

Stalin is Dead! Examining the Post-Stalin Succession Crisis

Patrick McColgan

San Diego State University

Who led the Soviet Union after Joseph Stalin died in 1953? Some may say Nikita Khrushchev, but the reality is not so straightforward as Stalin's death set off a power struggle between three potential successors: Khrushchev, Georgy Malenkov, and Lavrentiy Beria. In the immediate months after Stalin's death, Beria seemed to be the most likely successor. He controlled the entire Soviet security apparatus and, to everyone's surprise, spearheaded the reform program that addressed the country's most pressing domestic issues, legitimized the new regime, and took the first steps toward de-Stalinization. And yet, by year's end, Beria's rivals managed to arrest him, try him for treason, and execute him. Why did this crisis occur? And how was Beria ousted from power? That is the topic of this paper. By examining the events of the succession crisis immediately after Stalin's death, this paper will examine why the crisis occurred in the first place and how Beria met his ultimate end.

Countless historians have written on the matter. Robert Conquest attributed the crisis to the embrace of a collective leadership because its success, and the very nature of one party-Communist rule, required a single line. Therefore, alternative agendas and interests were bound to create factions.¹ Amy Knight argued that the collective leadership removed Beria out of fear that his reforms and consolidation of the security forces took things too far.² Sheila Fitzpatrick has claimed Beria's colleagues deposed him out of a *perceived* fear he would seize power, due to his history in the security forces and his disdain for collective leadership.³

This paper differs from previous works through its argument and how it examines the crisis. Previous works examined the crisis under subjects of broader Soviet history, such as foreign policy, domestic policy, leadership dynamics, etc. Rather than exploring the crisis as an episode in a larger subject, this paper examines it as the *primary* topic, while the larger Cold War and Soviet history serve as the context for explaining why the crisis occurred the way it did. Argument-wise, previous works have claimed that fears of Beria's intentions, disagreements over domestic reforms, conflicts of ideology, or Khrushchev's ambitions for leadership caused the crisis.⁴ Instead, this paper argues that foreign policy disagreements, especially in regard to East Germany, caused the crisis. This is not to say that previous works have ignored the role of

¹ Robert Conquest, *Power and Policy in the U.S.S.R.: The Study of Soviet Dynasties* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1962), 11-12

² Amy Knight, *Beria: Stalin's First Lieutenant* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 9, 228.

³ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 230-2.

⁴ William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2003) 244-9; James G. Richter, *Khrushchev's Double Bind: International Pressures and Domestic Coalition Politics* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994) 30-31; Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1996); Knight, *Beria*, 228; Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team*, 230-2.

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foreign policy. Rather, previous works attributed foreign policy as having exacerbated the crisis, but not as the *primary* factor.⁵

This paper's topic resembles that of Mark Kramer's research, which also examined the relationship between the post-Stalin succession crisis and Soviet foreign policy and how they were influenced by external events, particularly in East Germany. Despite the parallels, Kramer's conclusion for why the succession crisis occurred is more "traditional" in that he believed Beria's rivals doubted his sincerity for reforms and deposed him to avoid the possibility that Beria would depose them instead.⁶ He further maintained that "Beria's positions on concrete issues — whether domestic or foreign — had little or nothing to do with the effort to eliminate him," which this author does not agree with.⁷

Besides the valuable context that helps with understanding the Cold War, the Soviet Union, or individuals like Stalin and Khrushchev, the recent outbreak of war between Russia and Ukraine has created a new relevance for this topic. Much like in 1953, the war has necessitated a deeper understanding of Russia's international position and foreign policy. And much like Stalin and his successors, Russian leaders have had to increasingly come to terms with how the war has affected or will affect them, vis-à-vis their hold on power. Surprisingly, the power struggle of 1953 has recently received newfound interest in popular culture, thanks to Armando Iannucci's 2017 political satire film *The Death of Stalin*, which, in many ways, has inspired this paper. After Stalin's death on March 5, 1953, the issue of succession confronted the Soviet Union for the first time in almost thirty years. However, no established succession process existed, and Stalin never designated an official heir. Rather, he preferred to keep his subordinates in line by pitting them against each other and reminding them, up until his death, that "...the imperialist powers will wring your necks like chickens."⁸ Such measures reinforced Stalin's authority by keeping his inner circle in a constant state of uncertainty and subservience, which did not bode well at a time when the Soviet Union faced enormous challenges.

