

## THE ECONOMIC POLICIES OF THE KHRUSHCHEV DECADE: HISTORIOGRAPHY\* \*\*

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This paper analyses the historiography of the economic policy of the Khrushchev decade, revealing debated issues and gaps in the study of the field. The authors review works published on this issue, relying on the principles of historicism traditional for historiographical research, i. e. grouping methods based on the classification of problem fields in academic literature and methodological approaches used in scholarship. As a result of the research, the authors conclude that despite a solid groundwork in the study of the economic policy of the Khrushchev decade, a few fundamental issues have not yet been resolved. In particular, there is no universal periodisation. It is also not clear at what expenses were planned for increasing the economy's efficiency, why this could not be achieved, and what role was played by scientific and technological progress. Additionally, it is not quite clear to what extent this was based on borrowing foreign technologies and/or practical mastery of the results of research produced in the country and how the military-industrial orientation of economic policy was supplemented by the consumer-oriented component and what consequences this led to. Furthermore, there are no special studies on several aspects of the integrated economic policy, such as investment, fiscal and monetary policies, price and income regulation, and the planning and financing of the defense

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industry. The authors consider the study of these topics, along with deepening the historiographical directions that have already been developed, an urgent task.

*Keywords:* economic history of Russia, N. S. Khrushchev, mobilisation economy, economy of approvals, economic policy, scientific and technical policy, transit of power, historiography.

Представлен анализ историографии экономической политики времен «хрущевского десятилетия», выявлены имеющиеся в ней дискуссионные проблемы и лакуны. Обзор массива публикаций проведен с использованием традиционных для историографического исследования принципов историзма, методов группировки на основе классификации сложившихся в научной литературе проблемных полей, используемых методологических подходов. В ходе исследования установлено, что, несмотря на солидный задел в изучении экономической политики «хрущевского десятилетия», ряд принципиальных вопросов пока еще не нашел своего решения. Отсутствует ее общепринятая периодизация. Нет ясности, за счет чего планировалось добиться повышения эффективности экономики и почему это не удалось сделать, какая роль в ускорении темпов экономического роста отводилась научно-техническому прогрессу, заимствованию зарубежных технологий и практическому освоению результатов собственных исследований, как военно-промышленная направленность экономической политики была дополнена потребительски ориентированной составляющей, и какие это имело последствия. Также отсутствуют специальные исследования ряда составляющих единой экономической политики: инвестиционной, бюджетно-финансовой, кредитно-денежной, регулирования цен и доходов, планирования и финансирования оборонной промышленности. Сделан вывод о том, что разработка этих тем, наряду с углублением сложившихся в историографии направлений, является насущной задачей.

*Ключевые слова:* экономическая история России, Н. С. Хрущев, мобилизационная экономика, экономика согласований, экономическая политика, научно-техническая политика, транзит власти, историография.

The Khrushchev decade was one of the most dynamic but also controversial periods of Soviet history. This was most significantly manifested in the country's political and public life. At the same time, noticeable changes occurred in socio-economic policy and the dynamics of economic processes. It is no coincidence that historians have paid close attention to them. And yet, despite the large number of publications, there is a strong feeling that the Khrushchev period has been studied in much less detail than the preceding Stalin era. This can be seen in historiographical reviews, in particular those by V. N. Starikov [Стариков] and A. V. Trofimov [Трофимов, 1997; Трофимов, 2000], and in a number of dedicated teaching aids [Историография истории России; Современная российская историография, etc.]. From the methodological point

of view, the institutional approach, theories of groups and conflicts of interest and concepts of modernisation, the command (mobilisation) economy and the approval economy (the mechanism of “bureaucratic bargaining”) are the starting points of this study. Political science studies devoted to the analysis of the transition of power and the rules and procedures for developing political decisions in Soviet society have also been used. This area of research has a great international historiographical tradition, especially in English. However, the heuristic potential of this tradition has not been adequately taken into account in Russian methodological discourse [Хоскинг; Tarschys; Kelley; Sakwa; Hosking; et al.]. Nonetheless, the results of studies in this vein are difficult to exaggerate, even if the fundamental methodological positions of their authors are not shared by other researchers.

The study of the British political scientist R. Sakva, who analyses the relationship between continuity and innovations in Soviet society in different historical periods, is of particular interest. The author convincingly shows that in all post-Stalin discussions on the development of the Soviet economy, including those between Khrushchev and Malenkov, only issues of “fine tuning the system founded by Stalin, and not about its destruction” [Sakwa, p. 14] could be debated.

