I visited the Soviet Union for the first time during the spring and summer of 1966 on the young faculty exchange then under the aegis of the IUCTG (Inter-University Committee on Travel Grants). It was an exciting time to be in the Soviet Union. There was a great deal of optimism about the future of the USSR. Brezhnev and Kosygin were viewed as a new breed of leader, a breed sufficiently removed from the soil and from peasant culture to be able to represent the USSR abroad with dignity and style. The Kosygin economic reforms were being implemented, or so we thought, and there was much loose speculation in the American press about "creeping capitalism" in the USSR. We now know, of course, that Brezhnev had little interest in economic reform and that Kosygin's influence was insufficient to keep the issue of economic reform on the front burner.

What surprised me in 1966, however, was the attitude of my Soviet friends and faculty colleagues toward Nikita Khrushchev. They were critical beyond my understanding. He was accused of "hare-brained schemes" to reform the Party and the economy, and the administrative turbulence of his last years in power does provide certain grounds for these charges. Khrushchev was certainly boorish in his behavior in international forums, such as the United Nations, and Soviet intellectuals clearly were embarrassed for him and for the USSR.

Nonetheless, it was Khrushchev who had first denounced Stalin and the cult of personality in 1956 at the Twentieth Party Congress, who permitted the publication of Solzhenitsyn's "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," thereby stimulating a brief flowering of Soviet prose and poetry, and who preached and attempted to bring about a return to "socialist legality" in relations between the state and the members and organizations of Soviet society. Thus, although I understood why they preferred Brezhnev and Kosygin, who were college-educated, "business like" and well-tailored, their ingratitude for Khrushchev's
contributions to Soviet life surprised me. The high hopes of the intelligentsia, especially of those with a liberal or reformist bent, for the government that overthrew Khrushchev were, of course, subsequently dashed. The CPSU lapsed into a bureaucratic, self-satisfied and self-rewarding pattern of behavior once pressure from the top ceased. The era of stagnation therefore was also an era in which the legitimacy of the Party was further eroded.

The initiation of de-Stalinization at the Twentieth Party Congress was designed both as a way to undercut political opponents and as a way to dissociate the CPSU from the worst of Stalin's crimes. Khrushchev wanted to ground his own regime in Leninism, but he was not prepared to jettison everything that had been accomplished under Stalin. Thus he exposed Lenin's deathbed criticisms of Stalin, but argued in his famous speech that the "negative characteristics of Stalin ... were only incipient" in Lenin's time, and only subsequently "transformed themselves during the last years into a grave abuse of power by Stalin, which caused untold harm to our party." Through this device Khrushchev was able to maintain the correctness of the struggle Stalin led against the "anti-Leninist theses" of Trotsky, Zinoviev and Bukharin, which was essential for at least two reasons. In the first place, many of Stalin's accomplices were necessary and even willing allies of Khrushchev. This was of course an unspoken reason. The second reason was articulated by Khrushchev in the speech itself:

Let us consider for a moment what would have happened if in 1928-29 the Political line of right deviation had prevailed among us....We would now have a powerful heavy industry, we would not have the kolkhozes, we would find ourselves disarmed and weak in a capitalist encirclement.

Repression began, according to Khrushchev, only after 1934, when the victory against the enemies of the revolution was secure, that is, only after the fundamental institutions of the Soviet economy and society had been created. Thus it was that 1934 became the dividing line between acceptable criticism of Stalin and Soviet history and heresy, a line that remained effective well into Gorbachev's own time.

Khrushchev sought through his reforms, then, to end the terror, to renovate, revitalize and purify the Party and to reform the economy. These reforms initially focused on the reestablishment