exceeding pre-World War II levels by 1.5 times.² Optimistic views prevailed, anticipating the imminent closure of the remaining gap and the Soviet Union’s eventual surpassing of the U.S. in both scale and efficiency. These sentiments permeated not only the Soviet leadership, who were making ambitious plans for creating the “material and technical base of communism”, but also the broader populace, fostering expectations of a prosperous future.

This belief in the USSR’s inevitable ascension to global economic preeminence extended to Western commentators, political spheres, and the intellectual elite. Such perspectives even found a place in university courses, as evidenced by the 1961 edition of P. Samuelson’s widely used Western economics textbook, predicting the Soviet Union’s national income to surpass that of the United States by 1984.³ However, all this has not become a reality. While these optimistic projections might question the necessity of Khrushchev’s initiated reforms when viewed superficially, a deeper examination reveals underlying factors shaping economic development motives in a different light.

The second pivotal question that arises pertains to an apparent disconnect between the formulation and vocalization of ambitious strategies expressed in the “unanimously approved” key political document of the Soviet era – the 3rd program of the CPSU – but also manifested in economic policies and subsequent reforms. Despite these concerted efforts, the anticipated outcomes failed to materialize, ultimately

2 See ANGUS MADDISON, *The World Economy: Millennium Perspective Development Centre of the OECD* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2001); И. С. КОРОЛЕВ (ред.), *Мировая экономика: глобальные тенденции за 100 лет* (Москва: «Юристъ», 2003); А. А. ДЫНКИН (ред.), *Мировая экономика: прогноз до 2020 года* (Москва: *Магистр*, 2007), etc.

3 See ТОМ БЕТЕЛЛ, *Собственность и процветание* [пер. с англ.] (Москва: Ирисэн, 2008), 205-206; DARON ACEMOGLU, JAMES A. ROBINSON, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012), 145-146.

determining the fate of their initiator. A closer examination reveals that rather than witnessing a rapid upsurge in production volumes during the development and implementation of the new strategy, the growth rate of the economy decelerated at the juncture of the 1950s and 1960s. Concurrently, plans for a sustained increase in household incomes proved unattainable. Documents prepared by N. S. Khrushchev's contemporaries for the October 1964 plenum of the CPSU Central Committee unanimously acknowledged a severe deterioration in key economic indicators, asserting that the economy had experienced an unprecedented decline in growth rates over the preceding eight years, twice, according to data from the Institute of Economics of the USSR Academy of Sciences. Khrushchev bore the brunt of the responsibility for these setbacks, being accused of major mistakes in the implementation of the "general line of the party," which led to his removal from leadership.⁴ However, the change in leadership did not yield the expected results. While the economy appeared to stabilize somewhat in the second half of the 1960s following Khrushchev's removal, this respite proved short-lived. Negative trends in economic development resurfaced at the beginning of the next decade, prompting the pressing question: what were the primary reasons underlying the economic downturn, why did the promising "Khrushchev decade" conclude in failure, and what factors laid the groundwork for a sustained decline in economic dynamics? This inquiry necessitates a comprehensive exploration of the intricacies surrounding the economic policies, reforms, and strategic decisions made during the "Khrushchev era". Delving into the underlying factors that hindered realization of the intended goals is crucial for unraveling the complexities that led to the downturn and, subsequently, the reassessment of the trajectory of Soviet economic development.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DISCOURSE AND UNRESOLVED PROBLEMS

Nevertheless, an immense literature is devoted to economic development in the "Khrushchev decade". The subject of the economic policy of the "Khrushchev decade" has been extensively examined in a plethora of research, including studies conducted during the Soviet era that still

⁴ Никита Хрущев. 1964. *Стенограммы пленума ЦК КПСС и другие документы* (Москва: МФД, 2007), 185–186, 217–231, 239–252; 255–267.

retain scientific relevance.⁵ Soviet historiography, however, primarily aimed at validating the economic course of the party and government, rather than providing an objective reconstruction of socioeconomic processes. Foreign studies, while contributing to the discourse, often displayed an over-politicized nature due to methodological approaches that, at times, led to simplified conclusions. The reliance on concepts such as totalitarianism, assumptions about the “innate” expansionism of Russian statehood, and simplistic views on management mechanisms hindered nuanced historical reconstructions.

