Intrigue in the Kremlin brings down the chief of secret police

Articles prepared for LIFE by Gene Farmer and Jerrold Schechter

At Stalin's funeral on March 9, 1953 the leading pallbearers (Malenkov, left; Beria at extreme right) were in temporary command. Behind Malenkov: Stalin's son Vasili, Molotov, Bulganin, Kaganovich and Nikolai Shvernik, then Chairman of the Presidium (President). Khrushchev, also a pallbearer, is hidden behind casket.
DEATH OF STALIN, OF BERIA

The most powerful personality during Stalin's last years was the secret police chief, Lavrenti P. Beria, who came to look more and more like the take-over man after Stalin's death. A fellow Georgian, Beria was about 32 when Stalin in 1931 named him head of the Party organization in Transcaucasia. Four years later Pravda prominently serialized a "Manifesto of pro-Revolutionary Bolshevism," written by Beria; it was actually a profoundly fawning biography of Stalin. When Stalin wanted a new secret police chief to wind up the purges of the 1930s, he brought Beria to Moscow. In December 1938, Beria took full command of the police apparatus he was to control for nearly 15 years. It was Beria who institutionalized the terror and the concentration camps, and it was Beria who presided over the mass deportations. He was named to the Politburo in 1946—the only secret police chief ever admitted as a full member. Khrushchev's account of Beria's arrest, which is published in this issue, is likely to become the definitive one.

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eria and I started to see each other frequently at Stalin's. At first I liked him. We had friendly chats and even joked together quite a bit, but gradually his political complexion came clearly into focus. I was shocked by his sinister, two-faced hypocrisy. Soon after Beria arrived in Moscow [in 1938], the atmosphere in Stalin's inner circle took on an entirely different character. Stalin once confided to me his own unhappiness with Beria's influence: "Before Beria arrived, dinner meetings used to be relaxed, productive affairs. Now he's always challenging people to drinking contests, and people are getting drunk all over the place."

Even though I agreed with Stalin, I knew I had to watch my step in answering him. One of Stalin's favorite tricks was to provoke you into making a statement—or even agreeing with a statement—which showed your true feelings about someone else. It was perfectly clear that Stalin and Beria were very close. Anyone who wanted to be sure of staying in Stalin's good graces had to fawn all over Beria too. I must say I never saw any of this debasing obsequiousness on Molotov's part. Nor did I ever kowtow to Beria myself, and as
'Beria's arrogance grew
Lying in state in Hall of Columns, Stalin's bier was flanked by old lieutenants already locked in a war of succession. Left to right: Molotov, Voroshilov, Beria, Malenkov, Bulganin, Khrushchev, Kaganovich and Mikoyan. Conspicuously missing are Aleksei Kosygin and Leonid Brezhnev, present rulers.

On the day of Stalin's funeral Muscovites turned out by the thousands to pay spectacular tribute piled on wall of the Kremlin, where Soviet heroes are buried. The spire at left center is St. Basil's Cathedral, between GUM department store and Lenin Mausoleum.

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KHRUSHCHEV REMEMBERS

CONTINUED

Stalin, these people are your faithful servants; they’re all devoted to you.”

Stalin became indignant: “Does that mean Russians are unfaithful? Does that mean Russians aren’t devoted to me?”

“No,” answered Beria, “I didn’t say that. But the people who have been selected here are all loyal servants.”

Stalin shouted, “I don’t need their loyalty! Clear these people out of here!” The Georgians—including the shashlik cook and the provisions officer—were immediately whisked away, and Beria shuffled out of the room like a man who had been beaten up.

Once he had thrown out all the Georgian help and replaced them with Russians, Stalin probably believed he had closed off Beria’s access to his kitchen through his entourage. However, Stalin was getting old. He didn’t understand what was happening. Beria still did control Stalin’s entourage, even after the Georgian service personnel had been thrown out. Beria had worked in the Cheka (secret police) for a long time, and all the Chekists were known to him. They were all trying to get in Beria’s good graces, and it was easy for him to use these people for his own aims. Therefore Stalin couldn’t even trust his Cheka bodyguard.

Beria’s arrogance grew and grew. He was able—and I was astonished that Stalin stood for it—to make some point over dinner.