Paranoia gripped Soviet society in 1953. Stalin had called for ever more ideological vigilance in the face of capitalist encirclement, fears of another Great Purge floated around, and the country was engulfed in a nationwide anti-Semitic campaign known as the Doctors' Plot, which accused Doctors and Soviet Jews of being Zionist, imperialist agents plotting to kill prominent party and military leaders.⁹ This atmosphere created ever more victims for the Soviet Gulags, which held over 2.5 million prisoners. All this only compounded everyday domestic issues. Large swathes of the country had still not recovered from World War II, food shortages

⁵ Zubok and Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War*, 155-63; Knight, *Beria*, 193-4; Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team*, 231-5.

⁶ Mark Kramer, "The Early Post-Stalin Succession Struggle and Upheavals in East-Central Europe: Internal-External Linkages in Soviet Policy Making," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 12-13.

⁷ Kramer, "The Early Post-Stalin Succession Struggle and Upheavals in East-Central Europe," 18.

⁸ Yoram Gorlizki and Oleg Khlevniuk, *Cold Peace: Stalin and the Soviet Ruling Circle, 1945-1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 43-44; Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, trans. and ed. Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), 392.

⁹ Joshua Rubenstein, *The Last Days of Stalin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 35-69.

abounded, and over-investments in heavy industry created abysmal living standards and an indefinite lack of consumer goods.¹⁰

Things were no more promising internationally. The West had united into an anti-Soviet bloc led by the United States, which had more nuclear weapons, military bases on the Soviet perimeter, and a new administration in Washington dedicated to rolling back Communism. In response, Stalin increased the pace of Sovietization in Eastern Europe and embarked on an aggressive military buildup, which gave the USSR an atomic weapon in 1949, brought the Soviet armed forces up to 5.8 million men by 1953, and ensured Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. But it also exacerbated international tensions and facilitated anti-Soviet sentiment.¹¹

To get through these tumultuous times and stay in power, Stalin's heirs had to implement wide-reaching reforms which would address their most pressing domestic needs, ease international tensions, and earn popular support. Surprisingly, they did it with ease. In the last years of his life, Stalin's health had deteriorated to the point where he spent most of his time away from the Kremlin. To ensure the government could function without him, he "reformed" administrative structures to make ministries more autonomous and delegated more authority to his subordinates. While he retained the final say, these changes gave the Politburo valuable leadership experience and informed them of the USSR's situation.¹²

As Stalin lay dying, the Politburo put that experience to the test and reorganized the government.¹³ Their plan made Georgy Malenkov the Soviet Premier (head of government) and monopolized the Ministries of Internal Affairs (MVD) and State Security (MGB) under Lavrentiy Beria.¹⁴ On March 14, Malenkov subsequently renounced his dual role as Secretariat of the Central Committee (Party leader) which Khrushchev inherited.¹⁵ In just two weeks the USSR quickly and *peacefully* transitioned from one-man rule to a collective triumvirate of Premier Malenkov, Party Leader Khrushchev, and Security Chief Beria.

Domestic reforms quickly followed, and to everyone's surprise, Beria became the driving force. On March 27, in response to a report he filed three days earlier, the Supreme Soviet issued a sweeping reform of the Gulag system that shortened prison sentences, restricted prisoners' "deprivation of freedoms," expunged criminal records, and freed up to a million prisoners whom Beria claimed posed no threat to society. However, the amnesty fell short of complete reform as its provisions did not apply to political prisoners.¹⁶

¹⁰ William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (London: The Free Press, 2003), 241-2.

¹¹ Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 242-3, 247; Oleg Khlevniuk, *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 297.

¹² Khlevniuk, *Stalin*, 199; Gorlizki and Khlevniuk, *Cold Peace*, 45-46.

¹³ Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team*, 222-3; Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 238.

¹⁴ Nikita Khrushchev, "Record of Proceedings of the Joint Meeting of the CPSU Central Committee Plenum, The Council of Ministers of the Union of the SSR, and the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR," Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Moscow: March 5, 1953, *Cold War International History Project*. Accessed Sep. 24, 2019. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112870>.

¹⁵ Knight, *Beria*, 182-3; Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 245; Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team*, 224.