In modern historiography, these problems have been largely overcome, mostly because of the “archival revolution”, which expanded the possibilities of acquaintance with previously inaccessible documents. However, a number of important questions remain. There is a need to clarify the reasons for the decline in the effectiveness of economic policy, manifested in a decrease in investment activity, increasing difficulties in using scientific and technological achievements in production, and a deterioration in its quality parameters. The role of the military-strategic factor in determining current and long-term development priorities has not been clarified. Several key questions remain unanswered, including the role of military-political and ideological factors in economic strategy, the reasons behind decreased investment activity and deteriorating qualitative parameters of production development, the failure of plans to expedite scientific and technological progress, and the efficacy of measures taken to address emerging difficulties in production management, budgetary and financial spheres, and policy regulating prices and incomes.

However, objective limitations, particularly related to the accounting of Soviet defense expenditures, hinder researchers in this area. This is mainly due to the fact that official defense budgets failed to encompass all costs, concealing expenses related to building military power, weapons production, nuclear weaponry, and mobilization reserves within other state budget categories. This obscured the true extent of militarization in the Soviet economy, complicating assessments. So, it is possible to estimate the level of militarization of the Soviet economy only very approximately. According to former leaders of the Soviet military-industrial complex, in the post-war years, defense spending (including capital investments of military-industrial ministries, defense research and development work,

5 See EVGENY ARTEMOV, EVGENY VODICHEV, “The Economic Policy of the “Khrushchev’s Decade”: Historiography of the Research Field”, *Quaestio Rossica*. 8, no. 5 (2020): 1822-1839.

and the maintenance of mobilization reserves) amounted to about 10% of the gross national product.⁶ However, it is not clear how the above assessment took into account the costs of “dual-use” research, financing of the nuclear weapons complex and the creation of “long-range” missiles, carried out under the difficult-to-recover item “special expenses”. Perhaps the difficulties in determining their volume, along with differences in calculation methods, explain the higher estimates of Western analysts and researchers (from 12-15 to 15-17 and even up to 24% of GDP). But in any case, this figure was at least 2-3 times higher than that in the USA.⁷ Recent calculations of the enlarged intersectoral balances of the USSR national economy for 1950–1970 have provided some clarity, enabling a better understanding of the dynamics of weapons procurement.⁸ However, these calculations remain limited in their circulation within scientific discourse.

Another critical aspect relates to the military-economic dimensions of the national economic strategy. Presently, numerous researchers posit that allocating efforts and resources to weapons creation or enhancement restricts scientific and technical research, hampers innovation activity, and ultimately impedes economic growth.⁹ However, this perspective is not entirely straightforward. The development of nuclear weapons, for example, gave rise to research areas and technologies extending beyond defense needs, exemplifying the multifaceted impact of military endeavors.¹⁰ Yet, an unbalanced buildup of military potential undeniably constrains the resolution of a broad spectrum of socioeconomic challenges. Hence, it becomes crucial to establish and subject to scientific analysis the

6 Ю. Д. Маслюков, Е. С. Глубоков, «Планирование и финансирование военной промышленности СССР», в *Вооружение России. Т. 1. Советская военная мощь* (Москва: Изд. дом «Оружие и технологии», 2010), 138–139.

7 JOHN L. GADDIS, *The Cold War: A New History* (N.Y.: The Penguin Press, 2005), 213–214; VLADIMIR KONTOROVICH, *Reluctant Cold. Warriors Economist and National Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 30.

8 See Ю. В. Яременко, *Приоритеты структурной политики и опыт реформы. Избран. труды в 3 кн.* (Москва: Экономика, 1999), 253–261; The second quadrant of the input-output balances includes the column “other final consumption”. It is supposed to reflect the supply of conventional types of military equipment and weapons (without detail).

9 JOEL MOKYR, *The Lever of Riches: Technological Creativity and Economic Progress* (N.Y., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 217–220.

10 В. Г. Бондур, Г. Н. Рыкованова, А. А. Макоско (ред.) Академия наук и атомная отрасль. Научные сессии Общих собраний отделений РАН. Декабрь 2020 г. (Москва: Издательство РАН, 2021); Е. Т. Артемов, *Атомный проект в координатах сталинской экономики* (Москва: РОССПЭН, 2017).

optimal balance between maintaining national security and the capacity of the economy. Otherwise, the very foundations of its development are undermined. The Soviet Union’s experience during the “Khrushchev decade” appears to underscore the significance of finding this equilibrium.

