

The Leningrad Affair: The Purge of Stalin's Would-Be Successors, 1949-1952

The Leningrad Affair, a purge of the Soviet political elite between 1949 and 1952, had a transformative effect on the postwar history of Russia and the USSR. Not only did it stymie reform and exacerbate the country's hyper-centralization, but it claimed the lives of Joseph Stalin's hand-picked successors (Aleksei Kuznetsov, Nikolai Voznesensky), weakened other prominent leaders (Viacheslav Molotov, Anastas Mikoian, Aleksei Kosygin), and crippled the country's third largest party organization. Ultimately, the purge allowed Nikita Khrushchev, Georgy Malenkov and Lavrenty Beria to take power after Stalin's death in 1953—a motley group of party bosses whose inconsistent leadership and infighting would rock Soviet society, frustrate its communist allies, and confuse its Cold War rivals until the mid 1960s.

Such fallout has long justified a thorough investigation of this purge. That said, despite the importance of the Leningrad Affair to our understanding of everything from domestic Soviet politics to the international history of the early Cold War, remarkably little is known about the purge itself. This is largely due to the inaccessibility of the historical record: if the study of the Soviet 1920s and 1930s has been revolutionized since 1991 by the declassification of important archives, information on high-level Politburo decision making during the 1940s and 1950s remains much more restricted. These circumstances have hamstrung all attempts to investigate the origins of the Leningrad Affair, as well as its destructive course and overall impacts.

Recently, I made a dramatic discovery that finally provides an opportunity to make sense of this purge of Stalin's would-be successors. *The Leningrad Affair: The Purge of Stalin's Would-Be Successors* will finally produce a definitive account of the Leningrad Affair that would resolve key questions about this Soviet political infighting and succession crisis at the dawn of the Cold War.

PROBLEMATICA

The 1949-1952 Leningrad Affair was the last major political purge of the Stalin era. It led to the execution of 23 high-ranking party and state leaders and the imprisonment of dozens more. Still others were compromised by the purge, including longstanding members of Stalin's inner circle. By 1952, the Leningrad Affair had ruined the lives and careers of several hundred party and state officials and their families. The purge also had institutional repercussions, hobbling not only the Leningrad party organization but other prominent regional bodies as well. It triggered witch hunts within the central bureaucracies associated with the party, state, military and security services. In policy terms, it inhibited economic planning, complicated center-periphery relations and paralyzed discussions of party and state reform. Most dramatically, the Leningrad Affair skewed the balance of power within

Stalin's inner circle, setting the stage for a decade of chaotic domestic and foreign policy after 1953.

Although many specialists on Soviet history tend to underestimate importance of the Leningrad Affair,¹ it has generated a fair amount of scholarship in the past fifty years. One school of thought regards the Leningrad Affair as the result of disagreements within Stalin's entourage over ideology, economics and power. In other words, the purge had much more to do with political infighting in Moscow than it did with anything to do with Leningrad.² A second school of thought argues that the purge's focus on Leningrad was not coincidental and stemmed from Stalin's historic distrust of the city. These scholars often disagree over whether the purge took place at Stalin's initiative or whether it was the result of lobbying by Malenkov or Beria.³ A third school of thought hypothesizes that the Leningrad party organization may have accidentally provoked the purge itself, either by showing too much local initiative or by developing an excessively large patron-client network.⁴ Still others allege that the key victims of the purge—Kuznetsov, Voznesensky and their comrades-in-arms—were targeted for aspiring to transform the Leningrad party organization into a political institution capable of challenging the central party apparatus.⁵

In spite of this literature's considerable breadth, it remains inconclusive, due to the classified nature of important archival documentation. Despite such limitations, I've worked on the Leningrad Affair intermittently for some 20 years, conducting research, presenting papers and publishing articles in both English and Russian.⁶ I've likewise sought out Russian specialists on the subject and built relationships with relatives of some of the most prominent purge victims. All this research and networking paid off in 2015 when I was at last able to discover the whereabouts of the proverbial "Holy Grail" for researchers working on this subject: a key collection of still-classified documentation detailing Stalin's

¹ See, for example, S. Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics* (Princeton, 2015); O. Khlevniuk, *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator* (New Haven, 2015).

² Most recently, see Y. Gorlitskii and O. Khevniuk, *Cold Peace: Stalin and the Soviet Ruling Circle, 1945-1953* (New Haven, 2004), 79-89; (Moscow, 2011), 99-100; C. Kelly, "The 'Leningrad Affair': Remembering the 'Communist Alternative' in the Second Capital," *Slavonica* 17:2 (2011): 103-122.

