

7/6/93
C → R → shelf

TITLE: Beria: Stalin's First Lieutenant

AUTHOR: Amy Knight

**THE NATIONAL COUNCIL
FOR SOVIET AND EAST EUROPEAN
RESEARCH**

1755 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036

PROJECT INFORMATION:*

CONTRACTOR: Georgetown University
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Amy Knight
COUNCIL CONTRACT NUMBER: 804-08
DATE: July 2, 1993

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

Individual researchers retain the copyright on work products derived from research funded by Council Contract. The Council and the U.S. Government have the right to duplicate written reports and other materials submitted under Council Contract and to distribute such copies within the Council and U.S. Government for their own use, and to draw upon such reports and materials for their own studies; but the Council and U.S. Government do not have the right to distribute, or make such reports and materials available outside the Council or U.S. Government without the written consent of the authors, except as may be required under the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 5 U.S.C. 552, or other applicable law.

* *The work leading to this report was supported by contract funds provided by the National Council for Soviet and East European Research. The analysis and interpretations contained in the report are those of the author.*

Executive Summary*

This paper is itself a summary by the author of a book-length biography of Lavrentii Beria, the second-most powerful politician in the Kremlin from the late 1930s until Stalin's death in 1953, (forthcoming, Princeton University Press, 1993).

This study, based on a reassessment of old sources and on new materials that have emerged as a result of glasnost, does not serve in any sense to "rehabilitate" Beria. But it does challenge some basic assumptions, both about Beria and about the Stalinist system in general. One of these assumptions concerns the extent to which Stalin himself dominated political events. That Beria was a villain who committed terrible acts there can be no doubt, but the myths and legends about him have obscured the complexities of his character and detracted from the important role that he played in Soviet domestic and foreign policy from the pre-war years onward. The conventional image of Beria as just another of Stalin's ruthless policemen has prevented historians from recognizing that, however evil he was, Beria was a highly intelligent and efficient administrator whose influence on Soviet policy was pervasive. Moreover, the fact that he became a forceful proponent of liberal reforms after Stalin's death has not been fully understood.

No dictator's power is truly absolute, in the sense that it always depends on the loyalty of those directly below him. However powerful he might have appeared to others, Stalin never felt secure with the members of his inner circle. Indeed, his biographers have argued that his insecurity, stemming as it did from deep psychological imbalances, went far beyond the bounds of rationality. His paranoia inevitably detracted from his effectiveness as a leader and, more importantly, it made him vulnerable to psychological manipulation. Fortunately for Stalin, he managed for the most part to surround himself with malleable bureaucrats, who lacked the imagination or insight to penetrate his mind, but Beria was an exception.

*Prepared by NCSEER staff.

During the 1920s and 1930s, as police chief and later party chief of Georgia and Transcaucasia, Beria had won Stalin's confidence by his ruthless enforcement of Soviet domination and by his ambitious efforts to further Stalin's personality cult. His sycophantic devotion to Stalin paid off in late 1938, when he was brought to Moscow to head the national secret police, the NKVD. Although a relative late-comer to Stalin's entourage, Beria soon insinuated himself into Stalin's inner circle, rising to become the second most powerful person in the Kremlin for the next decade and a half.

As NKVD chief, Beria was responsible for intelligence, counterintelligence, and domestic security during the pre-World War II and war years. He also commanded the vast slave labor network, the GULAG, which furnished a significant portion of the manpower for the Soviet economy. During the war he oversaw the enormous task of evacuating defense industries to the East as the Germans advanced, and his powers expanded to include overseeing defense industry production and membership on the State Defense Committee. In 1945 Stalin placed him in charge of the Soviet atomic bomb project. Although Beria relinquished formal control over the police and security apparatus to trusted subordinates in 1946, he retained oversight for this sphere in his position as a full Politburo member and a deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers.

Beria's unique sway over Stalin contributed to his power. Although his relations with Stalin were not always smooth, even in the early days, Beria was able to weather the crises because he understood better than his comrades Stalin's peculiar psychopathology. As a fellow Georgian, he was familiar with the cultural and social world in which Stalin had grown up, the society that had instilled in him the values and orientation that remained with him for life. In Stalin's development a complex interaction of cultural and familial experiences contributed to a deeply neurotic, paranoid personality, alienated and out of touch with normal human emotions. Beria understood these influences not only because he was Georgian, but also because he had suffered a similar upbringing. Recognizing Stalin's insatiable need for praise to compensate for his deep feelings of inferiority, Beria flattered him endlessly. He also played on Stalin's fear of betrayal by feeding his suspicions, a task he was well-positioned to undertake by means of his control over the political police and the files on Stalin's colleagues and subordinates. As the only Georgian in Stalin's inner circle,

Beria was in a sense Stalin's alter ego, speaking to him in Georgian in front of the others and often addressing him as "Koba."