The prevailing interpretation attributing the failures of Khrushchev’s strategies to “voluntarism” and the “low level of competence of the ruling elite” stems from the Soviet historiographical tradition. This perspective posits that adherence to ideological stereotypes hindered a critical assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the “exhausted” economic development model, impeding overdue transformations.¹¹ Recently, some historians have sought to “rehabilitate” the classic version of the “command economy,” contending that the attenuation of economic growth resulted from the “elimination of key factors” inherent to the “lead model.”¹²

In contrast, an alternative viewpoint places emphasis on the “innate” inefficiency and irresponsibility of the “socialist economic system,” suggesting that its flaws predetermined the growth of crisis phenomena as production scale increased and structural complexity intensified.¹³ This perspective matured during the “late Khrushchev” period, culminating in a “sharp decline” in the pace of development. The ongoing debate surrounding these contrasting views highlights the complexity of assessing the impact of economic strategies during the “Khrushchev era” and underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of the interplay between political decisions, economic policies, and the overarching socioeconomic landscape.

The interpretative landscape surrounding the historical process is rife with various facts, often selectively employed to validate preconceived theoretical constructs and generalizations. Conclusions drawn from such selectivity tend to disregard substantial amounts of concrete historical

11 See В. А. ШЕСТАКОВ, «Социально-экономическое развитие СССР в период хрущёвской оттепели», в *XX век в российской истории: проблемы, поиски, решения. Вып 4* (Москва, Издательство ИРИ РАН, 2010), 245–251; etc.

12 В. Ю. КАТАСОНОВ, *Экономика Сталина* (Москва: Ин-т русской цивилизации, 2014); Е. Ю. СПИЦЫН, *Хрущёвская слякоть. Советская держава в 1953–1964 годах* (Москва: Концептуал, 2020); А. С. ГАЛУШКА, А. К. НИЯЗМЕТОВ, М. О. ОКУЛОВ, *Кристалл роста к русскому экономическому чуду* (Москва: Изд-во «Наше завтра», 2021); etc.

13 В. НАЙШУЛЬ, «Высшая и последняя стадия социализма», в *Погружение в трясину* (Москва: Прогресс, 1991), 36–41; MANCUR OLSON, *Power and Prosperity. Outgrowing Communist and Capitalist Dictatorship* (N.Y.: Basic Books, 2000), 111–116; Е. Т. ГАЙДАР, *Гибель империи. Уроки для современной России. Изд. 2, испр. и доп.* (Москва: РОССПЭН, 2007), 9–10; RICHARD E. ERICSON, “Command Economy and Its Legacy”, in *The Oxford Handbook of the Russian Economy* (Oxford, N.Y.: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), 52–57.

data. This tendency is evident in attempts to attribute the slowdown in economic dynamics during the first half of the 1960s solely to a deterioration in the “quality of economic management.”¹⁴ However, a more pragmatic explanation was acknowledged even in Soviet times – a pronounced deceleration in the growth rate of industrial capital investment.¹⁵ It is plausible that the actual decline was more substantial than officially captured, given the peculiarities in accounting for defense costs. Despite this acknowledgment, analysis of the underlying causes of the downturn in investment activity has not received adequate attention. The question of explaining the failed acceleration in the latter part of the “Khrushchev decade” remains pertinent, demanding a critical examination of the proclaimed strategies. The authors hope that this topic will allow them to contribute to addressing the key problem of Russian economic history: why the country, despite all the efforts made since the 18th century, failed to close the gap with advanced economies; how to explain the cyclical nature of its development, when a period of high rates of economic growth was followed by stagnation and even a rollback from the achieved positions; were there alternative scenarios for the development of events? If yes, then why were they not implemented in practice?