The Leningrad Affair: ‘Kosygin’s

Until Khrushchev’s 20th Party Congress secret speech in 1956, the Leningrad Affair was never mentioned officially in the Soviet Union. All the outer world knew was that after the sudden death in 1948 of Andrei Zhdanov, the former Party chief in Leningrad and once Stalin’s lifelong heir, there was a vicious purge of Zhdanov’s supporters in Leningrad and elsewhere. Malenkov and Beria, working in tandem and supported by Stalin, sought to destroy their rivals in the Leningrad Party apparatus. At the end of 1949, Stalin brought Khrushchev back from the Ukraine and installed him in Moscow in his old job as First Secretary of the Moscow City and Regional Party Committees.

After taking up my job in Moscow I could see that my arrival on the scene got in the way of Beria’s and Malenkov’s plans. I even began to suspect why Stalin had sent me to Moscow. His own political enemies had started to fear the influence the balance of power and to put a check on Berk and Malenkov. I seemed that Stalin would have been glad to get rid of Beria but didn’t know how to do it. Stalin never told me this, but I could sense it.

Stalin certainly treated me well. Even though he frequently criticized me, he gave me support when I needed it. I was constantly running up against Beria and Malenkov. Malenkov had become a member of the Politburo after the war. Essentially he was a typical office clerk and paper-pusher. Such men can be the most dangerous of all if given any power. They’ll freeze and kill anything that’s alive if it oversteps its boundaries.

Meanwhile the hunt was on in Leningrad. I don’t know how Stalin really felt about the Leningrad case. He never spoke to me about it except when he touched on the matter of the “Moscow conspirators” in connection with my transfer from the Ukraine. By the time I started working as the Central Committee Secretary responsible for the Moscow organization, A. A. Kuznetsov (Zhdanov’s top man in Leningrad) had already been arrested, and the Leningrad Party organization was being torn to shreds. The campaign was concentrated against a troika of prominent young men—Kuznetsov, Voznesensky, and Kosygin. Before the whole Leningrad Affair started, Stalin had nourished high hopes for these troika of bright young men and in fact had been systematically promoting them. Voznesensky was often entrusted with the job of presiding over the Council of Ministers. Kosygin (Aleksei Kosygin, now Soviet Premier) had been given a responsible
and then, if Stalin rejected it, Beria would slam down someone else who tried to make the same point later in the meal. "I've already told you," Beria would say. "This question needn't be raised." Stalin wouldn't say anything, even though he had heard with his own ears that it had been Beria himself who had raised the question in the first place.

You couldn't even report to Stalin without getting Beria's support in advance; if you made a report to Stalin in Beria's presence and if you hadn't cleared it with him beforehand, he would be sure to tear your report down in Stalin's eyes with all sorts of questions and contradictions.

Stalin used to joke over dinner about Beria and [Georgi] Malenkov as "those two rogues." I watched with great interest as their "friendship" developed. I could see Beria neither liked nor respected Malenkov [who in the Politburo appeared to rank second only to Stalin]. But once I said to me something like the following: "Listen, about this spineless fellow Malenkov. He's nothing but a billy goat. He'll bolt if you don't hold him on a leash. But he may come in handy."

Once Malenkov and I were together at Stalin's vacation home in Sochi. We went for a walk together and I said to him, "I'm surprised you don't realize what Beria's attitude is toward you. Don't be life hung by a thread'.

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you see what it is?" He was silent. "You think he respects you? I think he mocks you."

Finally Malenkov answered, "Yes, of course, I see. But what can I do?"

"What can you do? I would just like you to understand, it's true, right now you can't do anything. But the time will come."

In late 1952 Stalin had only a few months to live, but he still had one monstrous judicial fabrication left: the weird "Doctors' Plot." It led to arrest of the Kremlin doctors in January 1953 for mishandling the illness of Andrei Zhdanov, who had died in 1948, and it is sometimes confused with the Leningrad Affair (see box), since the ghost of Zhdanov was in the background of both. The larger purposes of the Doctors' Plot are still obscure, but it appears to have been a preliminary move in what was intended to become Stalin's last great purge, aimed at Malenkov, Beria and many others—including, possibly, Khrushchev himself.