Beria was, then, not simply a sycophant who gained Stalin's favor by insidious means. He actively encouraged Stalin's neuroses and his sense of self-alienation, "stirred him up" as no one else could do. Stalin depended emotionally on Beria, who was at his side constantly from the early 1940s onwards.

Though Beria was an efficient and highly intelligent leader, who was known as a good administrator, he had fallen out of Stalin's favor by the early 1950s. However strong was Beria's emotional hold on Stalin, he was playing a dangerous game. It was inevitable, given Stalin's paranoia, that he would eventually begin to distrust Beria. Indeed, Stalin, who was growing increasingly paranoid and suspicious, was planning to get rid of Beria by implicating him in a nationalist conspiracy. Thus Stalin's death in March 1953 was fortuitous for Beria. He immediately took over an enlarged police and intelligence organization, the MVD, and forged an alliance with his colleague Malenkov. A bitter power struggle with Khrushchev ensued. As part of his strategy Beria embarked on a sweeping program of de-Stalinization and liberalization, which included recognition of the long-suppressed rights of national minorities and a reunification of the two Germanies. But Beria underestimated Khrushchev, who was able to rally support for a surprise arrest of Beria on June 26, 1953. Beria, who was executed in December 1953, along with several colleagues, was then made a scapegoat for the repressions of the Stalin period. He soon became a "non-person" and his name was mentioned in the press only very rarely.

With the onset of glasnost, however, historians in the former Soviet Union began looking anew at Beria's past and considerable new material on him appeared. This study draws upon many of these recent sources, including archival materials, in an effort to go beyond the conventional image of Beria as an evil villain and to look more deeply at his political influence on the Stalin period.

Amy Knight, BERIA: STALIN'S FIRST LIEUTENANT

(forthcoming, Princeton University Press, 1993)

SUMMARY

As Lavrentii Beria stood over Joseph Stalin's deathbed in early March 1953, witnesses observed that he could barely contain his pleasure in watching the leader edge towards his final moments of life. The two men had been through a great deal together since they had first met in the 1920s. Indeed, Beria, who oversaw the Soviet police apparatus and had been a key member of Stalin's government for years, was at Stalin's side during some of the most dramatic crises of his leadership. But around 1950 their relationship, while outwardly still close, had taken a bizarre turn. Stalin had come to distrust Beria and was plotting to get rid of him. Beria knew this, so it was not without reason that he welcomed Stalin's death.

But, Stalin's death proved to be only a temporary reprieve for Beria. Three months later he was arrested by his Kremlin colleagues in a dramatic coup led by Nikita Khrushchev. In an effort to justify their coup, Beria's opponents denounced him as a spy and a traitor. Following--or perhaps even before--a closed trial in December 1953, Beria was executed and his name officially expunged from public memory. As a symbol of his "non-personhood," the editors of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia sent out a discreet notice to all their subscribers recommending that they cut out "with a small knife or razor blade" the entry on Beria. They provided as a replacement text an entry on the Bering Sea. For the next thirty years no Soviet history, no textbook, no officially sanctioned memoirs mentioned Beria's name, except for the occasional reference to him as a criminal or evil-doer. Those who lived through the Stalin era did not forget Beria, however. Associated as he was with the dreaded police and labelled a traitor by his Kremlin opponents, he came to symbolize all that was evil in this period, haunting the public imagination to this day.¹ Whereas some might still view Stalin with ambivalence, giving him grudging credit for his leadership abilities, the general reaction to Beria is fear and loathing.

That Beria was a villain who committed terrible acts there can be no doubt, but the myths and legends about him have obscured the complexities of his character and detracted from the important role that he played in Soviet domestic and foreign policy from the pre-war years onward. The conventional image of Beria as just another of Stalin's ruthless policemen has prevented historians from recognizing that, however evil he was, Beria was a highly intelligent and efficient administrator whose influence on Soviet policy was pervasive. Moreover, the fact that he became a forceful proponent of liberal reforms after Stalin's death has not been fully understood.