CHALLENGES OF TIME AND PATH DEPENDENCE: THE STRATEGY’S DICHOTOMY

The strategies of the “Khrushchev era” brought about notable changes in the country, although many of these transformations proved inconsistent and incomplete. Whether existing only in plans or implemented with varying degrees of success, these initiatives did not alter the fundamental nature of the prevailing system. As a result, at the turn of the 1950-1960s a long-term downward trend in economic activity took shape. Thus, the “article of faith” that the country was progressively moving towards a bright communist future which was “just around the corner,” was called into question. The discrepancy between long-term plans and reality inevitably resulted in increased social tension. The situation was aggravated by the fact that

14 See Г. И. Ханин, *Динамика экономического развития СССР* (Новосибирск: Наука. Сибирское отделение, 1991), 293; Ханин, *Экономическая история России в новейшее время. Т. 1* (Новосибирск: Издательство НГТУ, 2008), 172–174.

15 Яременко, *Приоритеты структурной политики и опыт реформы*, 378.

these plans were conveyed to society through a set of ideologemes. Most of them were expressed in simple and uncomplicated formulas, promising the achievement of material abundance “for one and all” within the life of one generation. The decisions of the “party and government”, which determined the logic of socioeconomic strategies and practices, had a technocratic orientation.¹⁶ Thus, ideologemes were transformed into numbers, which connected Khrushchev’s understanding of strategic prospects with his predecessor in power. While Stalin’s plans never gained official status or became programmatic documents, Khrushchev’s ambitions, prominently associated with the 3rd program, led to a significant setback for the CPSU.

While postulating development goals at the doctrinal level, the foundational principles of an administrative-distributive economy remained unquestioned. Commodity-money relations on the path to communism were allowed only in a heavily restricted format. The absence of market mechanisms diminished the motivation of economic actors. Competition, with rare, unadvertised exceptions in the military-industrial complex, where it had a different character, was suppressed. In Stalin’s time, it was rather a struggle between leaders of various ranks for physical survival.¹⁷ The attempt to replace the threat of repression with appeals and slogans, undertaken during Khrushchev’s liberalization of the regime, turned out to be untenable. They did not work without strict administrative pressure and emergency measures. In this regard, Khrushchev and his circle were not only unable to understand the specifics of the modern stage of development of society and the economy in the conditions of new technological structures and trends of post-industrialism emerging in the world, but also, by and large, did not understand how the command economy works, or what its advantages and disadvantages were.

Moreover, in formulating and presenting development strategies during the “Khrushchev era,” the pursuit of extremely ambitious economic indicators rested on an overly optimistic extrapolation of positive trends. The robust economic dynamics of the 1950s were underpinned by short-term growth factors. In conditions of expanding scale and complexity of

16 See A. A. Фокин, «Коммунизм не за горами». Образы будущего у власти и населения СССР на рубеже 1950-1960-х годов (Москва: РОССПЭН, 2017); Е. Г. Водичев, Н. Н. Аблажей, «Стратегический план «построения коммунизма» в СССР: амбиции и идеология хрущевской эпохи», *ЭКО. Всероссийский экономический журнал*, no. 2 (2023): 137–151.

17 See Е. Т. Артемов, «Мобилизация и конкуренция в советском атомном проекте», *ЭКО. Всероссийский экономический журнал*, no. 7 (2019): 156–172.

the structure of production, they could not be maintained for long. As some experts rightly point out, “Even when the Soviets achieved rapid economic growth, there was little technological change in most of the economy, though by pouring massive resources into the military they were able to develop military technologies and even pull ahead of the United States in the space and nuclear race for a short while. But this growth without creative destruction and without broad-based technological innovation was not sustainable and came to an abrupt end”.¹⁸ Despite the evidence that radical changes in the economic mechanism were necessary for enduring impact, there was a reluctance to acknowledge this reality. Long-term strategic planning was characterized by a tendency where politics and ideology took precedence over economic considerations, and the indoctrination of the population replaced material incentives for labor.