¹⁶ Kliment Voroshilov and N. Pegov, "First Post-Stalin Amnesty," Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R., Moscow: March 27, 1953, *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*. Accessed Apr. 19, 2019. <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1954-2/prisoners-return/prisoners-return-texts/first-post-stalin-amnesty/>.

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Things did not stop there. On April 4 the Doctors' Plot came to an end when *Pravda* reported that an investigation had determined the old MGB used "illegal methods" to extract false confessions. A follow-up article on April 6 announced their "complete exoneration." Both articles emphasized the role of "the newly-merged USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) under L.P. Beria."¹⁷ He also implemented a new nationality policy that "de-Russified" the Soviet republics by replacing Russian leaders in the republics' party and MVD branches with local officials and encouraged the official use of minority languages.¹⁸

Why did Beria become an ardent reformer? A CIA report postulated that Beria was "probably anxious to remove the dread stigma attached to his name...by virtue of his connections with the police."¹⁹ Similarly, historian and Beria biographer Amy Knight claimed the reforms helped him "win support for the regime as a whole and changed his own public image from that of policeman to liberal statesman."²⁰ Khrushchev biographer William Taubman even claimed that Beria "played the role of reformer just *because* he was drenched in blood."²¹ However, the same could be said for his colleagues, who were all complicit in Stalin's crimes. The same CIA report claimed the central government (not just Beria) passed the reforms "to ease internal tensions & popularize itself with the Soviet people."²² Furthermore, the collective leadership's experience in governing without Stalin made them more attuned to the USSR's domestic issues, which allowed them to formulate and shelve reforms that Stalin forbade.²³ Therefore, the post-Stalin reforms stemmed from a collective realization of their necessities and a collective need for legitimacy.

The team also strove to ease international tensions. During his March 9 eulogy at Stalin's funeral, Malenkov declared that the Soviet Union strove to achieve "prolonged coexistence and peaceful competition of two different systems, capitalist and socialist."²⁴ Six days later, in a speech to the Supreme Soviet, he asserted that "there do not exist any troubled and unresolved questions that cannot be resolved by peaceful means."²⁵ The Kremlin subsequently issued a dizzying array of diplomatic gestures and concessions which reversed many Stalin-era practices. The hallmark move came on March 19 when the Council of Ministers issued a resolution outlining a potential peace process for the Korean War.²⁶ The resolution called for China and North Korea to express interest in prisoner exchanges, ceasefire arrangements, a demarcation

¹⁷ U.S. CIA, *The Reversal of the Doctors' Plot and its Immediate Aftermath*, Caesar 3, Washington, D.C.: Office of Current Intelligence, July 17, 1953, 1.

¹⁸ Knight, *Beria*, 186-8; Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team*, 230-1; Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 247; U.S. CIA, *Melnikov's Removal in the Ukraine*, Caesar 5, Washington, D.C.: Office of Current Intelligence, July 17, 1953, 1-5; U.S. CIA, *Purge of L.P. Beria*, Caesar 10, Washington D.C.: Office of Current Intelligence, August 17, 1954, 21.

¹⁹ CIA, *The Reversal of the Doctors' Plot*, 4.

²⁰ Knight, *Beria*, 184.

²¹ Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 245.

²² CIA, *The Reversal of the Doctors' Plot*, 6.

²³ Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team*, 197-9.

²⁴ "Texts of the Funeral Orations Delivered by Malenkov, Beria, and Molotov," *New York Times*, March 10, 1953, 10.

²⁵ Harrison Salisbury, "Malenkov Offers to Settle Tensions by Peaceful Means," *New York Times*, March 16, 1953, 1, 4.

²⁶ Rubenstein, *The Last Days of Stalin*, 166-9.

line, and an armistice. The resolution required Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov to support China and North Korea and ordered the Soviet's UN delegation to do everything possible to facilitate those goals. The initiative bore fruit on July 27 when an armistice was ratified.²⁷

Up to this point, Stalin's heirs had displayed remarkable unity and cohesion in bringing about a new order, which proves they had a concrete, unified succession plan. But that unity fractured when the team tried to address the "German question."