This study, based on a reassessment of old sources and on new materials that have emerged as a result of glasnost, does not serve in any sense to "rehabilitate" Beria. But it does challenge some basic assumptions, both about Beria and about the Stalinist system in general. One of these assumptions concerns the extent to which Stalin himself dominated political events. Most historians have viewed Stalin as an absolute dictator, whose powers, after the mid-1930s at least, knew no bounds. Although they have disagreed about the reasons for his rise to power and debated the relative strengths and weaknesses of the Stalinist system, few have doubted that he was firmly at the helm in his position as Soviet leader. His subordinates have generally been dismissed as pawns or vassals, who acted as "little dictators" in their own realms, but always bowed to their leader's will.² Given the prevalence of this view of Stalin's leadership, it is not surprising that scholars have focussed their attention almost exclusively on Stalin, treating the members of his inner circle as peripheral characters. They have combed Stalin's past for details that might shed light on his personality and analyzed his motivations from all perspectives, but have shown little interest in the character or motives of other members of the leadership. Only Khrushchev has been deemed worthy of serious biographical treatment, because he managed to achieve the top leadership post after Stalin died.

In view of Stalin's impact on history, this preoccupation with his personality may be justified. But no dictator's power is truly absolute, in the sense that it always depends on the loyalty of those directly below him. Thus the motivations of Stalin's subordinates and the dynamics of his relationship with them should also be a concern for historians. However powerful he might have appeared to others, Stalin never felt secure with the members of his inner circle. Indeed, his biographers have argued that his insecurity, stemming as it did

from deep psychological imbalances, went far beyond the bounds of rationality and developed, as he grew older, into an intense paranoia.³ He became deeply suspicious, so obsessed with the possibility of betrayal from any quarter that he trusted no one. This is why he could never tolerate the idea of an heir apparent and continually intrigued against his subordinates with the aim of pitting one against the other, isolating them, and warding off any possible collective initiative on their part by having them report to him personally.

Stalin's strategy of "divide and rule" was successful, particularly because he could use the threat of physical annihilation as the ultimate deterrent against disloyalty on the part of his lieutenants. With the latter aware that the slightest sign of disobedience could bring death, Stalin never had to face overt opposition to his rule.⁴ But his paranoia inevitably detracted from his effectiveness as a leader and, more importantly, it made him vulnerable to psychological manipulation. Fortunately for Stalin, he managed for the most part to surround himself with malleable bureaucrats, who lacked the imagination or insight to penetrate his mind, but Beria was an exception.

Born in 1899, twenty years after Stalin, Beria was not part of Stalin's generation of revolutionaries who had fought against the Tsar. He did not join the Bolshevik party until 1917. But he was, like Stalin, a Georgian and he shared with his mentor an ability to employ the most extreme measures of repression against his countrymen. During the 1920s and 1930s, as police chief and later party chief of Georgia and Transcaucasia, Beria had won Stalin's confidence by his ruthless enforcement of Soviet domination and by his ambitious efforts to further Stalin's personality cult. Unlike most other leaders of national republics, he managed to survive the 1936-38 purges, though he did come dangerously close to arrest. By the time he moved to Moscow in 1938 to head the dreaded Soviet political police, the NKVD, Beria already had the blood of thousands of his fellow Georgians on his hands. Although a relative late-comer to Stalin's entourage, Beria soon insinuated himself into Stalin's inner circle, rising to become the second most powerful person in the Kremlin for the next decade and a half.

As NKVD chief, Beria was responsible for intelligence, counterintelligence, and domestic security during the pre-World War II and war years. He also commanded the vast slave labor network, the GULAG, which furnished a significant portion of the manpower for the Soviet economy. During the war he oversaw the enormous task of evacuating defense

industries to the East as the Germans advanced, and in 1945 Stalin placed him in charge of the Soviet atomic bomb project. Although Beria relinquished formal control over the police and security apparatus to trusted subordinates in 1946, he retained oversight for this sphere in his position as a full Politburo member and a deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers. This gave him an advantage over his Kremlin colleagues in the power struggles that characterized Kremlin politics and became increasingly bitter as Stalin's physical and mental health declined in the post-war years.