No less relevant are studies attempting to comprehensively present Khrushchev as a leader of the country and to identify the place of the Khrushchev era in the history of Soviet society. A monograph published in West Germany back in 1960 was one of the first works of this kind. Nowadays, there are many similar studies in the non-Russian historiography [Breslauer; Crankshaw; Frankland; Hyland, Shryock; Leonhard; Tatu; et al.]. The fundamental monograph of the American historian and political scientist W. Taubman [Тайбман; Taubman] is now considered a classic and is repeatedly cited. C. Linden’s substantive work is less known in Russia. In its latest edition, the author draws important parallels between the Khrushchev era and Gorbachev’s perestroika [Linden]. The historical study of another British author, W. Tompson [Tompson], is also among such works. While his assessment of Khrushchev’s activities as leader remains within the popular framework of a struggle between two bureaucracies, those of the Communist Party and the state, he shares the views of R. Tucker, one of the oldest “Sovietologists”. Noting the “voluntarism and subjectivity” in Khrushchev’s activities, the author praises him as the politician who undermined the foundations of the Stalinist model [Tucker, p. 284, 285]. Other historical and biographical studies that clarify important features of power in the Khrushchev era have been released in Russia and abroad [Никонов; Сушков; Хрущев С. Н., 2017; Шаттенберг].

The approaches developed by international researchers have had a significant impact on the Russian historiography. In Russia, serious interest in the Khrushchev era appeared only during perestroika. However, initially the amount of research remained insignificant. The situation only changed after the expansion of the information base and the introduction

of a significant number of historical sources into academic circulation in the post-Soviet epoch. This is sometimes referred to as a real “archival revolution”, which made it possible to achieve profound scholarly generalisations. Among the first Russian studies about Khrushchev and the Thaw, in which an attempt was made to analyse his policies and their results, the collective monograph *The Twentieth Congress of the CPSU and Its Historical Realities* [XX съезд КПСС] stands out. This publication, written in the spirit of the perestroika methodological paradigm, remains one of the best general works devoted to this historical period.

In the post-Soviet historiography, O. L. Lejbovich made the next attempt at a comprehensive monograph [Лейбович]. His conclusion about an overdue correction of the USSR's political and economic course was further developed in a number of other publications [Аксютин; Аксютин, Пыжиков; Грушин; Данилов, Пыжиков; Пыжиков; Емельянов, 2005; Зубкова, 1993; Зубкова, 1999; Козлов]. The desire of these authors to assess political and economic changes in the Khrushchev era in the context of the entire history of late Soviet society is an important merit of these works. The memoirs of Khrushchev himself [Хрущев Н. С.], as well as numerous other memoirs and belletristic works [see, for example: Medvedev R. A., Medvedev Zh. A., 1976; Попов, Аджубей; Бурлацкий; Медведев; Хрущев С. Н., 1994; Хрущев С. Н., 2017; at al.], should also be mentioned in this respect.

At the same time, a number of controversial issues remain. Among them are the imperatives behind Khrushchev's reforms, their prerequisites and the driving force and nature of the post-Stalin transformations in Soviet society. Answers to these questions have largely been determined by the methodological position and political preferences of historians. In both the Russian and international historiography, the interpretation of the Thaw as a consequence of the growing contradictions of Stalinism and the impending crisis of the regime (associated with both discontent among the people and “fermentation” among the elite) has become widespread. This point of view is expressed by the Italian historian J. Boffa [Боффа]. O. V. Khlevnyuk and J. Gorlitsky [Хлевнюк, Горлицкий]. Some other researchers also maintain this standpoint. The conclusion that “the overall economic crisis caused by the spasmodic increase in capital investments to the Group A” industries and the decomposition of the labor camp economy led to the main political decisions in the spring of 1953 has become a major argument for explaining the signs of crisis in Stalinist society [Заклученные на стройках коммунизма, с. 27]. This view remains one of the most popular approaches in the modern historiography on late Stalinism and the Thaw.

Another opinion is based on the interpretation of the Thaw as a natural transformation in the status and mentality of bureaucratic *nomenklatura*, which dates back to the work of M. Jilas [Джилас]. The ups and downs of politics associated with Khrushchev's rise to power are explained by the desire of the *nomenklatura* to maintain the status acquired during the years of Stalinism while also getting rid of the threat of repression and gaining social stability. The initial support of Khrushchev's policy provided by

the Soviet bureaucracy (and his ultimate removal from power) are largely explained by this factor (see, for example, [Кремлев]).