Khrushchev’s economic plans were often shaped by the dynamics of political maneuvering, serving the primary goal of consolidating power. The influence of Khrushchev’s personality was also pronounced, with his approach oscillating between militant orthodoxy, centrist positions dictated by expediency, and a tendency towards radical reforms within the confines of the existing party regime. It entailed frequent zigzags in economic policy.¹⁹

The force of inertia inherent in the Soviet economic model, coupled with the concept of “path dependence” or the “rut effect,” played a pivotal role. The resistance of the existing system to any attempts at developing and implementing new economic strategies proved formidable, resulting in institutional blocking of reforms that threatened, at least in some way, the established order. As a result, the Soviet economy, even under Khrushchev, continued to rely on concepts and institutions from earlier times, which in the new conditions hindered the transition to balanced, progressive development. In particular, despite the declared emphasis on a “consumer” orientation in national economic planning, significant challenges persisted in plan implementation. For instance, discussions on the plan and budget for the development of the national economy for 1963 revealed disparities in overfulfillment in heavy industry. Khrushchev himself emphasized: “We now have a large overfulfillment of metal and steel. And that’s good, of course. But we have shortfalls in textiles, comrades. Now this is a

18 DARON ACEMOGLU, JAMES A. ROBINSON, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*, 110-111.

19 CARL A. LINDEN, *Khrushchev and the Soviet Leadership: With an Epilogue on Gorbachev* (Baltimore; London: John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1990), 23.

contradiction, because these are budget savings. Then it’s about meeting the needs of the people.” However, despite criticism, this problem was constantly reproduced. A year later, Khrushchev also noted that “the overfulfillment was due to heavy industry and the underfulfillment of the light industry plan,” which, according to him, violated the decisions of the 21st Congress of the CPSU.²⁰ This recurrent pattern reflected the systemic issues and institutional hurdles that impeded effective economic planning and implementation during the “Khrushchev era.”

The development of the production of the means of production, a foundational principle since the era of Stalinist industrialization, was perceived as an unalterable law in the socialist economy. In this regard, Khrushchev can be seen as a continuator of previous strategies. Even if all his economic initiatives had been fully implemented within the economic management system, the systemic foundation of the Soviet model of industrial modernization would not have been threatened. Certain nuances in economic policy and organizational changes, notably the economic councils (sovnarkhoz) reform, lacked a fundamental basis.²¹ Shifting the emphasis in the management system from industrial branches to territories, as seen in the sovnarkhoz reform, proved to be ineffective in Soviet practice, unlike similar reforms in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) after Mao Zedong. In the PRC, reform of the industrial system created according to Soviet patterns stimulated competition between regions, tying the position and career prospects of regional leaders to the results they achieved. This setup provided incentives for economic growth. However, the Soviet Union under Khrushchev lacked the discipline and incentive structures present in China.²² The ability of Khrushchev to influence regional party leaders and maintain competition using administrative methods was constrained by the need to secure political support from them. His counter-reforms, such as consolidating economic councils at the level of macro-regions and dividing the territorial structures of CPSU

20 «Стенографическая запись выступления Н.С. Хрущёва на заседании Президиума ЦК КПСС 5 ноября 1962 г.» и «Стенографическая запись заседания Президиума ЦК КПСС. 10 ноября 1963 г.», в Президиум ЦК КПСС, 1954–1964: черновые протокольные записи заседаний, стенограммы, постановления: в 3 т. Т. 3. (Москва: РОССПЭН, 2008), 628 и 764.

21 Е. Г. Водичев, «Реорганизация системы управления экономикой в период «хрущевского десятилетия»: намерения и результаты», в *Экономическая история: Ежегодник. 2022* (Москва: Издательство ИРИ РАН, 2023), 402–432.

22 See RONALD COASE, NING WANG, *How China Became Capitalist* (N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

management, ultimately weakened his political support base and played a crucial role in his downfall in October 1964.

Moreover, Khrushchev's innovations in strategic planning, particularly the emphasis on forming a socialist analogue of a "consumer society," faced resistance from the political elite. The Soviet leaders didn't think it was possible to shift all resources towards improving welfare, as had been done during Stalin's concentration on heavy industry. These potential changes threatened the existing status quo and the interests of a significant portion of the ruling elite. The decision-making mechanism and inter-sectoral balances in the economy were areas of concern, and the policies of the Khrushchev leadership unintentionally contributed to transforming the Stalinist "command" economy into an "economy of approvals." In the previous historical period, disagreements had been leveled out due to a rigid vertical of power, but under the conditions of liberalization of the regime this became impossible. From now on, the controllability of the system could only be maintained on the basis of coordinating the interests of various economic and political actors. Although under Khrushchev a model of "bureaucratic bargaining" had just begun to take shape, it was not easy to harmonize the interests of economic and political leaders in the search for compromise solutions. In addition, such a system needed an effective moderator, a role for which the impulsive Khrushchev was not exactly suitable.