One day Stalin read us a letter from a woman doctor named Timashuk. She claimed that Zhdanov died because the doctors purposely administered improper treatment. If Stalin had been a normal person, he wouldn't have given Timashuk's letter a second thought. But Stalin was more than receptive to this sort of literature. Stalin had instilled in the consciousness of us all the suspicion that we were surrounded by enemies and that we should try to find an unexposed traitor or saboteur in everyone. Stalin called this "vigilance" and used to say that if there were 10% truth in a report, we should regard the entire report as fact. Stalin's version of vigilance turned our world into an insane asylum in which everyone was encouraged to search for nonexistent facts about everyone else. Son was turned against father, father against son, and comrade against comrade. The irrational policies of a sick man terrorized us all.

I should mention that Zhdanov had been treated by Kremlin physicians. Before his death, Zhdanov had been in poor health for some time. One of his ailments was that he had lost his willpower and wasn't able to control himself when it came to drinking. In the last days of Zhdanov's life Stalin used to shout at him to stop drinking. This was an astounding thing because Stalin usually encouraged people to get drunk. But he compelled Zhdanov to drink fruit juice while the rest of us were drinking wine or something stronger.

Anyway, the doctors connected with Zhdanov's case were arrested. Among them was V. N. Vinogradov. He had once treated Stalin, which was a rare distinction because Stalin almost never let doctors treat him. But Stalin had Vinogradov arrested and beaten. They also arrested V. K. Vasilenko, a reputable physician and professor. Vasilenko was in China when the arrests started. He was called home, and the minute he stepped across the Soviet border he was thrown in chains.

I remember after I made my speech on the Party Statutes to the
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19th Party Congress [1952], I fell ill. I couldn't leave home when my report was being discussed at the Congress. An elderly doctor came to examine me. I was touched by his thoughtfulness and care. I felt terrible, but not because I was sick. I was tormented because I had already read the testimonies against this old doctor, whose concern for my health I found so touching, and I knew that no matter what I said Stalin wouldn't spare him.

Stalin circulated copies of Timoshuk's letter with his own postscript in which he invoked the anger of the masses against the doctors who had "committed such villainy" by doing away with Zhdanov. More letters started pouring in branding the doctors as traitors. [Marshal Ivan] Konev, himself a sick man at the time, sent a long letter to Stalin in which he claimed that he too was being poisoned with the same medicines which had allegedly been used to do in Zhdanov. Apparently all the members of the Presidium sensed the lack of substance in Konev's accusation, but we never discussed it openly. Once Stalin had made up his mind, there wasn't anything to do.

The interrogations began. I myself heard how Stalin talked to S. D. Ignatiev, who was then Minister of State Security. I knew Ignatiev personally, and I knew that he was a very sick man. Stalin used to berate him viciously over the phone. Stalin was crazy with rage, yelling at Ignatiev and threatening him, demanding that he throw the doctors in chains, beat them to a pulp and grind them into powder. It was no surprise when almost all the doctors confessed to their crimes.

It was a shameful business. After the crushing of the enemy in World War II, suddenly our intelligentsia—or at least the doctors in its midst—fell subject to Stalin's suspicion. The doctors' case was a cruel and contemptible thing.

On Wednesday, March 4, 1953, Radio Moscow announced that Stalin had been struck with a cerebral hemorrhage. Two days later, about four o'clock in the morning, came the announcement that Stalin was dead. Khrushchev's account of this momentous event and its aftermath is probably the most detailed that we will ever read.

Malenkov, Beria, Bulganin and I had been at the dacha with Stalin on a Saturday night [Feb. 28] after watching a movie at the Kremlin. As usual, dinner lasted until five or six o'clock in the morning. Stalin was pretty drunk. He was jabbing me playfully in the stomach and calling me "Nikita" with a Ukrainian accent, which he always did when he was in a good mood. Dinners at Stalin's didn't always introduce such a pleasant note.

On Sunday evening, expecting his call at any moment, I delayed dinner at home. Finally I had something to eat. It was very late when I undressed and got into bed.

Suddenly the telephone rang. It was Malenkov: "Listen, the Cheka boys have just called from Stalin's dacha. They think something has happened to him. We'd better get over there. I've already notified Beria and Bulganin."

It took 15 minutes to get there. We stopped to see the duty officers. They explained: "Comrade Stalin almost always calls someone and asks for tea or something to eat at 11 o'clock. Tonight he didn't." The Chekists sent Matryona Petrovna to check up. An aging maid, she wasn't very bright, but she was honest and devoted to Stalin. She came back and told the Chekists that Stalin was lying asleep in the large room where he usually slept. Apparently Stalin had gotten out of bed and fallen. The Chekists lifted him off the floor and laid him on a sofa in the small dining room next door.