Often, Khrushchev's personal interest in strengthening his own power by discrediting political competitors is also considered as the main motivating factor in the reforms. Such an interpretation is typical, for example, of W. Tompson's monograph [Tompson] and dominates Yu. V. Emelyanov's work [Емельянов, 2006]. In general, the Khrushchev epoch is evaluated in a rather positive way, even if it is characterized as a time of "missed opportunities". However, there are some purely negative assessments as well. In such works, the Khrushchev Thaw is called the "Slush", which launched destructive changes in Soviet society, ultimately resulting in the collapse of the "great power" [Спицын].

These and many other works serve as a kind of background for any concrete historical research on Khrushchev's economic policy, its achieved (and unattained) results and the possible alternatives. The "Beria-Malenkov platform" is referred to as such an alternative. M. I. Geft'er was one of the first Russian historians to note that it included accelerating the development of "Group B" industries, easing the position of the peasantry and lessening administrative methods of management [Гегтер]. Malenkov's initiatives have always attracted close attention from Sovietologists (see, for example, works by R. Tucker, W. Tompson, etc.) [Tompson; Tucker]. According to some researchers, the practical implementation of such a programme could have opened the way for more radical reforms than the policies of Khrushchev. In this sense, Khrushchev's victory in the struggle for power after Stalin's death blocked more progressive social transformations in the economic sphere. L. A. Openkin and R. G. Rykhoa [Опенкин, 1988; Опенкин, 1990; Опенкин, 1991; Пихоя] provide similar arguments.

In some historical studies, it is argued that many of Malenkov's projects were used by Khrushchev to a certain extent; however, the question of how deeply the leader strove to practically implement them remains open. A number of researchers emphasise that he constantly maneuvered between relatively conservative and relatively liberal scenarios of economic development, voicing ideas about the priorities of socio-economic strategy depending on the political situation. According to Linden, "at times, political necessity forced Khrushchev to dress up in the colors of a militant Orthodox. Appropriateness often led him to a centrist position, but personal convictions made him more and more moving in the direction of radical reforms, remaining within the framework of the existing party regime" [Linden, p. 23]. A very simplified version of Khrushchev's "radicalism" in relation to economic transformation is simultaneously underlined. In contrast to Malenkov, who emphasised the need to take into account the activities of enterprises, Khrushchev focused mainly on the organisational side of economic reform [Зубкова, 1991].

There is also an established opinion that there were no fundamental differences in the views of the former Stalinists. All of them, one way or another, supported an accelerated pace of military and industrial growth

and a corresponding investment policy. This was so in the first post-war years, and it remained unchanged after Stalin's death. It is pointed out that the stated differences of opinion did not have a fundamental basis and can instead be explained by political rivalry, as well as departmental and group interests [Борджин]. On the whole, this rivalry between various interest groups embodied in the personalities of political leaders never went beyond the boundaries defined by the current system [Griffiths, p. 335; Sakwa, p. 187–193]. They always remained within the framework of a “corporation”, aptly named by Alex Nove, a prominent British economist and a native of Russia, as “the USSR Ltd.” [Nove, p. 7], controlled by directive methods and “administrative pressure”.

The study of industrial policy in the context of overall economic development is an important direction in the historiography of the Khrushchev era. In the Soviet heritage, it is necessary to highlight M. I. Khlusov's works, written more than 40 years ago but still relevant today [Хлусов]. The seven-volume *History of the Socialist Economy* [История социалистической экономики], which contains a lot of factual data, should also be noted. However, it needs a new reading based on information and statistics that became available later.

In the post-Soviet historiography, a substantial monograph authored by V. A. Shestakov, dedicated to the socio-economic policy of the Soviet state in the 1950s and mid-1960s [Шестаков], should be mentioned first. However, this work does not answer a few important questions, particularly those relating to the drivers and imperatives behind the strategy for economic development. However, both Russian and international researchers have paid much attention to the problem of centralised economic management. An important conclusion has been made that its role should not be exaggerated. The allocation of resources and the formation of cooperative links between enterprises were largely corrected by quasi-market, limited monetary relations [Хлевнюк, с. 75]. As a result, the prescriptive nature of the Soviet economy can only be discussed with a certain degree of conventionality. However, it is not clear what has changed in this respect in connection with the economic reforms initiated by Khrushchev.