Beria was by all accounts an astute politician who made good use of the extensive political networks he had established in Transcaucasia and in the security police by cultivating a group of supporters who owed their allegiance to him. Indeed, his career is a testimony to the importance of patronage, particularly that based on regional loyalties, in the Stalinist system. But his unique sway over Stalin also contributed to his power. Although his relations with Stalin were not always smooth, even in the early days, Beria was able to weather the crises because he understood better than his comrades Stalin's peculiar psychopathology. As a fellow Georgian, he was familiar with the cultural and social world in which Stalin had grown up, the society that had instilled in him the values and orientation that remained with him for life. Georgians have always been deeply conscious of their national tradition and closely tied to their cultural and societal roots. Although Stalin eventually became thoroughly Russified on the surface and shunned his Georgian past, at a personal level he retained the influences of his Georgian heritage.

Foremost among these influences, as historian Ronald Suny has argued, was the Georgian ideal of manhood—fearless, determined, tall, physically strong, proud, and fiercely loyal to friends, family and nation. A Georgian man should also be lavishly hospitable and able to hold his alcohol. In Georgian society honor is accorded the highest value and to fail in fulfilling the ideal of manhood is to lose one's honor and bring shame upon oneself and one's family. Stalin shared this ideal, calling himself in the Bolshevik underground by the nickname "Koba," the protagonist in a famous Georgian novel who embodied all the traits of Georgian manhood.⁵ Yet he failed miserably to measure up to this ideal, just as his father, Beso Dzhughashvili, had. The latter, who died in a brawl when Stalin was a boy, was a drunkard, unable to provide for his family and prone to violent beatings of both Stalin and his mother.

Stalin was deprived of a model of traditional patriarchal authority that he might have emulated, relying instead on his strong-willed mother, who assumed the dominant role even before his father's death. Short in stature, with an arm permanently weakened by an accident, and scarred by smallpox, Stalin was also disadvantaged by his physical appearance. And despite his mother's reported devotion to him, the beatings by his father in early childhood, as Stalin's biographers have hypothesized, created a deep sense of anxiety and inferiority, which further inhibited him from approaching the Georgian ideal of manhood. The abusive treatment also left Stalin with an inherent distrust of other people and a strong vindictive streak, traits that were reinforced by Georgian societal norms:

The high value on friendship, loyalty, and trust in a fiercely competitive society increased the potential for disappointment and disillusion. Betrayal of a friend was the worst sin. Competition leads to judging superiority and inferiority--who is stronger, drinks more, is better at toasting--and in turn creates tensions, frustrations, and mutual suspicions. Close to the reliance on trust is the omnipresent fear of betrayal. Friendship and family networks provide security and protection, resources of all kinds, but they cannot eliminate the anxiety of betrayal and loss of trust or honor.⁶

In Stalin's development, then, a complex interaction of cultural and familial experiences contributed to a deeply neurotic, paranoid personality, alienated and out of touch with normal human emotions. Beria understood these influences not only because he was Georgian, but also because he had suffered a similar upbringing. He too was from a poor peasant family and grew up in an impoverished rural area. He too lost his father at early age and was brought up by his mother, without the role model of an adult male.

Recognizing Stalin's insatiable need for praise to compensate for his deep feelings of inferiority, Beria flattered him endlessly. He also played on Stalin's fear of betrayal by feeding his suspicions, a task he was well-positioned to undertake by means of his control over the political police and the files on Stalin's colleagues and subordinates. As Robert Tucker observed: "a craving for praise was not the only need in Stalin to which Beria ministered. There was also...the active propensity for distrusting others, the need born of Stalin's own self-accusations to expose, accuse and punish others as enemies. From this standpoint, the function of a Beria was to supply Stalin with ever new objects of distrust and condemnation."⁷

As the only Georgian in Stalin's inner circle, Beria was in a sense Stalin's alter ego.

He was a constant reminder to Stalin of his ethnic origins, speaking to him in Georgian in front of the others and often addressing him as "Koba." Yet Stalin had intensely ambivalent feelings about Georgia, which is not surprising given his unpleasant childhood, and he gradually tried to sever himself from his Georgian self. Ironically, Beria helped him to do this by serving as his accomplice in two acts that symbolized a repudiation of his heritage. The first was in 1935, when Beria published his notorious book, On the History of Bolshevik Organizations in Transcaucasia, the purpose of which was to give Stalin a leading role in the revolutionary movement in the Caucasus by falsifying the historical facts and thereby denigrating the role of other revolutionary figures. It is not clear whether Stalin had the idea of writing the book, but in endorsing it wholeheartedly and going along with the unfounded glorification of his role at the expense of the truth, he denied any allegiance to Georgian history or respect for the past. Then, in 1937, Stalin failed to attend his mother's funeral in Georgia. Beria, who was party chief there at the time, acted as his surrogate, making the arrangements and presiding over the ceremony. Whatever the reasons for Stalin's absence, it was not only a terrible insult to the memory of his dead mother but also a shocking breach of cultural and societal tradition in a country where veneration of the dead is accorded the highest importance.⁸