We separated and all went home. Later that night there was another call from Malenkov. "The boys have called me again," he said. "They say that something is definitely wrong with him. We'd better go back." We arranged for Malenkov to call Voroshilov and
Khrushchev remembers

Beria and Malenkov tried to take over after Stalin died. Mikoyan (right) was personally close to Beria and, according to Khrushchev, was the only voice raised in Beria’s defense when he was arrested.

CONTINUED:
Kaganovich, who hadn’t been at dinner the night before. [All were members of the “inner Presidium” of nine men.] We arranged for doctors to come too. Among them I remember Professor [P. E.] Lukomsky. Shaking nervously, he touched Stalin’s hand as though it were a hot iron. Beria said gruffly, “You’re a doctor, aren’t you? Go ahead and take hold of his hand properly.”

Lukomsky said Stalin’s right arm wouldn’t move. His left leg was also paralyzed. His condition was grave. They undressed him and moved him back into the large room where he usually slept. We arranged our own round-the-clock vigil among the Presidium bureau members. Beria and Malenkov were on together; Kaganovich and Voroshilov; and Bulganin and I. The doctors told us that Stalin might live, but he wouldn’t be able to work again, that usually illnesses like this don’t last long and end fatally.

While the doctors were taking a urine sample, I noticed Stalin tried to cover himself. He must have felt the discomfort. Once he actually returned to consciousness. His face started to move. They had been spoon-feeding him soup and sweet tea. He raised his left hand and started to point to something on the wall. There was a picture hanging on the wall, a clipping from the magazine Ogonyok.

It was a reproduction of a painting of a little girl feeding a lamb from a horn. Stalin was trying to say, “I’m in the same position as that lamb.”

He began to shake hands with us one by one—with his left hand, because his right wouldn’t move.

Beria had started spewing hatred against Stalin and mocking him. It was simply unbearable to listen to Beria. But as soon as Stalin showed these signs of consciousness and made us think he might recover, Beria threw himself on his knees, seized Stalin’s hand and started kissing it. When Stalin lost consciousness again and closed his eyes, Beria stood up and spat.

I was more candid with Bulganin than with the others. I told him, “Stalin’s not going to pull through. You know what kind of situation we’re going to find ourselves in when Stalin passes away? You know what post Beria will take for himself? He’ll try to make himself Minister of State Security. We can’t let him do this. It will be the beginning of the end for us.”

Bulganin said he agreed with me. I said, “I’ll talk to Malenkov. I think he will see it our way. If we don’t do something and do it right away, it will mean disaster for the Party. Beria could turn back the clock to 1937-38—and he could do worse.”

Our watch ended and I went home. No sooner had I lain down than...

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KHRUSHCHEV REMEMBERS

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'Stop it!
Can't you see the man is dead?'

CONTINUED

than the telephone rang. It was Malenkov: "Come quickly, Stalin has had a setback."

I found that Stalin was indeed in a very bad way. The doctors told us that he was dying and that we were watching his death throes. Suddenly he stopped breathing. A huge man came from somewhere and started giving him artificial respiration, massaging him to get him breathing again. It was painful for me to watch, I said, "Listen! Stop it, please! Can't you see the man is dead?"

They gave up. It was true—Stalin was dead.

The moment Stalin died, Beria got in his car and drove off.

Beria was hurrying to take control of the security forces and put himself in the strongest possible position. He was bidding for supreme power. So was Malenkov, who emerged for a time as Stalin's nominal successor with Beria second in the hierarchy. But Khrushchev by now had also set his sights very high.

As soon as Stalin was dead, Beria was radiant. To put it crudely, he had a housewarming over Stalin’s corpse before it was even put in its coffin. Beria was sure that no power on earth could hold him back now. You could see these triumphal thoughts in his face as he drove off to the city, leaving us at the dacha.

I knew that Malenkov was just an errand boy. Stalin used to say, "This Malenkov is a good clerk. He can write out a resolution quickly, but he has no capacity for independent thought."

Malenkov was sure to "come in handy" for Beria’s plans.

Malenkov paced up and down nervously. I decided to have a talk with him then and there. I went over and said, "I want to talk to you."

"What about?" he asked coldly.

"Now that Stalin is dead, we have something to discuss. What do we do now?"

"What’s there to talk about? We’ll all get together and then we’ll talk," I looked to mean that Malenkov had already talked things over with Beria. I already sensed that Beria would start bossing everyone around. He was a butcher and an assassin.

