

# How Khrushchev Leaked his Secret Speech to the World

*by John Rettie*

On the night of 24 February 1956, the windows of the Communist Party's Central Committee building in the heart of Moscow were ablaze with light into the early hours, with the great black limousines of the Party elite parked all round it. This, it seemed to westerners in Moscow, was very odd. The Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) had formally ended that afternoon. So why was the Party headquarters still humming with activity that night?

It was not many days before inflammatory rumours began to circulate, fuelled by western diplomats with good connections to their Central European communist colleagues, and by western correspondents of communist newspapers. Scarcely credible tales were whispered that Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev, First Secretary of the CPSU, had made a sensational speech denouncing Stalin for heinous crimes, including murder and torture. As it was a mere three years since Stalin's death, this seemed barely credible. True, for many months the rigidly controlled press had been full of mounting attacks on the 'cult of personality', obviously a veiled reference to Stalin. This criticism had reached a crescendo during the Twentieth Congress, though only Anastas Mikoyan, Khrushchev's right-hand man, had been authorized to criticize Stalin cautiously by name in a published speech. But overt charges of torture and murder? Surely impossible.

The rumours in 'diplomatic circles' suggested nevertheless that something totally unprecedented really had happened: a furious personal denunciation of the man who, only three years before, had been looked upon as God by the overwhelming majority of the population. Now, it seemed, God had been cast down and showered with accusations of committing appalling crimes and oppression on a massive scale.

Nothing, however, appeared in the Party or government press. The rumours could not be substantiated. But they were so insistent that my colleague in Reuters news agency, Sidney Weiland, filed a report of four brief paragraphs. This stated merely that 'diplomatic circles' were a-buzz with rumours of a speech by Khrushchev denouncing Stalin at a special meeting after the formal end of the Party Congress. But in those days there was prior censorship in the USSR. Western correspondents had to write and send their stories from a special office in the Central Telegraph building. Weiland handed in his story for cabling, fully expecting it to be censored. He was right; it vanished into the censor's maw and was never heard of again.

Officially, Khrushchev's formally unscheduled speech was an unspeech. He himself never publicly admitted making it. But in fact, on the morning of 25 February, the Soviet Party delegates to the Twentieth Congress returned to the Great Kremlin Palace, without their foreign comrades, to be stunned by his tirade against their once revered leader.

A few days later, at the beginning of March, I had a telephone call from Kostya Orlov, a Soviet citizen I had met several times. 'You're going on holiday to Stockholm tomorrow', he said, 'and I must see you before you go.' It was my last evening, so I invited him round at once. He had often been to my flat in a block for foreigners only, and never appeared to have any difficulty getting past the militiamen who guarded the entrance from intrusion by Soviet citizens.

Orlov was an intelligent young man with a tinge of sleaziness about him, and not infrequently drunk. He lived on the ground floor of a squalid communal dwelling, in one of many small rooms off a long corridor, at the end of which was a kitchen, a toilet and a shower room for all on that floor to share. Most inhabitants of Soviet cities lived in such depressing conditions in those post-war years of acute housing shortage. I first met him the year before when I went to cover the arrival of French tourists – the first independent westerners to visit the Soviet Union since the second world war. He was trying to befriend them outside their hotel, though without the advantage of any language but Russian, and we fell into conversation. During the next few months I saw quite a lot of him, occasionally on visits to his solitary room, but more often when he came to my flat.

In those days this was so unusual that I had little doubt he was controlled by the KGB, though he always denied it, claiming to hate Soviet life; he even asked me if I could spirit him out of the USSR across the Finnish frontier or smuggle him out on a Finnish plane. He knew, of course, that I was then married to a Finn, had lived in Finland and was close to the Finnish embassy and Aero (as Finnair was then called – the only western airline flying into Moscow). What made me even more suspicious was that he offered to smuggle me into a Moscow factory if I would put on local clothes (then poorly made and horribly unfashionable) and masquerade as a Soviet citizen. 'Your Russian's good enough for you to pass as a Latvian', he explained. All the same, he told me a lot about Soviet life and passed me snippets of minor information that all proved correct. The best was a brief Central Committee resolution on pig production, which sent the US agricultural attaché, to whom I showed it, into paroxysms of delight. 'This is just what we've been looking for,' he chortled with grateful glee.