Beria was, then, not simply a sycophant who gained Stalin's favor by insidious means. He actively encouraged Stalin's neuroses and his sense of self-alienation, "stirred him up" as no one else could do. Stalin depended emotionally on Beria, who was at his side constantly from the early 1940s onwards. Beria acted as the unofficial toastmaster at Stalin's endless dinners, which all members of his inner circle were required to attend, forcing the guests to consume large quantities of alcohol and making crude, scatological jokes. Aside from his daughter, Stalin was not close to members of his family and he hated to be alone, so he insisted that his subordinates keep him company during all his waking hours. They even went with him on vacations.

The lack of distinction between their public and private lives doubtless strengthened the sense of emotional dependency that existed between Stalin and the members of his circle, as did their isolation from the outside world. Stalin and his entourage were so out of touch with the rest of the country, so involved in their own group dynamics and court intrigues, that what happened "below" seemed almost irrelevant to them. Milovan Djilas, a Yugoslav

diplomat who spent considerable time with Stalin's inner circle after the war, aptly portrayed this atmosphere in a description of a dinner scene at Stalin's villa in 1949. The guests, all members of the leadership and including Beria, were playing a game at the table. Each of them had to guess what the temperature was outside and then drink one glass of vodka for every degree by which his estimate was off the mark. "This apportioning of the number of vodka glasses according to the temperature reading," writes Djilas, "suddenly brought to my mind the confinement, the inanity and senselessness of the life these Soviet leaders were living, gathered about their superannuated chief even as they played a role that was decisive for the human race."⁹ Isolated, caught up in themselves and blighted by a kind of group neurosis, Stalin and his lieutenants made their decisions with little or no regard for the Soviet people. Indeed, what bound them together was their contempt for human individuality and their ability to inflict terrible cruelty on their people with no remorse.

However strong was Beria's emotional hold on Stalin, he was playing a dangerous game. It was inevitable, given Stalin's paranoia, that he would eventually begin to distrust Beria. And he had good reason. Beria was becoming increasingly contemptuous of him behind his back. By this time, however, Stalin's suspiciousness and fear of death had overcome him to such a degree that he could no longer manipulate men and events to suit his purposes. Or perhaps he was still able to manipulate, but his purposes had become vague. Although he continued to instil fear in his subordinates, including Beria, and to command their outward obedience, there was more than a little covert resistance and by the early 1950s the intense battle for the succession had begun to take on a life of its own.

The chief contenders were Beria and Khrushchev, then a powerful Central Committee secretary. Once Stalin died, Beria was free to act and he immediately took control of the vast police apparatus, a move which was seen as threatening by his colleagues, especially Khrushchev. This has generally been cited as the reason for the opposition to Beria and his subsequent arrest. But, as this study shows, Beria's reform program aroused equal concern. Beria embarked on a series of liberal initiatives aimed at reversing many of Stalin's policies. The changes he advocated were so bold and far reaching that, while greeted with relief by the public, they alarmed his colleagues. Ironically, it was Khrushchev, acclaimed later as a courageous de-Stalinizer, who was chiefly responsible for putting a halt to Beria's reforms by leading the plot against him. As this biography suggests, Beria's program aimed at

undermining the Stalinist system and therefore might have led to its demise. Khrushchev's policies, while reformist, in fact perpetuated Stalinism. Though Khrushchev eliminated the role of police terror, many would argue that the system remained essentially totalitarian.