In general, several economic reforms have been given significant attention in research literature. First of all, the transformation of the industrial and construction management system, the so-called “Sovnarkhoz” reform: a thorough analysis of this was carried out back during perestroika [Веденев]. In the post-Soviet years, E. V. Demichev's monograph [Демичев], dedicated to the reform of the industrial and construction management system between 1957 and 1965, was released. The prerequisites and consequences of these transformations are analysed in the aforementioned book by V. A. Shestakov [Шестаков]. They are also touched upon in the works of Yu. V. Izmestiev [Измestьев, с. 419, 420], E. Yu. Zubkova [Зубкова, 1993; Зубкова, 1999], and Yu. V. Aksyutin [Аксютин], as well as in a collective work on the Soviet economic history [Экономическая история СССР] and a number of publications by international researchers [Miller; Schroeder].



Almost all authors note the political background of the reforms associated with attempts to weaken Khrushchev's opponents in the economic apparatus. However, very contradictory conclusions are reached. Most researchers, in one way or another, note the "voluntarism and subjectivity" of "Soviet economic reform" and its negative consequences for the controllability of the economy. In a number of works, the reforms receive a sharply negative assessment if they started "destroying" the effective Stalinist model of economic development for the sake of narrow selfish interests [Катасонов, с. 39, 92–102]. But still, more balanced evaluations dominate. It is noted that Khrushchev's reforms responded to real problems: the courage of the attempt to decentralise the economy and the reform's positive, albeit short-term, effects in terms of overcoming industry barriers at the level of individual regions are pointed out. Moreover, some experts are of the opinion that the work of the Economic Councils was extremely effective [Щербакова]. However, their argumentation is not seen as too solid [Артемов, 2020]. A more objective picture of economic development in the Khrushchev era and assessments of the long-term consequences of the reforms can be found in the fundamental work by G. I. Khanin [Ханин, 2008, т. 1, с. 92–306].

Studies of scientific and technological policy are also noticeable in historiography. The first significant publications devoted to this appeared as early as perestroika (see: [Лельчук; Лахтин]). However, the most significant results were achieved in the post-Soviet years. The monographs by A. B. Bezborodov and B. I. Kozlov [Безбородов; Козлов] are examples of this. We have also made a contribution to the analysis of Khrushchev's scientific and technological policy, particularly its territorial dimensions [Артемов, 2006; Водичев, 1994; Водичев, 2012; Водичев, 2014]. As could be expected, much attention is paid to the decentralisation of science as part of the economic system and the creation of the Siberian branch of the USSR Academy of Sciences, which has become a kind of "calling card" of the Khrushchev era [Российская Академия наук]. Recently, new shades have appeared in this topic, such as the de-mythologisation of the history of the Novosibirsk Akademgorodok. Within the framework of this approach, the significance of Khrushchev's technological policy for the development of Soviet science and society is not questioned. However, emphasis is placed on hidden motives, imperatives and determinants in this process, as well as its conflicting consequences in a longer term perspective [Артемов, 2011; Водичев, 2018a; Водичев, 2018b; Кузнецов; Josephson].

Research on the military and industrial aspects of economic policy is now being intensively conducted. In this framework, most attention is paid to the development of the scientific and industrial defense complex and the creation of new weapons systems [Безбородов; Быстрова; Вооружение России; История советского атомного проекта; Симонов]. The history of the nuclear project, strongly associated with outstanding breakthroughs in science and technology in the public mind, has been most thoroughly studied [Артемов, 2017; Холловэй]. Over the past three decades alone, more than 170 books have been published in Russia

devoted to various aspects of mastering nuclear energy: the creation of the nuclear industry, the organisation and activities of its enterprises, design bureaus and research institutes, the construction of closed “atomic” cities, the contribution of intelligence and the USSR’s efforts in the development of scientific research and technologies [Артемов, 2017, с. 9, 10; Мельникова, Джозефсон]. Among them, one can single out studies which attempt to reconstruct the atomic project as a phenomenon of the “command” economy [Артемов, 2017; Холловэй]. It should be noted that this line of research is far from exhausted, since there is still no complete understanding of how the nuclear industry was integrated into the Soviet economic system and what consequences this brought.

