Letter from Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, J. Colville, to Private Secretary to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, C. Shuckburgh, dated 6 August 1953

Dear Shuckburgh,

I wrote to you on July 27 to ask what the views of the Foreign Office were about the significance of the Beria story, with particular reference to events in Hungary and any other satellites.

Interpretation of the recent events in the Soviet Union is something which particularly interests Sir Winston at the moment and I should therefore be obliged if you could let me have a reply to this letter fairly soon and indeed any other significant comments on cognate questions.

Yours ever,

Colville

ENDS

Draft letter

To: Mr. Colville,

In your letter of August 6 about the Beria story and other developments behind the Iron Curtain, you asked for “any other significant comments on cognate questions”. What seems to be one of the more important recent developments inside Russia is the rise to even greater prominence of Khrushchev, the new head of the Party Secretariat. The Prime Minister may like, therefore, to have a brief note upon Khrushchev’s background and the significance of this development.

CONFIDENTIAL

N.S. KHRUSHCHEV

At the meeting of the Supreme Soviet on August 5, Khrushchev, who has been in the Politburo since 1938, appeared as No. 3 of the Party hierarchy, having moved up above Voroshilov. He had previously been No. 5, ranking above Bulganin and Kaganovich.

2. His rise is thus not sensational. But it is interesting that the oligarchy should have thought it necessary to show Khrushchev as having been promoted. There are two factors which may account for this.

3. First, the current emphasis on collective leadership, and the constant repetition of the theme that it is the Party which is responsible for the wellbeing of the Soviet people makes it logical that the chief Secretary of the Party should be given a very prominent place. Khrushchev took over the post of First Secretary from Malenkov on March 14, when it was stated that Malenkov had relinquished the post at his own request.[[1]](#footnote-1)

4. Secondly, Khrushchev is one of the Party’s chief agricultural experts. Malenkov’s speech suggested that agricultural policy, over which there has been an open high-level controversy for many years, is probably the chief problem now facing the Soviet Government. In 1950 Khrushchev appears to have been in charge of the policy of amalgamating collective farms. Between the middle of 1950 until March 1951, he urged, first, that at the administrative centre of the enlarged collective farms, modern urban-type settlements known as Agrotowns should be built, into which collective farmers could be moved from their primitive dwellings in the outlying villages; and, secondly, that in each collective farm auxiliary enterprises should be established for making bricks, tiles and other manufactured goods. It looked as though Khrushchev was advocating a better deal for the peasants. However, in March 1951, on the day after a speech by Khrushchev summarising these policies had appeared, “Pravda” said that by mistake the issue of the previous day had omitted to say that Khrushchev’s article was “of a discussional character”. The Agrotown policy was then officially repudiated at a number of local Republican Congresses, although Khrushchev was never mentioned by name. At the 19th Party Congress in October 1952, Malenkov specifically condemned both the tendencies suggested by Khrushchev, describing them as the “consumer’s approach”. He repeated the Party line that, however important it was to provide these amenities, all this was subordinate to the main task which required the resources available to be devoted to more immediately productive ends, i.e. cowsheds before houses. Malenkov’s speech at the Supreme Soviet now makes it clear that the “consumer’s approach” is to be the order of the day in rural districts. To this extent we may assume that Khrushchev’s views have been accepted.

5. Khrushchev is a Ukrainian by origin and he spent some of the most important years of his life outside Moscow (1938–1949) in charge of Ukrainian affairs, despite his membership of the Politburo throughout this period. He was, in particular, largely responsible for the economic and ideological “rehabilitation” of the Ukraine (the “bread-basket” and a main industrial centre of the USSR) after the German occupation.

[TNA, FO 371/106518]

Keywords: Post-Stalin leadership

1. In accordance with the resolution of a plenum meeting of the Central Committee on 5 March 1953, G.M. Malenkov was made Chairman of the Council of Ministers, while at the same time the leadership of the Party was passed to N.S. Khrushchev. This was done in order to secure the Soviet leadership against the reappearance of personal rule and to satisfy all sides of the country’s leadership. See: Khlevniuk О.V., Gorlitskii I. Kholodnyi mir: Stalin i zavershenie stalinskoi diktatury. М., 2011. S. 13640. S. 218-219. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)