The present study, then, might be considered a revisionist history because, in examining the career of one political figure, it questions some common assumptions about Stalinism. The approach to this biography is a dual one. The narrative describes the rise of Beria in the political and social climate of the Stalin era, chronicling his successes and failures and assessing his influence in terms of the dynamics of the Soviet system. At the same time, the study considers Beria's career at a more personal level, examining his motivations and his relationship with Stalin and other colleagues. Soviet political figures have by tradition revealed little about their private lives, and Beria was no exception. Even if all the archives were opened and his personal papers were made available, it is doubtful that diaries or letters recording intimate feelings would surface. Like Stalin, Beria had little in the way of a private life, especially after he came to the Kremlin in 1938. His marriage to the beautiful Nino Gegechkori had become a meaningless formality. He was apparently fond of his only son, Sergo, who often accompanied him on trips, and there was the diversion provided by his notorious sexual attacks on young women and girls. But his wife and others who knew him have claimed that he spent most of his time working or with Stalin. And one of his closest associates for many years, Vladimir Merkulov, observed that Beria never once spoke to him about personal matters. Only in Beria's letters to his mentor, the famous Bolshevik Sergo Ordzhonikidze, does one detect a hint of personal emotion.

The seeming absence of a human dimension in Beria's personality should not prevent us from attempting to discern the causes behind his actions. He did not exist as an abstraction, but as a human being whose behavior was motivated by specific personality traits. During the course of his career, for example, Beria committed atrocious crimes; he was directly responsible for the death and suffering of thousands. Was he driven purely by rational, cynical self-interest? Or did he have some of Stalin's psychopathological tendencies? It is the aim of this biography to relate these individual factors to the broader historical forces that shaped Beria's career, with the more general purpose of offering new insights on Stalinist-type dictatorships.

In comparing the fates of Stalin and Beria it can hardly be said that historical justice

prevailed. Though he may not have received timely medical treatment, Stalin was at least allowed to die a natural death, followed by a state funeral with all the honors befitting a leader. Beria, by contrast, was imprisoned, tried and executed. Subsequently he became the scapegoat for all the negative phenomena of the Stalin period. Stalin continued to have admirers and apologists, even Khrushchev's revelations about him, but Beria remained the consummate embodiment of evil in the public mind.

There is of a course a good reason for the fact that Beria has borne much of the blame for the excesses of the Stalin period. Soviet leaders have traditionally made their defeated opponents scapegoats for past errors in order to legitimize their successions. Because Beria was a lesser figure than Stalin in terms of his political authority and public persona, it was possible to recognize his evil deeds without disgracing and discrediting the entire Stalinist system. Stalin had been the object of public adulation for so long and was so closely tied with the patriotic illusions shared by Soviet citizens that to acknowledge fully his crimes was to question the legitimacy of the regime. Stalin's successors recognized this, which is why the full truth about the purges could not emerge until the Soviet system began to unravel.

Beria came very close to inheriting Stalin's mantle as leader of the Soviet Union, perhaps to remain in power for several years. Indeed, it was by no means a foregone conclusion that Khrushchev would be successful in ousting Beria and arresting him. The details that have emerged about the coup make it clear that it was hastily planned and haphazardly executed. Only luck and circumstance prevented the plot from failing. If Beria had not fallen, he might well have continued with the pragmatic program of de-Stalinization and liberalization that he had pursued in the first three months after Stalin's death. Beria was, after all, a hard-working, efficient and effective administrator, who was admired and respected by those who worked under him. It is not all that hard to imagine him as a "policeman-turned-liberal" in the same genre as Iurii Andropov, Brezhnev's successor as party leader in 1982. After serving for a decade and a half as a sinister and ruthless KGB chief who sent talented writers to labor camps and perfected the strategy of placing troublesome dissidents in psychiatric hospitals, Andropov was praised as a liberal, especially in the West, and credited with starting the process that led to perestroika. As was the case with Beria, Andropov was in a good position to press ahead with reform because he had

already proven that he was "tough." He was therefore less vulnerable to accusations of being "soft" or lacking resolve. Moreover, like Beria, he was practical enough to realize that the outmoded, rigid bureaucracy fostered by his predecessor was leading the Soviet Union down the road to decay. Andropov was not driven by a moral or ideological imperative, but by the insights gained from his years of amassing information, as head of the police, on all aspects of Soviet society.

Having been in charge of the police for many years, Beria was similarly "enlightened" and he energetically set about putting his ideas to work after Stalin died, motivated above all by the desire to further his own power. Two aspects of Beria's program might have had especially far-reaching implications for the Soviet system. First, he wanted to reduce the power of the party apparatus and free the government from party interference in administration and decision-making. This was of course heresy from the Leninist point of view, but it might have eventually led to a less ideologically cumbersome and more efficient bureaucracy. Secondly, he planned to give the non-Russian minorities a greater role in decision-making and to recognize, on a limited basis, their national and cultural identities. This marked a reversal of the consistent policy of Russification and Sovietization that had been in force since the early days of the Soviet regime. To question the dominance of Great Russians over other nationalities was to question the very essence of Stalinism. Yet, as the nationalist ferment in the Gorbachev era and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union has shown, the nationality question was of tremendous political importance, even in the early 1950s. The idea of making concessions to the republics was much more prescient than it appeared at the time.