"GUNS", "BUTTER" AND SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION: INCOMPATIBLE TASKS AND INEFFECTIVE TOOLS

The challenges faced during the "Khrushchev era" were exacerbated by the attempt to address difficult-to-combine tasks simultaneously. Some of them had to be sacrificed, and with all Khrushchev's passion for consumerism, the military-industrial sector could not be such a sacrifice; the role of its leaders in the Soviet political-economic system was already too significant. Khrushchev himself repeatedly stated the need to reduce the defense burden on the economy, calling for "going bolder" with the development of "production of consumer goods," etc.²³

23 «"Мы находимся на рубеже славы или позора". Замечания тов. Хрущева к записке о проекте основных направлений развития народного хозяйства СССР на 1966-1970 гг. 22 сентября 1964 г.», *Источник*, no. 6 (2003): 184.

But in practice, directly opposite decisions were followed, which included increasing investments in the production of ever new weapons systems. This was facilitated by the procedure for developing defense programs that developed under Khrushchev. These were prepared in the “bowels” of the Commission on Military-Industrial Issues of the Presidium of the USSR Council of Ministers, the Military-Technical Committee for Atomic, Hydrogen and Missile Weapons under the USSR Defense Council with the involvement of “interested parties”: general and chief designers of weapons systems, heads of leading defense enterprises, and representatives of the command of the Armed Forces. Considering the “unanimous” desire of the country’s top leadership to radically strengthen the position of the Soviet Union on the world stage, no one dared to challenge their proposals. Therefore, the programs they prepared were approved by the Defense Council virtually without any double-checking and were formalized in the form of resolutions of the CPSU Central Committee and the USSR Council of Ministers.

It is true that, when Khrushchev was removed from all posts, he was blamed for the loss of control over the activities of the military-industrial complex. According to members of the Presidium of the Central Committee, they had no idea what “was going on there.” And Khrushchev himself, who “monopolized” the solution to “military issues,” “did not know” this.²⁴ But former colleagues clearly exaggerated Khrushchev’s personal responsibility. Of course, as chairman of the Defense Council, he could block the implementation of some defense programs. This even extended to equipping the Armed Forces with nuclear weapons, and the suspension of the nuclear artillery munitions program is an example of that.²⁵ However, such decisions could not reverse the trend towards a rapid build-up of military power. The transformation of the “command economy” into the “economy of approvals” naturally turned the military-industrial complex into a difficult-to-manage conglomerate of “appanage principalities” “vitaly” interested in increasing military spending. And their explosive growth at the turn of the 1950s-1960s became the root cause of the slowdown in economic dynamics.²⁶

24 «Документ №6 Рабочая протокольная запись В.Н. Малина заседания Президиума ЦК КПСС», в А. Н. Яковлев (ed.), Никита Хрущев. 1964. *Стенограммы пленумов ЦК КПСС и другие документы* (Москва: Наше время, 2007), 225.

25 Б. В. Литвинов, *Грани прошедшего (триптих)* (Москва: Издательство АТ, 2006), 333–338.

26 See E. T. АРТЕМОВ, Е. Г. ВОДИЧЕВ, «По сталинским лекалам: экономическая стратегия коммунистического строительства в программных установках хрущёвского руководства», *Идеи и идеалы*. 13, no. 4, part 2 (2021): 324–347.

Of course, the problem of building up military power was not discussed in the public space. Both in official documents and in the speeches of political leaders it was categorically stated: “the party and the government” are doing everything necessary and sufficient to strengthen the country’s security, to defend “the cause of peace and socialism throughout the world.” The main priorities of the country’s economic development were chemicalization and electrification of the national economy, mechanization and automation of production processes, and the widespread use of nuclear technologies for peaceful purposes.²⁷ These priorities became the “calling card” of the Khrushchev era, although, by and large, there was nothing original here, with the exception, perhaps, of the “peaceful atom”. Electrification, chemicalization, etc. in Stalin’s time were also called the main directions of scientific and technical (technical and technological) progress, since this reflected modern trends in the development of production.