When the meeting was convened, Beria immediately proposed Malenkov for Chairman of the Council of Ministers. Malenkov proposed that Beria be appointed his first deputy. He also proposed the merger of two ministries into a single Ministry of Internal Affairs with Beria as Minister. I was silent. Bulganin was silent, too. If Bulganin and I had objected, we would have been accused of starting a fight before the corpse was cold. Things were moving in the direction I had feared.

Molotov and Kaganovich were nominated to be First Deputy Prime Ministers. Voroshilov was nominated to be Chairman of the Presidium. Beria was trying to make Voroshilov into someone whom he could rely on when he started his next round of butchery. Then Beria proposed that I be released from my duties as Secretary of the Moscow (Party) Committee so that I could concentrate on my work in the Central Committee secretariat. Then we decided on how best to announce Stalin’s death.

During and right after the funeral Beria was attentive and respectful to me, which surprised me. Beria and Malenkov started including me in their strolls around the Kremlin grounds.

It was Beria’s Asiatic cunning coming into play. I knew that
Beria was toying with me and trying to put me off my guard. We had reverted to a narrow circle which Stalin had set up. We had wandered into a narrow circle of about 11 people. Then came the first clash. Beria made the following proposal: "Since many prisons and exile terms are coming to an end and all these former convicts and exiles will be returning to their homes, I propose that we pass a resolution not allowing any of them to return without special permission from the Ministry of Internal Affairs."

I got angry and spoke against him: "I categorically object. We've already had this sort of thing in the past. These convicts and exiles you're talking about were arrested, interrogated, tried and sentenced by State Security tribunals. They were never given the benefit of witnesses, prosecutors or judges. You're saying that these people should again be deprived of all their rights. This is totally unacceptable!"

The others supported me. Beria shrewdly withdrew his proposal, and since Malenkov was taking the minutes, the motion was never recorded. Later Beria introduced what seemed to be a liberal motion; he suggested lowering the maximum prison term from 20 to 10 years. I said, "I'm categorically opposed to this too. You can always sentence someone to 10 years and then another right up until he dies." Once again Beria withdrew his motion.

And what was this acrimonious Beria's next move? One day we were walking together—Beria, Malenkov and I—and Beria began to develop the following idea: "We're not getting any younger. Anything could happen to any one of us, and we would leave our families behind. I'd like to propose that the government build da-chas which would then turn over to the leaders of the country for their personal use. I propose building these da-chas on the Black Sea coast. We could clear the center of the city and turn it into a park with peach trees."

We returned to our cars. Once we were alone I said to Malenkov, "Listen, what do you think about this idea of Beria's? It's the most blatant provocation."

"Why do you think so?"

CONTINUED

The secret speech: Khrushchev's version

When Khrushchev denounced Stalin in his sensational secret speech to the 20th Party Congress in 1956, he had great power but had not yet emerged supreme in his struggle to eclipse Malenkov. The speech was a 20,000-word document, packed with detail. Its substance apparently was drawn from a report on Stalinism prepared by P. N. Pospelov, a dogmatic Party ideologist and a former director of Pravda, but Khrushchev's decision to deliver the speech was a highly personal one. He had been forced onto an exposed position because of his close association, especially with Malenkov, and he must have determined to turn the tables on them by sheer skillfulness. It was a panic that paid off brilliantly.

For three years we were unable to break with the past, unable to master the enormous block of truth and see what had been hidden from us. We couldn't imagine that those executions during the purges were, from a legal standpoint, crimes themselves. But it was true. Criminal acts had been committed by Stalin, acts which would be punishable in any state except fascist states like Hitler's.

I sensed the falsity of our position when we went to Yugoslavia and talked with Tito in 1955. When we mentioned Beria as the culprit behind the crimes of the Stalin period, the Yugoslav comrades smiled scornfully and made sarcastic remarks. We were walking together—Beria, Malenkov and I—and Beria began to develop the following idea: "We're not getting any younger. Anything could happen to any one of us, and we would leave our families behind. I'd like to propose that the government build da-chas which would then turn over to the leaders of the country for their personal use. I propose building these da-chas on the Black Sea coast. We could clear the center of the city and turn it into a park with peach trees."

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"Why do you think so?"

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"I am discussing this with you on Malenkov's and Bulganin's behalf."