Since 1951 rapid Sovietization in East Germany had caused nearly 450,000 people to emigrate while strikes, protests, and shortages of foods and consumer goods paralyzed the country. During a Politburo meeting on May 27, Molotov blamed the crisis on an ill-prepared "all-out offensive" against capitalism and proposed to "not implement a policy of *forced* socialism." Beria counter-proposed that socialism be abandoned altogether. For him, it made no difference if Germany was socialist, as long as it was united and peaceful. He apparently had practical reasons for this. Future Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko claimed that Beria believed that the GDR's reliance on Soviet troops made it untenable as an independent state.²⁸ Pavel Sudoplatov, an MVD intelligence officer, recalled Beria concluding that his plan would balance American and Soviet interests and even earn the USSR monetary compensation.²⁹ Molotov opposed Beria's plan on the grounds that it would have created a Western-allied "bourgeois Germany," which was inherently dangerous. Khrushchev elaborated by recalling how Molotov decried the abandonment of socialism as "surrendering our positions...and capitulating to the Americans." Khrushchev supported Molotov and denounced Beria's plan as anti-Communist. The Politburo embraced Molotov's plan.³⁰

By all accounts, this was the only major disagreement amongst Stalin's heirs, which reflected fundamentally incompatible worldviews. On one side were Molotov and Khrushchev, ideologues who believed capitalism was inherently hostile and empowered by "retreats" like Beria's plan.³¹ On the other side was the pragmatic Beria, who believed working with the West was possible and necessary for Soviet security. His history as the Security Chief and his supervision of the Soviet atomic bomb project no doubt influenced his approach.

On June 2 the Soviets summoned the leaders of the East German Communist Party (SED) to Moscow and "recommended" that they halt collectivization, allow more private commerce, increase investments in light industry and consumer goods, reform the financial system, reform the criminal code, and end discriminatory practices against the church.³² To justify the changes,

²⁷ The conflict never officially ended as no peace treaty was signed. The situation lasts to this day.

²⁸ Felix Chuev and Vyacheslav Molotov, *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics*, ed. Albert Resis (Chicago: Ivan R Dee, 1993), 317; Andrei Gromyko, *Memoirs* (London: Hutchinson, 1989), 317.

²⁹ Pavel Sudoplatov and Anatoli Sudoplatov, *Special Tasks: The Memoirs of an Unwanted Witness — A Soviet Spymaster*, ed. Jerrod and Leona Schecter (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 363-5.

³⁰ Nikita Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev, Volume 2: Reformer, 1945-1964*, ed. Sergei Khrushchev, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 184.

³¹ Chuev and Molotov, *Molotov Remembers*, 376; Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev*, 92.

³² Georgy Malenkov, "On Measures to Improve the Health of the Political Situation in the GDR," U.S.S.R. Council of Ministers, No. 7576-rs, Moscow: Kremlin, June 2, 1953, *Cold War International History Project*. Accessed Oct. 3, 2019. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110023>.

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Malenkov proclaimed that forced socialism would keep Germany divided, which would lead to “the accelerated remilitarization of West Germany,” and ultimately another World War. He subsequently asserted that the only way Germany could unify under the current conditions was based on it becoming “a bourgeois-democratic republic” because a unified socialist Germany was “not feasible.”³³

The SED leaders followed Moscow’s line and implemented the reforms but did not rescind an unpopular 10% work quota increase that the SED had announced on May 14 to resolve the shortages of foodstuffs and consumer goods. On June 16, a crowd of over 10,000 East Berliners took to the streets to protest against the work quotas. The situation spiraled out of control the next day when a general strike and nationwide riots rocked the GDR, with calls for greater freedoms and the SED leadership to step down. The Red Army ultimately had to be called in to suppress the rebellion, which proved Beria correct on the GDR’s existence. Over half a million people participated in the uprising; at least 120 were killed and over 3,000 arrested.³⁴

The uprising sealed Beria’s fate because it further cemented Khrushchev & Molotov’s belief that German socialism, and therefore Soviet security, was under threat. To be clear, Beria had little to no influence over events in Germany. But for Khrushchev and Molotov, all that mattered was that the uprising threatened German socialism internally, Western aggression threatened Socialism externally, Beria’s German plan catered to both threats, and his role as Security Chief gave him the power to pursue it. With threats appearing to be on all fronts, Khrushchev began moving against Beria.