However, Khrushchev failed to realize that scientific and technological progress, as a key factor in intensifying production, required a departure from the logic of industrialization and structural changes in the economy. He did not understand that the slowdown was rooted in the Soviet economic mechanism, which rejected scientific and technological advancements and impeded the transition to intensive development factors. This occurred despite the ideologemes of the scientific and technological revolution theory and slogans about the advantages of the socialist economic system. This failure to align economic policies with the potential of scientific and technological progress contributed to the challenges faced during the “Khrushchev era.”

The doctrinal documents of the “Khrushchev decade” left a contradiction unresolved. The dilemma of understanding the processes taking place in the economy during the transition to the stage of post-industrialism, either within the framework of a “socialist economic system” or in the context of a “market-centric” model of economic development, was preserved and even strengthened.²⁸ The Soviet conceptualization of post-industrialism,

27 See Khrushchev’s speech, «О Программе Коммунистической партии Советского Союза. Доклад Н. С. Хрущёва», в XXII съезд КПСС. 17–31 окт. 1961 г. Стенографический отчет: В 3 т. Т. 1 (Москва: Госполитиздат, 1962), 148–257.

28 See A. В. Бузгалин, А. И. Колганов, *Теория социально-экономических трансформаций. Прошлое, настоящее и будущее экономик «реального социализма» в глобальном постиндустриальном мире* (Москва: ТЕИС, 2003); Idem. *Сталин и распад СССР* (Москва: Эдиториал УРСС, 2003); Idem. «„Рыночноцентрическая“ экономическая теория устарела», *Voprosy ekonomiki*, no. 3 (2004): 36–49.

as embodied in the theory of scientific and technological revolution, neglected social changes amid the formation of new technological structures. Instead of driving the USSR toward a post-industrial economy, this conceptualization acted as a brake. The promotion of ideologemes about relying on the achievements of science and technology persisted, but practical absorption of innovations lagged behind. Khrushchev himself later expressed frustration about the inability to catch up with capitalist economies. Once he emotionally concluded: “We are catching up with everything, and we just can’t catch up with this rotten capitalism. And this rotten capitalism gives us such lessons that we open our mouths in amazement.”²⁹

Of course, Khrushchev was not in power alone. Various political leaders around him, such as L. I. Brezhnev, F. R. Kozlov, N. V. Podgorny, D. S. Polyansky, M. A. Suslov, and A. N. Shelepin, also seemed to lack a deep understanding of practical economics. They may have initially supported Khrushchev’s economic allusions and goals, but it is possible that both the ruling circles and Khrushchev himself understood the unattainability of the goals and the ineffectiveness of the proposed means. They might have assumed that a new generation of leaders would bear responsibility for the outcomes. Alternatively, Khrushchev might have been the last leader genuinely believing in communist ideals, but a degree of “managerial cynicism” cannot be ruled out. The lack of responsibility taken by political authorities for declared development goals became a typical practice in Soviet management.

Another factor was the presence of ossified social institutions formed in the 1930s. Under Khrushchev, this led to “negative selection,” blocking the advancement of leaders who thought and acted beyond existing administrative rules and stereotypes. The increasingly complex economy and new challenges demanded creativity, but the system rejected such leaders early on. The practice of adhering to established “rules of the game” became an informal law, fostering a negative attitude towards any changes seeking new approaches to technological, production, and socioeconomic problems. This resistance to change was evident even at the highest level of management. According to A. I. Mikoyan, the competence of the leadership decreased after getting Khrushchev’s unconditional leadership in 1957.³⁰

29 Артем Чашихин-Тоидзе (режиссер), Никита Хрущев – Голос из прошлого. Фильм четвертый. Крах. (Студия «Артель»).

30 А. И. Микоян, *Так было. Размышления о минувшем* (Москва: Вагриус, 1999), 604; See also А. В. Сушков, *Президиум ЦК КПСС в 1957-1964 гг.: личности и власть* (Екатеринбург: Уро РАН, 2009), 245-247.

Most of his nominees made careers as members of the party apparatus, primarily as leaders of regional party organizations, and, due to their life experience and education, did not have a deep understanding of the problems of practical economics. As for Khrushchev himself, he certainly valued loyalty over competence and professional knowledge, and this hindered the impact of the “managerial revolution” as a post-industrial trend in the USSR.