But the two stories that Orlov brought me that evening, a week or more after the Twentieth Party Congress, were no snippets. The first was, in journalistic terms, an earthquake. He confirmed that Khrushchev had indeed made his rumoured speech denouncing Stalin, and without any notes gave me a very full account of it. His memory was prodigious,

almost photographic, though I was not to know that at the time. His version included two items that were not in the edited version leaked from the Polish Communist Party, which fell into the hands of the CIA and was published by the *New York Times* early in June.

One was Khrushchev's description of how Stalin often humiliated those around him, using the familiar 'thou' instead of the more formal 'you', as one would to servants or children. 'Once he turned to me', Khrushchev declared, 'and said: "Oi, you [thou], *khokhol*, dance the *gopak*". So I danced.' The *gopak* is a fast and intricate Ukrainian dance in the execution of which Khrushchev, a portly man, would have looked ridiculous. *Khokhol* is a derogatory term for a Ukrainian, Stalin knowing full well that Khrushchev had worked for many years in Kiev, most recently as Party leader. The second – which has been dismissed by some as apocryphal, but which Orlov told me – was that one Party delegate, incensed by Khrushchev's description of Stalin's torture and oppression of Party members, shouted: 'Why didn't you get rid of him?' Khrushchev stopped and looked round the hall. 'Who said that?' he barked. No one spoke. So he repeated: 'Who said that?' Still no response. 'Now you understand why we didn't try anything against him', he said drily.

The other story told by Orlov was that when the speech was read out to Party organizations in Georgia, Stalin's homeland, crowds had rioted in protest against the 'insult' to their national hero, during which a number of Georgian civilians and Soviet soldiers were killed. In addition, Orlov said, trains from the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, had been arriving in Moscow with smashed windows. This was a sensational story in its own right, though it paled into insignificance beside the speech itself. But my problem was: could I believe Orlov about either of them? It is easy now, with hindsight, to realize that of course they must have been true. But then, only three years after Stalin the God had died, and given all the resultant tensions in Soviet society, it seemed a colossal risk to believe such a tale from a single and somewhat dubious source, with little corroborating evidence – and on that shaky foundation to disseminate it to the world with the authority of Reuters news agency. However, there remained only a few hours to make up my mind before flying to Stockholm.

And that raised another problem. In the 1930s, before the second world war, many western Moscow correspondents found Soviet censorship so restrictive that they often flew to Riga, the capital of then independent Latvia, to file their stories before returning to Moscow. Surprisingly, the Soviet government did not object at the time. But after nearly two decades of Stalinism since then, no western correspondent would have dared to do the same in the 1950s. At the very least instant expulsion would have resulted, if not much worse.

I felt unable to make a unilateral decision and called Weiland. It was then nearly midnight, but we agreed to meet on the street outside the Central Telegraph office where no hidden microphones could overhear us.

It was a very cold winter, and we tramped through the snow as I recounted the tale, pausing from time to time under street lamps to consult my voluminous notes. In the end we decided we had to believe Orlov. His tale fitted with what little we knew from the rumours floating through the foreign community, and he had been reliable in the past with lesser information. Besides that, a *New York Times* correspondent was also flying out the next day and he would of course immediately report on the rumours of a sensational speech by Khrushchev denouncing Stalin. Thus we would be beaten on a story of which we had an incomparably better – and exclusive – account. Unthinkable!

Orlov had to be genuine. ‘If you don’t get it out, you’re *govno* [shit]’, he had told me. Ironically, this now sounds suspiciously like a strong hint from the Soviet authorities to break the rules, though I could not have known it at the time.