Khrushchev did of course adopt many of Beria's policies and he can be credited with pushing for de-Stalinization despite opposition from the old-guard. But on the whole his record of reform was less than successful. Partly this was because of the fundamental dilemma faced by all reformist leaders in the Soviet Union, including Gorbachev: the difficulty of changing the system without de-stabilizing it and threatening its very existence. Khrushchev was also impeded by his indebtedness to the military as a result of its support in the Beria coup, an indebtedness that was increased by his reliance on Marshal Zhukov to help him defeat a challenge by the "anti-party group" in 1957. Though Khrushchev managed to get rid of Zhukov, he was not strong enough to prevent the military from defending its

priorities and exerting its influence on policy-making, a phenomenon unheard of in the Stalin era. Pressure from the military hindered Khrushchev's efforts to reduce defense spending and make more substantial investments in agriculture and the consumer sector. It also undermined his attempts at improving relations with the West.

Above all, Khrushchev was incapable of making substantial reforms because he was too deeply cast in the Stalinist mould. Although he no longer relied on police terror, he quickly adopted the highly personalized, capricious and autocratic style of leadership that had characterized the Stalin period and never focused on the deeply rooted institutional problems. Khrushchev has been "rehabilitated" in recent years, emerging as a relatively positive leader in historical assessments. But in some respects this seems unwarranted. Although he did not join the Politburo until 1939, after the purges had wound down, he profited directly from the deaths of his senior colleagues. And archival documents have shown that he willingly carried out directives from the center in 1937-38. After Khrushchev came to Moscow in 1950, he acted as Stalin's avid supporter during the dark era of the anti-Semitic campaign. If Khrushchev had the slightest compunction about subjecting innocent people to unwarranted suffering, he would not have promoted Kruglov and Serov, who had rounded up whole nations to be sent to Siberia or put to death.

Khrushchev did not have Beria arrested because of the crimes he had committed under Stalin during the purges; rather it was because Beria had accrued too much power and was imposing reformist policies on other members of the leadership. Without doubt Beria had more blood on his hands than other members of the leadership, except Stalin himself. But it was all a matter of degree and to say that Beria was any more evil than Molotov, Malenkov, or even Khrushchev is to obscure the fact that they all bore responsibility for the crimes of the Stalin period. Stalin did not rule in a vacuum. He was surrounded by sychophantic lieutenants who competed for his favor:

"They trembled at his manic behavior, but at the same time, they inflated and encouraged his suspicions. As his loyal followers and protectors, as it were, for the purpose of winning his affection, they allowed accounts or whisperings to get through to him of various enemies secretly bent on harming the country and him. It may be assumed that by this cunning bit of work they wanted not only to make themselves safe from him in the present, but also to assure themselves a part in the legacy, for the struggle of the gods over it in the Red Olympus began when Zeus himself was still alive."¹⁰

Stalin relied heavily on those below him, to whom he doled out his patronage in return for their support. As historian Graeme Gill has argued, the Soviet state early on became dependent on a system of personalized networks that made political institutions instruments of powerful figures rather than organs governed by set rules and norms. The result was a distinctly patrimonial power structure: "The entire Stalinist political system was patrimonial in nature...Through the power of appointment and his ability to remove sub-national leaders, Stalin effectively granted them a secular benefice, a share of the institution he headed. In return, they acknowledged his authority and deferred to him, but within their own backyards they were in a similar situation to Stalin: they could bestow favours on others."¹¹ This patrimonial power structure bred tyrants. For every Beria at the top there were little Berias in the republics, districts and towns, fostering their own personality cults and imposing their arbitrary wills.

It is thus not surprising that a man like Beria emerged in the leadership, however tempting it might be to view him as an aberration. To portray him as an exception, who rose to a powerful position because of a fluke is to misrepresent the very nature of the Soviet system during the Stalin period. If Beria was an exception, it was not because he was amoral, sadistic and cruel. Rather, it was because he was intelligent, astute and devoted to achieving power. He was also adept at the kind of court politics that prevailed in the Kremlin and below. His deviousness and two-faced behavior was an asset in this environment, particularly in dealing with Stalin. Beria never ceased to maintain his flattering tone--"As usual, you have hit the nail on the head, Iosif Vissarionovich,"--though by the end he was heaping scorn on Stalin behind his back.