Agrarian policy is definitely one of the special directions in the historiography of the economic history of the Khrushchev decade. Its analysis constitutes a very specific research task, since, as rightly noted in a number of studies, it was agriculture that became the main tool and argument in Khrushchev’s struggle for power, and failure in this area to a large extent determined his fall. Khrushchev’s political rivals deliberately left him this choice, believing that sooner or later it would become fatal. According to Tompson, Khrushchev’s rivals believed that, having taken up agriculture, the leader would have “a rope that he himself would tighten around his own neck” [Tompson, p. 135].

Among studies where the subject is precisely the economic side of the agrarian policy of the 1950s, M. A. Vyltsan’s work, published almost half a century ago, retains its significance [Вылцан]. Subsequently, this line of enquiry was continued by O. M. Verbitskaya [Вербицкая], I. E. Zelenin [Зеленин] and S. N. Andreenkov [Андреенков, 2007; Андреенков, 2016]. The agrarian economy under Khrushchev is also a subject in works from a number of English-speaking authors [Leonard; Hahn; Karcz; et al.]. Naturally, the main emphasis here is on the development of virgin and fallow lands, but other aspects of Khrushchev’s agrarian policy have also attracted substantial attention, including the reorganisation of the machinery and tractor stations system, the reduction of purchase prices for agricultural products and the struggle against private farms. According to the established point of view, through the development of virgin land, which initially looked like a strategy but turned out to be only a tactical measure, it was possible to obtain certain positive effects. These, however, were short-term and unstable. Later, this campaign led to the degradation of newly developed lands and a sharp drop in grain production, which was one of the causes of the food crisis in the USSR in the early 1960s [McCauley].

There are works in which even the short-term results of agricultural policy are questioned [Андреенков, 2007]. Their authors note the chaotic nature of Khrushchev’s transformations in the agrarian economy, which led to a large-scale crisis in agriculture, mass migrations from villages to urban areas, changes in the socio-demographic landscapes of rural locales and the desolation of vast territories [Иванов, с. 169]. However, there is also an alternative point of view, according to which Khrushchev’s agrarian policy,



despite all its inconsistencies and eclecticism, should be evaluated more positively [Зеленин; Коньшев].

In conclusion, a number of remarks can be made. Despite the attractiveness of the Khrushchev period for studying various aspects of the transformation of Soviet society and the abundance of publications produced by Russian and non-Russian authors, an analysis of the historiography shows that many fields are still open for further development. Assessments of the economic history of the Khrushchev decade, a dynamic and extremely controversial stage in the development of the Soviet economy, sometimes clash. On the one hand, researchers underline the expanding production of food and industrial consumer goods and the increased purchasing power of the population, which resulted in supplementing the military-industrial orientation of Soviet economic policy with a consumer-oriented component in the mid-1950s. Awareness of the value of scientific and technological progress for ensuring sustainably high rates of economic growth is also positively assessed. On the other hand, the unfeasibility of simultaneously solving three costly tasks at once (transferring the economy onto an intensive path of development, achieving parity with a “likely adversary” in defense capabilities and creating a socialist analogue of the “consumer society”) is noted [Артемов, 2020]. It is argued that the mismatch of the strategic goals of economic policy, complemented by the reluctance to “sacrifice the principles of socialism” in reforming economic mechanisms, did not allow the authorities to find the “fundamental factors for increasing production efficiency”, which is believed to have resulted in a dampening of economic growth [Ханин, 1991, с. 190, 191].

Of course, this argument needs an expanded justification. Historians also must overcome the mechanical use of methodological approaches originally intended to explain the development of other national societies (modernisation theory, the concept of totalitarianism, etc.) and simplistic, a priori theoretical constructs, such as claims about the “inborn” inefficiency and “fundamental irresponsibility” of the Soviet economy [Эриксон]. Hence, there is a need to widen research into the economic history of the Khrushchev period. This will clarify the balance between conservative continuity and innovation in economic policy, show how strategic planning was carried out and how its priorities were defined and demonstrate the reason for the failure of the ambitious plans of “communist construction” and who was to blame: the jockey (the leadership and its policies) or the horse (the system itself).

There are also unsolved problems connected with the clarification of certain aspects of integrated economic policies. In fact, there is still no specialised research on several economic policies, such as investment, structural, fiscal, and monetary policies, the regulation of prices and income, and planning and financing in the defense industry. Special attention should be paid to the nearly unstudied relationship between changes in political and strategic priorities and military-economic policy. Along with deepening research within the existing historiography, the elimination of

these “historiographical gaps” is crucial for understanding Soviet society as a whole and the logic of post-Soviet economic developments.

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