Reconstructing Khrushchev’s maneuvering is problematic as his recollections are the only sources on the matter. However, his role as the “ringleader” is corroborated by Molotov and Stepan Mikoyan — son of Anastas Mikoyan, Trade Minister and staunch Khrushchev supporter.³⁵

If Khrushchev is to be believed, an anti-Beria alliance formed from the very beginning.³⁶ Right before Stalin died, First Deputy Premier Nikolai Bulganin supposedly shared Khrushchev’s fear that Beria planned to become the Minister of State Security “for the purpose of destroying us.”³⁷ Khrushchev also claimed that Malenkov knew what Beria was up to, but he hesitated to resist him until after the two worked together to defeat the “harmful” motions Beria proposed in the Politburo. Active recruiting did not begin in earnest until after the East German uprising. Molotov fully supported Khrushchev on the matter due to their mutual stance on

³³ Georgy Malenkov, “Speech by Georgii M. Malenkov to a Visiting Government Delegation from the German Democratic Republic,” Moscow, June 2, 1953, *Cold War International History Project*. Accessed Dec. 8, 2019. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112796>.

³⁴ For more information on the East German Uprising, see Arnulf Baring, *Uprising in East Germany: June 17, 1953*, trans. Gerald Onn (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972).

³⁵ “The initiative was in his hands...” Chuev and Molotov, *Molotov Remembers*, 343; “Much of the credit for what they did goes to Khrushchev...” Stepan Mikoyan, *Stepan Anastasovich Mikoyan: An Autobiography*, trans. Aschen Mikoyan (Shrewsbury, England: Airline, 1999), 187.

³⁶ See Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 330-7 for a “complete” account of Khrushchev’s recruiting.

³⁷ Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 319.

foreign policy.³⁸ Maksim Saburov agreed without incident. Lazar Kaganovich supposedly joined them after he realized the plot had majority support.

Others had to be convinced. When Khrushchev met with Kliment Voroshilov to recruit him, Voroshilov began praising Beria before Khrushchev could even inform him of the plot. But when Malenkov informed Voroshilov, he was supposedly so relieved that he embraced Malenkov and started crying. Mikhail Pervukhin did not commit fully until after Khrushchev “told him everything, very frankly.” Trade Minister Anastas Mikoyan was kept out of the loop because, according to Khrushchev and Molotov, he firmly believed Beria would “take our criticisms to heart & reform himself.”³⁹

To carry out the plot, Khrushchev, who had been the Red Army’s head political commissar in Ukraine during World War II, turned to generals in the army he trusted.⁴⁰ He recruited Kirill Moskalenko, commander of Moscow’s air defenses, who in turn recruited nine other officers who had served alongside him and Khrushchev in the war. They included wartime Red Army commander Georgy Zhukov and future Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev.

The plot began on June 26 during a meeting of the Presidium of the Council of Ministers. Due to Kremlin security regulations, cars with darkened windows smuggled the generals into the complex, with guns hidden under their jackets. They waited in a small room outside Malenkov’s office and were instructed to enter and arrest Beria upon receiving a signal. A group of MVD guards were in another room nearby, presumably unaware of the brewing plot.

The meeting began at around eleven or twelve o’clock. By Khrushchev’s account, he initiated discussions by listing some of Beria’s “crimes” and declared that he was not a true Communist. Everyone else, save for Mikoyan, followed suit.⁴¹ Molotov denounced Beria for the same reasons and, with only slight variations, corroborated Khrushchev’s account.⁴² Khrushchev proposed Beria be removed from all his government positions and expelled from the party, but Malenkov panicked and pressed a button under the table. This was the signal; the generals burst into the room with guns drawn and detained Beria; they found a note with “alarm” scribbled down multiple times in big red letters.

Since the MVD was still guarding the Kremlin, the plotters had to wait for a safe moment to move Beria. At one point two MVD officers stumbled across the group and demanded to know what was going on. Moskalenko quickly put them on the phone with Bulganin, who somehow persuaded them to leave. By midnight, under the cover of darkness and after army personnel replaced the MVD guards, the generals shoved Beria into a car and transported him to Lefortovo Prison.

From July 2 to July 7, the Central Committee held a plenum to convince the government of Beria’s treachery. During the introductory session on July 2, Malenkov decried Beria as a

³⁸ Chuev and Molotov, *Molotov Remembers*, 344.

