10 years ago today —'The liberal trend is over'

The day they sacked Khrushchev

By ROBERT ALLAN

THE BELL of the Spassky Tower clock boomed out the chimes of midnight. I was reminded to confirm a luncheon date for the following day with a correspondent of a London daily. I called him from a phone booth on Gorki Street.

"Afraid I won't be able to make it, old boy," said my friend. "Looks like a big story about to break."

When I pressed him for more details, he fended me off. "Keep an ear on the radio," he advised. Moscow telephone conversations are not the freest of exchanges.

Finally he confided, "Khrushchev may lose one of his posts."

The cloudy morning filtered through the maroon drapes to usher in Friday, October 16, 1964. I peered out the windows into the busy square below, and all looked normal.

I went out to a news-stand and saw my first visible proof that something had happened. All the papers had been sold out. But the face of the kiosk proprietor was as impassive as always.

At the office of an international airline, I saw a copy of "Pravda." In three sentences, the paper explained that Comrade N.S. Khrushchev had resigned for health reasons and Brezhnev had been chosen as First Secretary of the Communist Party.

In my favourite restaurant the waitresses smiled as usual, the service was slow as usual, and the breakfasters, buttering black bread and sipping *stakahnchiks* of tea, were as uncommunicative as usual. I was fascinated by their stoicism. Churchill said something about Russia being an enigma, wrapped in a riddle, enveloped in a mystery.

Outside the Bolshoi Theatre a Russian friend, Grisha, was waiting for me. He looked up from his copy of "Komsomolskaya Pravda" and greeted me with a bewildered expression. Rushing over, he half-whispered, "Do you know the news?" and said that a neighbour had woken him early in the morning to tell him what had happened.

Grisha was afraid that Khrushchev's ouster meant a retreat to the right, a reaffirmation of Stalinist doctrines. I ventured the opinion that the tide of liberalization could not easily be reversed, but Grisha's mood was one of unshakeable pessimism.

Questions anxiously spilled forth. "Why are we told today about what took place two days ago?" "Why has Khrushchev lost all three posts?" "Perhaps he has gone too far in alienating the Chinese?"

I had a chore to do on Kropotkinskaya Street. Grisha accompanied me. As we came to a little side street a familiar figure came walking toward us. Clad in a fur-collared coat and gray fur hat, eyes alert behind his pince-nez glasses, it was Vyacheslav Molotov. The long-time Soviet Premier and erstwhile Foreign Minister, expelled from power some years before, strode by.

Comrade Khrushchev

His thoughts on that day would have made an interesting footnote to history. I last saw him as the trusted confidante and emissary of Stalin, on a triumphant drive through Manhattan in 1945. In 1964 he was a deposed statesman left to his memories and his morning stroll.

The eventful week in Moscow started off with the flight of three cosmonauts in one spaceship. The now-famous photograph of an elated Khrushchev on the phone with the cosmonauts whirling around the world had served graphically to point out Comrade Nikita's personal association with the achievement.

When the cosmos-troika landed near Petropavlovsk on Tuesday morning, preparations were begun for the traditional spectacular welcome. Red Square was festooned with banners and huge portraits of Khrushchev, Lenin, and the cosmonauts. Outside the stately Hotel Moskva on Manezhnaya Square there was unfurled a gigantic, full-length likeness of Khrushchev. Smiling and waving, the proclaimed, *Mir Narodom!* — Peace to the Nations of the World!

By Friday it had become clear that Khrushchev's wave was all finished. To those who still saw the picture hanging early in the morning, it was *adieu*, not even *da sveedanya*. Within hours the great portraiture purge was underway. All along the projected route of the cosmonauts' parade, busy iconnoclasts were doing away with the image of their fallen idol.

I had lunch with Tamara, an attractive, intelligent young woman who worked for one of the government ministries. Eventually Tamara volunteered a willingness to interpret the meaning of Comrade Khrushchev's "resignation." "It is a simple matter of a power struggle within the Praesidium," she said.

Then, branching out into the broader subject of Western understanding of Russia, Tamara said, "Ours is a country that cannot be understood by Westerners applying their brand of logic or by analyzing us intellectually. We are a people whose temperament and devotion to our land and ideology must be discovered through feeling... Those who want really to know us must have the patience and sympathy it takes."

In talking with many Muscovites later that afternoon, I was lucky to encounter some who spoke fairly freely. Most of them voiced their fear of the leadership change:

"It looks bad! After all, Khrushchev represented the break with Stalinism. Now we'll lose this precious fraction of freedom we've gained."

"I am afraid. This means a tightening up. The liberal trend is over."

In the evening, I went to see the "Threepenny Opera" and afterwards to a restaurant. Later I suggested to my companions that we pass by the Central Telegraph and Post Office on Gorki Street to see if the familiar, huge portrait of Khrushchev which dominated the interior of that building was still there.

Gorki Street was almost deserted. A truck was parked at the curb outside the Post Office and several workmen were struggling with paintings being carried out. Two other workmen were lugging in two new portraits. One was a likeness of Lenin, the other one we could not see. We followed the workmen inside, our footsteps resounding in the empty hall as curiosity steered us toward the far wall where the portraits were to be hung. The familiar figure of a ruddy-faced Khrushchev in a be-medalled jacket was gone. On one wall the old portrait of Lenin was being replaced by the new Lenin just brought in. But in place of the Khrushchev portrait, who would that be?

Slowly the workmen dusted off the frame of the picture. Then they raised it, and turned it around. It was Karl Marx, always in good standing. Just as Comrade Karl settled into his lofty perch overlooking Moscow's communications centre, the Kremlin chimes rang out the end of the first day of the post-Khrushchev era.

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