2002

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian/vol4/iss1/10

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The Banging of the Shoe: Recontextualizing Krushchev

Anna Andreeva

When Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev set sail for the United States from Kaliningrad on September 9, 1960, along with other representatives of many other European socialist republics, nobody in the Soviet Union could imagine that two weeks later the leader they so much adored would be banging his shoe on the podium (Medvedev 153). Such conduct gave rise to absolutely controversial reactions around the world ranging from bewildered condemnation to thrilling delight and put the Soviet vozhd, the Russian word for leader or chief-tain, in the center of international politics. Needless to say that the first kind of attitude was significantly more wide-spread than the latter, and even the Russians did not appreciate this behavior.

We can attempt to judge a speaker’s performance only after we know the context in which it took place. Thus, in order for us to be able to determine whether Khrushchev’s speech was effective, we need to examine the political situation in the world at a time.

The Soviet-American relationship was deteriorating because of several crises that occurred in 1960. First, the Soviet Union was effectively developing close ties with Cuba. Castro’s victory in Cuban revolution in January 1959 led to the United States’ implementing an embargo on all the goods that have been traded with that country in the past. As a result, Russia along with other socialist countries became Cuba’s largest exporter as well as importer for the next several decades. Second, a U.S. U - 2 unarmed reconnaissance plane, piloted by Francis Gary Powers who was employed by the Central Intelligence Agency, was shot down by Soviet military authorities 1,200 miles inside the Soviet Union near Sverdlovsk (Werth 300). Although the pilot was captured alive, this incident outraged the Americans who claimed that he was merely observing the weather conditions in Turkey. The Soviet Union subsequently demanded that President Eisenhower stopped all such flights and punished those responsible—a request that was never honored. Nor did the United States ever bring their apologies for what
happened.

Keeping in mind that Khrushchev advised the American President not to come for a scheduled visit to Moscow because of the negative reaction Russian public might have, Eisenhower's administration was surprised to discover that Khrushchev himself would be present at the United Nations meeting in New York in September, 1960. His decision was even more puzzling when one considered the fact that he never received an invitation from the U.N. Assembly (Medvedev 153). However, such minor formalities never stopped Nikita Sergeevich.

As we can see, before he even got to the United States, the American public sentiment was not in his favor. Moreover, it was the election year, and the country was in the midst of political struggle between the Republican Vice President Nixon and a Democrat John F. Kennedy. The arrival of a Communist ruler shifted the attention of the press and American citizens away from the presidential campaign towards the United Nations meeting.

Khrushchev's intentions for the speech appeared to be very noble and praiseworthy. Several times throughout his address to the members of the U.N. Assembly he stressed the importance of "peaceful co-existence" (United Nations 1) between the two greatest powers in the world at a time. According to Nikita Sergeevich, "peoples of all countries—workers, peasants, intellectuals and the bourgeoisie...want not war but peace, and peace alone" (1). So did the Soviet Union, he said, and added that his country put a lot of effort towards ending international tension.

As he continued, however, it became clear that the Soviet leader was quite upset over the recent events, such as the U.S. spy-plane's "aggressive intrusion into our country" (2) and the economic boycott declared on Cuba simply because of Castro's taking over the government. Khrushchev accused the American monopolies of exploiting the Cuban soil and industry prior to the socialist revolution and making a fortune at the Cuban people's expense, thus, defeating one of the major points of pride for the U.S.—its high standard of living.

As an active supporter of the People's Republic of China, Khrushchev did not forget to mention his "friend" in the East and strongly suggested that it be reinstated in the United Nations (3) as it deserved to be treated with as much respect as any other nation in the U.N. Once again Khrushchev condemned the United States and other
western countries for intentionally isolating China and leaving it outside the scope of political recognition.

While he continued emphasizing world peace on numerous counts during his speech, Nikita Sergeevich went on with his indictment of the United States administration by pointing out its apparent opposition to disarmament. In 1959 the U.N. adopted a resolution regarding general and complete disarmament, but, according to Khrushchev, "the absence of any progress...is the consequence of the position taken by the United States and by certain other States linked with it through NATO." Moreover, Khrushchev justified the Soviet Union's refusal to participate in the work of the Ten-Nation Committee entrusted with directing this programme by saying that "staying on in the Committee would only have meant helping the opponents of disarmament" (4).

After suggesting that the United States withdrew its troops from South Korea, Khrushchev in a short paragraph made a radical proposal as to the executive organ of the U.N.—a thought that, in my opinion, should have been mentioned somewhere in the middle of his speech rather than leaving it till the very end. Such an unfortunate placement of a very important idea makes me question how serious Khrushchev was when making this crucial suggestion. Many others in the Western Hemisphere doubted his degree of seriousness as well. As Philip J. Noel-Baker stated in his Nobel lecture referring to Khrushchev's proposal of complete disarmament, "first...we must know: Is Mr. Khruschev genuinely sincere?" He then immediately followed with his own answers:

First, perhaps no one knows if Mr. Khruschev is sincere, and we shall never know unless we start a serious negotiation with him without delay. Second, if we do negotiate, we shall know with in a week if he is sincere or not; that is certain. Third, if we do not soon start a serious negotiation on the basis of the mandate which the General Assembly has defined, then he may say, and others will believe, that it is we who are not sincere.

Whatever the intentions of the Soviet leader at the United Nations meeting, his conduct was completely unexpected. At one point during his speech he took off his shoe and banged it on the table. One of his biographers speculated that this was designed to improve his image at home (United States); others believed that it could have been
"a symbolic, but ambiguous statement of support for Fidel" (Pravda). Nevertheless, it embarrassed a lot of his colleagues and associates who thought that such behavior was inappropriate for a leader of the world power.

At another time during the U.N. meeting, while Harold Macmillan, the British Prime Minister, was addressing the Assembly, Mr. Khrushchev interrupted him with heckling shouts and table-thumping (Whitman). In addition, he called the representative of Philippines "a lackey of American imperialism"—an unfair name for a delegate from a nation that won its independence not too long before that. Other examples of disregard for any rules of decorum were displayed by Nikita Sergeevich several times until the USSR delegation got a fine of $10,000 for violating the procedure (Medvedev 154).

His performance received a wide disapprobation in the United States. Not only was it mentioned in the leading newspapers, such as New York Times, but it also came up during the Nixon-Kennedy Presidential debate later that year. When asked a question regarding the possibility of another summit conference with the Soviet ruler after the elections, Mr. Nixon replied that it is visible "only after Mr. Khrushchev—after his disgraceful conduct in Paris, after his disgraceful conduct at the United Nations—gave some assurance that he really wanted to sit down and talk to accomplish something and not just make propaganda" (Commission on Presidential Debates 11).

We can consider Khrushchev's speech effective in a sense that it focused everyone's attention on the issues presented in his address and made him one of the most popular figures (apart from Castro) at the meeting. However, discontent of the Soviets with their vozhd was evident. The same extrovert characteristics of Khrushchev's personality that brought him closer to people marked the beginning of his fall.
Works Cited