³ See, for instance, V. A. Kutuzov, "Tak nazyvaemoe 'Leningradskoe delo,'" *Voprosy istorii KPSS* 3 (1989): 55-56; L. Voznesenskii, "Bezzakonie . . . 'po zakonu,'" in *Sud'ba liudei—"Leningradskoe delo"* (St. Petersburg, 2009), 26-27.

⁴ See Kutuzov, "'Leningradskoe delo': mify i realii," in *Sud'ba liudei—"Leningradskoe delo,"* 49; B. A. Starkov, "Bor'ba s korruptsiei i politicheskie protsessy vo vtoroi polovine 1940-kh godov," in *Istoricheskie chteniia na Lubianke, 2001g.* (Moscow, 2002), 87; B. Tromly, "The Leningrad Affair and Soviet Patronage Politics, 1949-1950," *Europe-Asia Studies* 56:5 (2004): 707-729.

⁵ A. V. Pyzhikov, "Leningradskaia grupa: Put' vo vlast' (1946-49)," *Svobodnaia mysl'* 3 (2001) 92-96

⁶ David Brandenberger, "Stalin, the Leningrad Affair, and the Limits of Postwar Russocentrism," *Russian Review* 63:2 (2004): 241-255; D. Brandenberger, "O roli RKP(b) v 'Leningradskom dele,'" in *Sovetskoe gosudarstvo i obshchestvo v period pozdnego stalinizma, 1945-1953 gg.* (Moscow, 2015), 17-24; A. A. Amosova and D. Brandenberger, "Ongoing Debates over the Leningrad Affair in the Contemporary Popular Press," *Europe-Asia Studies* 67:9 (2015): 1487-1497.

personal role in the purge. More networking in the years since has enabled me to begin the process of their declassification.

When declassified, this documentation will revolutionize our understanding of the Leningrad Affair. Never seen before by professional historians, it contains detailed correspondence between Stalin and lieutenants such as Malenkov, Beria and Viktor Abakumov; regular reports to Stalin by regional satraps like Vasily Andrianov; drafts of important paperwork and communiqués; security service intelligence reports; and materials associated with the purge’s individual victims (denunciations, arrest warrants, case files, interrogation transcripts and sentencing documents). It is as close to a “smoking gun” as one is likely to find in the study of this bloody episode of Stalin-era state violence and political infighting.

Such material will provide answers to an array of fundamental questions concerning the Leningrad Affair. Who initiated the purge—Stalin or his inner circle? What were the charges that precipitated the bloodbath? Was the purge a response to actual abuse of power among the Leningraders, or was it based on false charges designed to compromise Kuznetsov, Voznesensky, et al? What was the ultimate objective of this witch hunt? How did it affect Soviet policymaking at the dawn of the Cold War?

METHODS, OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH PLAN

Having found the proverbial smoking gun, I aim to use it in conjunction with an arsenal of archival findings from other central and regional repositories to write the first comprehensive history of the Leningrad Affair and its role in the contest for the Stalin succession. Two Moscow repositories—the Russian State Archive of Recent History (RGANI) and the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political Documentation (RGASPI), will supply materials on the origins of the campaign as well as its bloodletting within central party and state institutions (the Politburo, Central Committee, Council of Ministers, Gosplan, security services, etc.). Much of this investigation of high politics will focus on factionalism and debates within Stalin’s entourage over ideology, reform, foreign policy and center-periphery relations. This “top-down” approach to the Leningrad Affair will then be complemented with a “bottom-up” analysis of documentation from regional archives in St. Petersburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Iaroslavl’, Pskov and Simferopol. Here, attention will be cast on the prosecution of the purge at the grass roots, focusing in particular on official efforts to break up local patron-client networks.

As promising as this project may sound, it’s been hampered by funding problems linked to federal budgetary shortfalls and a rise in US-Russian tensions. Fortunately, the fact that I have been working on the Leningrad Affair since the late 1990s means that I have already completed much of the needed research for this project. What remains is roughly two months of work in Moscow and a half-dozen regional repositories in provincial cities and then approximately 12 months of writing. *The Leningrad Affair: The Purge of Stalin’s Would-Be Successors* ought to be completed in 2020 or 2021.

SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPACT

Heretofore poorly understood, the 1949-1952 Leningrad Affair ought to be regarded as one of the decisive events in postwar Russian and Soviet history. Not only did it wreck plans for party and state reform and skew Soviet economic planning, but it precipitated the execution of Stalin's hand-picked successors and a decade of chaos and political infighting within the party elite after the dictator's death. *The Leningrad Affair: The Purge of Stalin's Would-Be Successors* will therefore resolve the mysteries surrounding this 1949-1952 bout of political violence while also contributing to a broader understanding of postwar Soviet politics.

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