³⁹ Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 337; Chuev and Molotov, *Molotov Remembers*, 343-4.

⁴⁰ Amy Knight provides a vivid account of Beria’s arrest in *Beria: Stalin’s First Lieutenant*, 196-200. Most of the details of Beria’s arrest come from her work.

⁴¹ Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 336-7.

⁴² Chuev and Molotov, *Molotov Remembers*, 344-5.

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bourgeois degenerate for his East German policy and his efforts to “place the MVD above the Party & the government.”⁴³ Khrushchev accused Beria of being an imperialist agent for wanting to “hand over 18 million Germans to the rule of the American imperialists.”⁴⁴ Molotov claimed Beria’s German policy “virtually demanded capitulation before the so-called ‘Western’ bourgeoisie states,” which entailed “rejecting everything that had been won by the blood of our soldiers, the blood of our people, in a difficult struggle against Hitlerism.”⁴⁵

Three days of colorful verbal abuse followed. Each speaker purportedly had different reasons for denouncing Beria, but a consistent, overarching theme emerged; Beria tried to seize power in order to implement a foreign policy that compromised national security and empowered the West. No doubt the speakers simply reiterated the party line, but their words reflected Molotov and Khrushchev’s personal foreign policy viewpoints, and both had moved against Beria *because* of his foreign policy.

On July 10, the Soviet news agency TASS published communiques announcing Beria’s removal from the party due to efforts to “undermine the Soviet state in the interest of foreign capital.” *Pravda* accused Beria of attempting “to grab the leadership of the party and country with the aim of destroying the Communist Party” and implementing “a capitulatory policy which would have brought about...the restoration of capitalism.”⁴⁶ Five months later, the Procurator General of the USSR declared on December 17 that Beria and six co-conspirators attempted to “grab power & liquidate the Soviet worker-peasant regime with a view to restoring capitalism & securing the revival of the domination of the bourgeoisie.”⁴⁷ On December 24, the Supreme Court of the USSR announced the punishment; “To sentence Beria, L.P. (& co-conspirators) to the highest measure of criminal punishment — to be shot, with confiscation of their personal property & deprivation of their military rank & medals.”⁴⁸

With no established succession process or designated heir at a time of domestic and international uncertainty, succession after Stalin’s death had all the recipes for a disaster. But in quite remarkable fashion, his heirs pulled it off. Informal leadership arrangements before Stalin’s death gave them valuable leadership experience and informed them of what changes the country needed. Using this experience and knowledge, the new leadership quickly assumed power, passed domestic reforms, and made the first tentative steps at *detente* with the West.

Lavrentiy Beria’s proactive role in reforms surprised and worried his fellow post-Stalin leaders, but, for the time being, they could not afford to act against him when his reforms won popular support for the whole leadership and addressed domestic issues in a way they had already agreed to. It was not until they had to address the “German question” that the collective leadership finally fractured due to two fundamentally incompatible foreign policies.

⁴³ D.M. Stickle, ed., *The Beria Affair: The Secret Transcripts of the Meetings Signaling the End of Stalinism*, trans. Jean Farrow (Commack, NY: Nova Science, 1992), 4-7.

⁴⁴ Stickle, *Beria Affair*, 15, 22.

⁴⁵ Stickle, *Beria Affair*, 29.

⁴⁶ CIA, *Purge of L.P. Beria*, 1-3.

⁴⁷ “Soviet Indictment of Beria & Aides,” *New York Times*, Dec. 17, 1953, 12.

⁴⁸ Stickle, *The Beria Affair*, 195-7.

Communist ideology shaped Khrushchev and Molotov's worldviews; they believed that supporting Communist states and movements where they stood for eventual spread around the world ensured geopolitical and ideological security by dissuading imperialist aggression and gradually replacing ideologically hostile states with ideologically friendly ones. Beria, the pragmatist, believed that "strategic" concessions could guarantee peace and security by easing tensions with the West and lowering international obligations. After Beria's proposal to abandon East Germany and the subsequent East German uprising seemed to confirm Khrushchev's suspicions, he knew he had to remove Beria if he wished to preserve his vision of a global Communist order. Under these conditions, it was no coincidence that Beria's threat to such a vision became the rallying cry for his downfall.