



History 7042
Additional Specimen Question Paper 2T (A-level)
Question 02 Student 1
Specimen Answer and Commentary

V1.0

Specimen answer plus commentary

The following student response is intended to illustrate approaches to assessment. This response has not been completed under timed examination conditions. It is not intended to be viewed as a 'model' answer and the marking has not been subject to the usual standardisation process.

Paper 2T (A-level): Specimen question paper

02 To what extent did Khrushchev bring about a 'great thaw' within the Soviet Union during his years in power?

[25 marks]

Student response

When Khrushchev came to power in c.1955, Stalin's ghost still had a restrictive hold over the soviet population. People were controlled by fear as opposed to popular consent and the economy had not adapted since the World War. Thus, when Khrushchev came to power, he realised he need to break this restrictive hold. His attempts to do so are known as 'the great thaw'.

To some extent he managed to change the Stalinist system, firstly in a political sense. De-Stalinisation is often described as a 'thaw' and it saw many developments that had simply been crushed under Stalin. For example, the Soviet population now had access to foreign media for the first time and intellectuals' work, which had been censored under Stalin, was now published. Additionally, foreign visitors were encouraged to visit the USSR for the first time. All of these are clearly a rejection of the Stalinist method, as the country was more open than ever before. Additionally he destroyed Stalin's reputation as an infallible leader, through de-Stalinisation in the Secret Speech of 1956. This immediately reduced Stalinism and was clearly the key factor undermining the Stalinist method of control.

Furthermore, some of the actual political methods changed under Khrushchev. He began a much more humane method of running the country by not imprisoning men such as Malenkov and this had the effect of 'thawing' the amount of fear within the country. This can also be seen through the way he released thousands of intellectuals who had been imprisoned under Stalin. Additionally, and perhaps more significantly, he decentralised the political system, which had the effect of removing the state controls that had been evident under Stalin and giving more control to the local people themselves. This is partly due to the fact that he was more likely to take advice than Stalin was. All of these points cumulatively show that the political system was thawing from a Stalinist idea of fear to one founded on popular consent.

Decentralisation did not only feature politically, but also economically, where control was given to economic ministers which had used to belong to the Gosplan. This was a complete change from the way all economic decisions had always come from Moscow. This was not the only economic initiative as, although still using the five year plan system, a greater emphasis on consumer goods was encouraged. The Stalinist method had always been focused on heavy industry and thus this is a definite signal of a thawing of the Stalinist system. Additionally, new resources had been discovered in Western Siberia and this was useful in Khrushchev's attempts to make the economic system more efficient.

Changes occurred in agriculture as well as industry. Agriculture had always been a problem under Stalin due to a lack of investment and expansion. Khrushchev considered himself an agricultural expert and set about making changes. For example, the Virgin Lands Scheme attempted to take previously unfarmed areas to create food production and thus was undoubtedly successful in raising Maize production by 10%. The treatment of peasants also became more humane under Khrushchev as the number of

compulsory deliveries they had to make was reduced. All of these economic changes show that Khrushchev was arguably attempting to move away from the restrictive Stalinist method of running things and allowing a thaw to take place.

However, to a lesser extent, Khrushchev did not bring about a 'great thaw' and this can be seen through the limitations of the Secret Speech and destalinisation. Although the secret speech had put the blame onto Stalin, it had relieved the party of any blame, instead reducing it to being a 'victim'. Additionally, the main policies of Stalin were overlooked and this is intentional, with little condemnation of his policies before 1934. This all shows a general acceptance of Stalin's major policies. Destalinisation itself had many flaws, mostly due to inconsistency. For example, Dr Zhivago was still banned and Khrushchev's own conservative views saw the closing down of the first exhibitions of abstract art. This again demonstrates that although Khrushchev wanted more popular consent, his conservatism prevented destalinisation from having a more massive effect.

Destalinisation, in fact, had a bigger impact in the nationalities and republics, with people like the Polish leader Gomulka and the home-grown reformer, Nagy, feeling it gave them the green light to reform and start their own 'thaw'. Khrushchev exactly imitated Stalin in his ruthless reaction to this, especially in Hungary where the reform movement was halted by Khrushchev and the reformers were crushed. This demonstrates that Khrushchev still had some of the same intentions as Stalin - of maintaining the USSR's role as the superior state which encompassed keeping control of the Eastern bloc.

As well as the fact that he retained some of the same policies as Stalin, many other Stalinist political features remained. Khrushchev attempted to cultivate his own cult of personality, which had been one of Stalin's key methods of control. Khrushchev also consolidated his power in administration by promoting his own supporters to the Politburo, using the same methods of patronage and control which ensured that a state of corruption remained in the USSR. All of these actions demonstrate that many similarities remained between Khrushchev and Stalin in their running of the Soviet Union and that it would be wrong to suggest that Khrushchev allowed a 'great thaw'.

Arguably, the biggest argument that there was no real thaw is that Khrushchev's policies failed to improve or change the economy. In industry, the decentralisation was not accompanied by any proper direction, which resulted in a state of confusion. This had the effect of ministers exercising their economic muscles as opposed to carrying out coherent policies. Moreover, the terms of the five-year planning system continued with government priorities still taking precedence over the needs of the consumer and the focus going on growth as opposed to quality. This meant that economic growth continued its patterns much as it had under Stalin. Finally, in addition to this, the arms race continued apace and thus the taxes required were heavy and crushing. Khrushchev supported the build up of the arms race through his tough foreign policy, which nearly led to nuclear war with the Cuban Missile Crisis.

There was, finally, no thaw in agriculture either. Many of Khrushchev's policies have been condemned, for example the Virgin lands scheme, which failed due to a continuation of central planning. Khrushchev's reforms were not enough to thaw the Stalinist methods of running the country.

Overall, to conclude, Khrushchev clearly attempted to make some change and he is often attributed with attempting to make the most changes of all soviet leaders. However, he was attempting to reform without changing the core principles of the Stalinist period and it is therefore wrong to speak of the Khrushchev years as a time of a 'great thaw'. He enjoyed the privileges of a Stalinist-type leadership and did not set out to bring fundamental reform. Therefore, despite destalinisation, any thaw was superficial and, as a consequence many of his reforms were quickly abandoned under Brezhnev who permitted the rehabilitation of Stalin. Although destalinisation was not significant in the short-term, in the long term it

had a much greater impact in the way it opened a 'can of worms'. This led to a mood of defiance under Brezhnev and eventually the implosion of the USSR under Gorbachev. In this sense Khrushchev might be praised for setting a thaw in motion which eventually turned into a 'great thaw' and the ending of the Stalinist method of control in 1991.

Commentary - Level 5

This is an effective answer. It is balanced, has range and is consistently focused and analytical. There is a clear conclusion which reflects the development of the argument in the answer. There may have been places where some of the assessment could have been further developed, but this is a controlled, clear and focused answer with judgements and is a Level 5 response.