The challenges faced by the Soviet economy under Khrushchev, including non-functioning innovation processes, a lack of material interest for business entities, and low administrative efficiency, could not be resolved through ideological slogans and appeals. The realization that these ideologemes were ineffective emerged towards the end of Khrushchev’s tenure when the economy’s efficiency and management quality significantly declined. By this time, the utopian nature of the declarations proposed by the leader had fully become a catalyst for irritation and discontent among the elites. This accelerated the loss of controllability of economic processes. The system rejected experiments that were “dangerous” for it, including those based on a set of political myths and ideologies which were supposed to become tools for the integration of both elites and society as a whole but turned out to be insufficiently effective for this.

The everyday difficulties and contradictions, the disparity between propaganda and reality, and the growing awareness of the Western “consumer society” standards fueled discontent among the population. At the same time, this criminalized economic relations and did not in any way correlate with the principles of the “moral code of the builders of communism,” which became an integral part of the new party program. Calls to be guided by them only undermined the authority of its leader and contributed to general frustration.

CONCLUSION: HALF-HEARTED REFORMS AND THE FAILURE OF THE STRATEGY

Despite these challenges, the party and state leadership were reluctant to “abandon principles” or reconsider key aspects of the socialist economic system. The events in Hungary and Poland, where anti-communist protests challenged the system’s foundations, alarmed the authorities. The mobilization economy rules, formulated during forced industrialization, were preserved, even though they no longer aligned with post-industrial perspectives. The ruling elite resisted a fundamental reconsideration

of the economic development model, fearing it would compromise their interests. Society, while seeking improvements, did not express a need for radical changes in existing social institutions. The weakened power and management vertical, a result of the regime’s liberalization and situational administrative changes, prioritized improving the socioeconomic situation while maintaining the fundamental principles of the current system.

N. S. Khrushchev’s experimentations and attempts at reform, verbalized through political myths and ideologemes, were rejected by the existing Soviet system. The policy of populism, aimed at captivating society with positive ideas, ultimately failed. The contemporaries of the “Khrushchev decade” became, in fact, the last generation of Soviet people taking the communist concept seriously. At the same time, by the mid-1960s, the idea of the construction of communism was exhausted. The arsenal of ideologemes depleted, the myth of building communism over one generation proved unfounded, and by the end of the “Khrushchev decade,” the socioeconomic situation had deteriorated. The suppression of mass protests in Novocherkassk highlighted growing discontent, discrediting the authorities. Despite all the efforts of the authorities to hush up the very fact of them, the unrest was not limited to one region, and information about them spread widely in society, again discrediting the authorities.

The second wave of economic transformations began after Khrushchev’s removal. The so-called “Kosygin” reform of 1965, that began to be worked out back in Khrushchev’s time, provided for the addition of economic administration with market elements of management. But very soon it became clear that these were incompatible with the “socialist system” of organizing production, and the reform quietly “died.” It is true that in the second half of the 1960s a certain improvement in the economy was achieved. This, as in the mid-1950s, occurred due to the limitation of defense spending and the redistribution of freed-up funds in favor of the development of industries serving the consumer market. But the stabilization was short-lived. And from the early 1970s the Soviet economy was drawn completely into a period of progressive decline in growth rates. This is evidenced by data from both official statistics (which overestimate the corresponding indicators) and all alternative calculations (see Fig. 1). As for economic strategies, they continued to be composed according to Stalin’s patterns and the “guns” in them always outperformed the “butter”.

Fig. 1. Dynamics of economic development in the USSR by five-year plans



Assessment based on data from: Kudrov, V. M. *Sovetskaia ekonomika v retrospektive: opyt pereosmysleniia* (Soviet Economy in Retrospective: Experience of Reinterpretation). Moscow: Nauka, 1997. Pp. 15, 16, 41.

This narrative does not imply the absence of alternative options. Social processes lack strict predetermination or adherence to Marxist “iron laws of history.” The subjective, personal factor is crucial in determining historical prospects, exemplified by the “Khrushchev era”. The Soviet elite turned out to be unable to reconsider the political and ideological stereotypes that blocked the implementation of urgent changes in the fundamental foundations of the Soviet economic system. Khrushchev himself may not have fully realized the risks of reproducing “institutional traps” he initiated. All he could do was deal with their consequences. As we know, he lost this fight, and for this reason the necessary transformations never became a reality.

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