So the next day my wife and I flew to Stockholm, the fat notebook burning a hole in my very tense pocket. We were to stay a fortnight with Finnish diplomats who had been transferred from Moscow, but I could not let them know that I was to be the author of the report which would be published all over the world the next day. So we stayed in a hotel for the first night, much of which I spent typing out the two stories and dictating them by telephone to London. I had spoken earlier to the News Editor and explained that under no circumstances should either story bear my name or even a Moscow dateline, and that the speech had to be based on ‘Communist sources’ – no others were possible.

When I was ready, Reuters called me back and put me through to ‘copy’ – the copy-takers. I was extremely nervous and fatuously assumed a false American accent to disguise my identity. In vain. ‘Thank you, John’, said the familiar voice to my dismay when I finished my long dictation. When the Swedish papers appeared with Khrushchev’s ‘Stalin sensation’ splashed across the front pages, it was datelined Bonn, and the riots in Georgia were sourced from Vienna.

My return to Moscow passed off without incident, but when I next saw Kostya I still thought it advisable to tell him that the story had already been published by the time I reached Sweden. I doubt if he believed me, but during the summer of 1956 the political thaw that had started eighteen months earlier went on soothing popular fears, especially in big cities like Moscow. It was not until October that the turmoil fomented by Khrushchev’s speech burst upon Central Europe, notably in Poland and, above all, Hungary.

In Moscow the thaw switched instantly into deep freeze. During October, around the time of the Soviet military intervention in Hungary, not one top Soviet leader appeared at diplomatic receptions to drink and chat with the abandon and bonhomie of the past two years. When they reappeared, they looked haggard and drawn; Anastas Mikoyan, in particular, seemed to

have put on years. On the streets, Muscovites now turned hastily away from any friendly approach by foreigners.

There had also been incidents of unrest in the Soviet Union itself when the secret speech was read out to Communist Party and Komsomol (Communist Youth) meetings after the Twentieth Party Congress. Georgia, Stalin's homeland, was the most violent (Orlov had told me only a small part of the story), but some meetings elsewhere, notably in Siberia, were more than unruly, particularly where students were involved. The threat to stability, both at home and abroad, seems to have caused Khrushchev some concern, and impelled him to tone down his programme of de-Stalinization. But this did not mean he regretted making the speech, nor its dissemination throughout the USSR and the rest of the world.

I saw very little of Orlov during the next few months, not least because one evening, while my wife was in Helsinki, he brought a 'friend' round to see me, a large Georgian. Both got very drunk, but the Georgian made repulsive homosexual advances and broke several bottles of wine. When I finally got rid of them, it took me till four a.m. to clean up the mess. Soon afterwards I gave a party for some friends, mostly western journalists, including a close Yugoslav friend who immediately warned me that Orlov was a *provokator* when he arrived uninvited in the company of two more 'friends'. Both were Russians, one I had met briefly at an official function. Orlov got very drunk and quite aggressive, leaving in high dudgeon when I told him to go. One of his 'friends' apologized for him, but stayed on at the party and said we must keep in touch. It was not this man, but a contact of his who phoned to invite me to lunch, where he announced himself to be a captain of the KGB. After four excellent weekly lunches, with lavish amounts of vodka, caviar and smoked salmon but a tone of growing menace, I finally cracked at the last one, when harsh Armenian brandy instead of vodka was served. So instead of attending the next week's lunch invitation, I asked the British ambassador to send a message to Reuters seeking my recall. During this period of several weeks I was followed ostentatiously about the streets of Moscow by obvious KGB agents. In the tension of that time, I assumed not unnaturally that this mounting pressure from the KGB was in some way connected with Khrushchev's secret speech and might be building up to some kind of retaliation. But on later reflection I concluded that it was merely the kind of pressure that the KGB exerted on many foreigners, in the hope of persuading or blackmailing them to become a KGB agent, or to denounce the West and remain in Moscow.