Had Beria managed to outsmart Khrushchev and retain his dominant position in the leadership he might, in the long run, have had little more success than Khrushchev in creating a viable and effective system of government because he too was deeply ingrained in the Stalinist tradition. But historians would probably have treated him more favorably and transcended the legend of Beria as the arch-villain of the Stalin period to examine the complexities of his career.

With the onset of glasnost, Beria became the object of renewed historical interest in Russia and in Georgia. Valuable archival materials, documents and memoirs have appeared in the press, shedding new light on Beria's career. In mid-1990, an unprecedented interview

with Beria's 86-year-old widow appeared in a Georgian paper, and a transcript of the dramatic July 1953 Central Committee Plenum, which was called by Khrushchev to discuss the reasons for Beria's arrest, was published for the first time in early 1991. But the release of these materials has been highly selective, and the revelations about Beria that have appeared over the past few years have continued to yield diverging accounts of certain episodes in his life. Fortunately, in 1992 the Russians opened their archives to scholars, enabling this author to see numerous hitherto secret documents, which have added much to the picture of Beria and his career. It must be pointed out, however, that the archives have yet to be fully exploited and that important questions remain unanswered. This study appears at the beginning of a new phase of historiography of the Stalin period, which should, if archival access continues, yield many exciting revelations and generate new interpretations of Stalinist history. The story of Beria's political career, then, must be considered an ongoing one.

NOTES

1. As one scholar points out, "the fact that Beria continues to appear in fiction, stylised, hyperbolised, parodied and conflated with coevals, says something about the hold which this figure still has over the public in the late 20th century. None of Beria's predecessors in office is the subject of any comparable public interest." Kevin Windle, "From Ogre to 'Uncle Lawrence': The Evolution of the Myth of Beria in Russian Fiction from 1953 to the Present," Australian Slavic & East European Studies 3, no. 1 (1989): 15.
2. See for example, Leonard Schapiro, "What is Fascism?" The New York Review of Books 14, no. 3 (February 1970): 14. As Schapiro put it: "each is able to act only until the moment when the leader chooses to declare his will."
3. See, for example, Gustav Bychowski, "Joseph V. Stalin: Paranoia and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat," in Benjamin B. Wolman, ed., The Psychoanalytic Interpretation of History (New York: Basic Books, 1971), pp. 115-149; Robert C. Tucker, Stalin As Revolutionary. 1879-1929: A Study in History and Personality (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973); and Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, The Mind of Stalin. A Psychoanalytic Study (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1988).
4. T.H. Rigby has argued that Stalin actually demonstrated a high degree of "objective loyalty" towards his closest subordinates, in that, unlike those at lower levels, most were allowed to remain in their positions throughout the Stalin era. But, as he observes, Stalin had ensured their obedience by instilling fear in them, so there was no need to continually purge the leadership at the top. See T.H. Rigby, "Was Stalin a Disloyal Patron?" Soviet Studies 38, no. 3 (July 1986): 311-324.

5. Ronald Grigor Suny, "Beyond Psychohistory: The Young Stalin in Georgia," Slavic Review 50, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 48-58. Suny argues here that attempts to understand Stalin have focussed too much on psychological factors, while the important role of his Georgian heritage has been neglected.
6. Suny, "Beyond Psychohistory," p. 54.
7. Robert C. Tucker, "Svetlana Alliluyeva as Witness of Stalin," Slavic Review 27, no. 2 (June 1968): 306. Tucker has been one of the few historians to recognize Beria's importance. "The time has come," he wrote here, "when we must revise the general view that Beria was no more than one of the many tools of Stalin's dictatorship, although he was a tool." (p. 306)
8. As one source expressed it: "veneration and remembrance of the dead lie at the core of basic Georgian traditions and values, the cornerstone of their historic survival." See Julie Christensen, "Tengiz Abuladze's 'Repentance' and the Georgian Nationalist Cause," Slavic Review 50, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 166.
9. Milovan Djilas, Conversations with Stalin (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1962), p. 151.
10. Gilboa, The Black Years of Soviet Jewry, pp. 320-321.
11. Graeme Gill, The Origins of the Stalinist Political System (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 325.