"You'll have my complete support," Molotov said. "But tell me something else: what do you want to do exactly?"

"First, we have to relieve Beria of his duties."

Molotov said that wasn't enough: "Beria's very dangerous. I think we must, so to say, resort to more extreme measures."

"You think we should detain him for investigation?" I said "detain" rather than "arrest" because there were still no criminal charges against Beria. We had only our intuition to go on, and you can't arrest a man on intuition. Molotov and I agreed.

We decided that we'd better speed things up because we might be overheard by "Beria's ears" or someone might let the cat out of the bag. Beria could easily have us all arrested.

Everyone I talked to asked the same question: "What about Malenkov?" At that time Kaganovich was making an inspection tour of the lumber industry. When he returned to Moscow I asked him to stop in at the Central Committee office. I didn't try to interrupt him, although I had other things on my mind. When he finished I said, "What you've told me is all very well. Now I want to tell you about what's going on here."

I told him what conclusions we had reached. Kaganovich pricked up his ears and asked, "Who is 'we'?" I said that Malenkov, Bulganin, Molotov, [Maxim] Saburov and I were of one mind, and that without him we had a majority. Kaganovich declared, "I'm with you, too. I was only asking." Then he asked me, "And what about Voroshilov?" I told him about my awkward meeting and how Voroshilov had praised Beria. "He really said that?" Kaganovich exclaimed. He was incredulous.

Kaganovich cursed Voroshilov, but not maliciously: "That sly old bastard! He's told me himself that he can't stand Beria, that Beria's dangerous and likely to be the ruin of us all. What he said doesn't mean a thing."

"Then we'll have to try talking to him one last time. Perhaps Malenkov will talk to him."

Then Kaganovich said, "And what about Mikoyan?"

I haven't talked to Mikoyan yet. His case is a bit more complicated." Everyone knew that Mikoyan was on the best of terms with Beria.

In this way we made the rounds of all the Presidium members except Voroshilov and Mikoyan. We arranged for me to speak to Mikoyan and for Malenkov to speak to Voroshilov. Later I went by to see Malenkov: "Well, what happened? Was he [Voroshilov] still singing Beria's praises?"

"As soon as I told him about our plan," said Malenkov, "Voroshilov embraced me and started crying."

Still another question arose. Once we had formally resolved to strip Beria of his posts, who would actually detain him? The Presidium bodyguard was obedient to him. His Chekists would be sitting in the next room, and Beria could easily order them to arrest us all. We would have been quite helpless because there was a sizable armed guard in the Kremlin.

Therefore we decided to enlist the military. First we entrusted the detention of Beria to Comrade Moskalenko, the air defense commander, and five generals. This was my idea. Then on the eve of the session Malenkov widened our circle to include Marshal Zhukov and some others. That meant 11 marshals and generals in all.

In those days all military personnel were required to check their weapons when coming into the Kremlin, so Bulganin was instructed to see that the marshals and generals were allowed to bring their guns with them. We arranged for Moskalenko's group to wait for a summons in a separate room. When Malenkov gave a signal, they were to come into the room where we were meeting and take Beria into custody.

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KHRUSHCHEV REMEMBERS

Beria wrote, ‘Khrushchev put you up to this’

Continued

vent him from grabbing a weapon from the briefcase. We checked later and found that he had no gun, either in his briefcase or in his pockets. His quick movement had simply been a reflex action.

Beria was immediately put under armed guard in the Council of Ministers building next to Malenkov’s office. At this point a new question arose. Now that we had detained Beria, where could we put him? We couldn’t hang him over to the Ministry of Internal Affairs because those were all his own men. Finally we agreed to entrust him to Comrade Moskalenko, who had his men transfer Beria to a bunker at his headquarters. I could see that Comrade Moskalenko would do what was necessary for the Party cause. [This event took place in June 1957. In December, Beria was shot.]

After it was all over, Malenkov took me aside and said, “Listen to what my chief bodyguard has to say.” The man came over to me and said, “I have only just heard that Beria has been arrested. I want to inform you that he raped my stepdaughter, a seventh-grader. A year or so ago her grandmother died and my wife had to go to the hospital, leaving the girl at home alone. One evening she went out to buy some bread near the building where Beria lives. There she came across an old man who watched her intently. She was frightened. Someone came and took her to Beria’s home. Beria had her sit down with him for supper. She drank something. She became quite sleepy, and he raped her.”