Much more significant, though, is the question of who told Orlov to leak the speech, and why to me. That he was operating independently, as he always claimed, is inconceivable. When I returned to Moscow thirty-two years later for the *Guardian*, I tried to make some enquiries. This was before the collapse of the Soviet Union, and KGB files were not yet available to westerners for selective inspection. But a veteran journalist on

*Moscow News*, who interviewed me about the speech, told me I would never find out. ‘Even if it was Khrushchev himself’, he said, ‘you would find nothing in any file. Remember it was a Party decision that the speech should not be published – and in any case he said himself: “Comrades, we must not wash our dirty linen in public”’. Even he could not have risked putting any instruction on paper, and perhaps not even on the telephone. If he did issue an instruction, it would only have been by a quiet word to someone he trusted implicitly.’

I had a very similar response from Sergo Mikoyan, the son of Anastas. ‘It was quite likely to have been Khrushchev’, he said in an informal interview, ‘possibly with my father’s support. My father was the only colleague of Khrushchev to urge the exposure of Stalin from the first, and was his strongest supporter in this throughout. But any decision to use you to tell the world about the speech would have left no trace.’

There is, however, strong evidence that Khrushchev wanted his speech to be known in the rest of the world as well as in the Soviet Union. In his masterly biography, *Khrushchev: the Man and his Era*, William Taubman quotes Khrushchev’s son Sergei as saying (p. 283): ‘I very much doubt that Father wanted to keep it secret. On the contrary! His own words provide confirmation of the opposite – that he wanted to bring his report to the people. Otherwise all his efforts would have been meaningless. The secrecy of the sessions was only a formal concession on his part.’

If this was indeed true, the selection of me as the conduit was quite logical. In those days foreigners in Moscow had to get exit visas to leave the country, so the authorities would have been aware of my imminent departure to Stockholm. Like other western journalists, I was also quite well known to Khrushchev and other members of the Party’s Presidium, as they were all talking eagerly to us (some, like Molotov, less eagerly than others) at diplomatic and Kremlin receptions – often as much as once a week. I had once even drunk Khrushchev’s glass of akvavit when he thrust it at me in the Norwegian embassy, commenting: ‘This is a lot better than that whisky we had at your embassy last week – here, try it!’ From the summer of 1954, when they started coming to diplomatic receptions, we journalists were used by Khrushchev and his colleagues as the quickest and easiest means of showing the world that they were human beings you could do business with, not ogres like Stalin immured behind the Kremlin’s walls. To use one of us to publish the speech abroad, by bending the rules we worked under, only needed discretion and a buffer like Orlov who could dissociate any Soviet authority from responsibility.

In fact, in 1956 Orlov had told me that a friend of his who was the Party Secretary of an institute had been given the speech to read to the institute’s Party members; this had to be done only once so that they could not study it in detail. He said his friend had to hand the speech back to headquarters within thirty-six hours, but had allowed him to read it during this time. This he presented as something he had done on his own initiative

just to help me. Thirty-four years later he still hotly denied that he had any connection with the KGB. After publication of an interview I gave *Moscow News* in 1990 on how I obtained the speech Orlov, with whom I had had no contact since the 1950s, rang me in a fury to complain that I had described him as a *stukach* (an informer). So I went to see him, but during a long discussion I could not shake his insistence that he had been acting on his own. Repeatedly walking unhindered past the militiaman guarding the foreigners' block I lived in, offering to take me to see a factory if I wore Soviet clothes, and giving me details of the speech itself were all done just to help me 'because you were so green', he said. 'But what about asking me to get you out to Finland on a Finnish plane?' I objected. 'Or helping you to get across the Soviet-Finnish border? After all, you told me you hated living in the Soviet Union.' 'Oh, you just made all that up', he said. Perhaps it was the only response possible when he could hardly claim he had suggested that too just to help me. So I told him there was no point in us talking any more, and left.

At the time I felt that Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost* had gone far enough for Orlov to have admitted the truth to me in private, and told me how the leak had been arranged. But perhaps I was unfair. If indeed the order had been given by Khrushchev, then as the ultimate agent Orlov must surely have been told that he was on his own – and that on pain of something like death, he must never reveal anything. Even in 1990 the KGB could frighten some people, and who knows what hold they had over him?