I told this man, “I want you to tell the prosecutor during the investigation everything you’ve told me.” Later we were given a list of over a hundred girls and women who had been raped by Beria. He had used the same routine on all of them. He gave them some dinner and offered them wine with a sleeping potion in it.

When Beria was put in solitary confinement, he asked for pencil and paper. Some of us were doubtful, but we decided to give him what he wanted in case an urge had come over him to tell us candidly what he knew about the things we had charged him with. He started writing notes. The first was to Malenkov: “Vegor, don’t you know me? Ara’re no friend? Why did you trust Khrushchev? He’s the one who put you up to this, isn’t he?”

NEXT WEEK: PART IV
KHRUSHCHEV PLAYS FOR HIGH STAKES

• When the Communists thought they were licked in South Vietnam
• Disillusionment with Mao Tse-tung
• Why he liked Kennedy and hated Nixon
• The Cuban missile crisis: his version
KhruShcheV REMEmBERS

We arranged to convene a session of the Presidium of the Council of Ministers in the Kremlin rather than in the Council of Ministers session so that we could discuss the situation in the Party. Voroshilov had to be especially invited, since he was Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet and therefore didn't regularly attend sessions of either the Council of Ministers or the Party Presidium.

As soon as Malenkov opened the session he said, "Let us discuss Party questions. There are some matters which we must deal with right away." Everyone agreed. As had been arranged in advance, I vetoed the floor and proposed that we discuss the matter of Beria. Beria was sitting on my right. He gave a start, grabbed me by the hand, looked at me with a startled expression and said, "What's going on, Nikita? What's this you're mumbling about?"

I said, "Just pay attention. You'll find out soon enough." And here is what I said. I recalled the Central Committee plenum of February 1939 at which Comrade Grisha Kaminsky had accused Beria of having worked for the English intelligence service when he was Secretary of the Baku Party organization. I then recalled how immediately after that meeting Grisha Kaminsky had dropped out of sight like a stone in the water: "I've always wondered about Kaminsky's statement and why no one made any attempt to explain what he said." Then I reviewed the moves Berk had made since Stalin's death, his interference in the Party organizations of the Ukraine, Belorussia and the Baltic states. I described how Berk was relying on nationalist antagonisms to undermine Soviet unity. I mentioned his latest proposal concerning policy toward people of Ukrainian, Belorussian and Baltic extraction. I emphasized that he is no Communist. He is a careerist who has wormed his way into the Party for self-seeking reasons. His arrogance is intolerable. No honest Communist would ever behave the way he does in the Party."

Bulganin asked for the floor and said something very much along the same lines. Then the others spoke in turn. Molotov expressed the proper Party position on the matter. The other comrades stressed the same principles, with the exception of Mikoyan, who spoke last. He repeated what he had told me before the session when we had our talk: namely, that Beria would take our criticisms to heart, that he wasn't a hopeless case and that he could still be useful in the collective leadership.

When everyone had spoken, Malenkov, as chairman, was supposed to sum things up and to formulate a consensus, but at the last moment he lost his nerve. After the final speech, the session was adjourned. There was a long pause. I saw we were in trouble, so I asked Comrade Malenkov for the floor in order to propose a motion. As we had arranged in advance, I proposed that the Central Committee Presidium should release Beria from his duties as Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers and Minister of Internal Affairs and from all other government posts he held.

Malenkov was still in a state of panic. As I recall, he didn't even put my motion to a vote. He pressed a secret button which gave the signal to the generals who were waiting in the next room. Zhukov was the first to appear. Then Moskalenko and the others came in. Malenkov said in a faint voice to Comrade Zhukov, "As Chairman of the Council of Ministers and Minister of Internal Affairs and from all other government posts he held."

"Hands up!" Zhukov commanded Beria.

Moskalenko and the others unbuttoned their holster cases in case Beria tried anything. Beria seemed to reach for his briefcase, which he had made since Stalin's death, his interference in the Party organizations of the Ukraine, Belorussia and the Baltic states. I described how Berk was relying on nationalist antagonisms to undermine Soviet unity. I mentioned his latest proposal concerning policy toward people of Ukrainian, Belorussian and Baltic extraction. I emphasized that he is no Communist. He is a careerist who has wormed his way into the Party for self-seeking reasons. His arrogance is intolerable. No honest Communist would ever behave the way he does in the Party."

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