

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

Manuscript in progress, 2013-

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 Mikoyan, 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—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 from the early 1950s to 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 logistical challenge of combining intensive archival research in Moscow and St. Petersburg with careful archival work in a half-dozen far-flung provincial cities. These circumstances have hamstrung all heretofore attempts to analyze the full scope of the Leningrad Affair, from its mysterious origins to its destructive course and impacts. The product of several decades of sustained research, *The Purge of Stalin's Would-Be Successors* finally produces a definitive account of this conspiratorial bout of infighting and political violence at the dawn of the Cold War.

## PROBLEMATICA

As is fairly well-known, 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,<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of its considerable breadth, this scholarly research remains inconclusive, largely due to the complexity of the research involved. Intrigued by the mystery surrounding this purge, I've worked on the Leningrad Affair intermittently for some 20 years, collecting material, presenting papers and publishing articles in both English and Russian.<sup>6</sup> I've likewise sought out Russian specialists on the subject and built relationships with relatives of some of the most prominent purge victims.

Aside from the logistical challenges associated with this research, other factors have conspired to slow my progress on this project. US funding cuts dating back to the 2012 "fiscal cliff" budget sequestration have complicated the task of financing lengthy research trips. International tensions stemming from Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its launch of a proxy war in eastern Ukraine complicated collaborative institutional contacts—

<sup>1</sup> 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).

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> A. V. Pyzhikov, "Leningradskaya gruppa: Put' vo vlast' (1946-49)," *Svobodnaia mysl'* 3 (2001) 92-96

<sup>6</sup> 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.

a process that became even more difficult after Russian meddling in the 2016 US presidential elections and the wave of russophobia that followed. Work then ground nearly to a halt in 2020 when COVID-19 first triggered international travel bans and then claimed the life of one of my project's elderly informants—L. A. Voznesensky, the nephew and son of key victims of the purge. And although the threat of COVID-19 finally receded in late 2021, international research travel has remained impossible due to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the emergence of Cold War 2.0.

Thankfully, I've been able to resume work on *The Purge of Stalin's Would-Be Successors* in the past few years, due to aggressive collection of raw research before 2020, the accessibility of archival collections in Estonia and Moldova and research through a peer-to-peer academic consortium still operating in Russia. Recast as a prosopographical group biography, the book is nevertheless positioned to answer an array of fundamental questions concerning the last political purge of the Stalin era. Who initiated the bloodletting—Stalin or his inner circle? What were the charges that precipitated this political violence? 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

An empirical archival investigation, this book project draws upon a massive body of poorly understood materials held in central and regional repositories in Russia, Estonia and Moldova. Two Moscow storehouses—the Russian State Archive of Recent History (RGANI) and the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political Documentation (RGASPI), supply materials on the origins of the campaign as well as its purge of central party and state organs (the Politburo, Central Committee, Council of Ministers, Gosplan, security services, etc.). Much of this investigation of high politics focuses 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 is then complemented with a “bottom-up” analysis of documentation from regional archives in St. Petersburg, Novgorod, Nizhny Novgorod, Pskov, Smolensk and Simferopol. Here, attention is cast on the prosecution of the purge at the grass roots, focusing in particular on official efforts to break up local patron-client networks.

Although I long planned this study to take the form of an institutional history of the tension between the central communist party apparatus and its regional affiliates, the limitations on research discussed above led me during the COVID pandemic to change approaches in order to foreground material on the personal experiences of many of the victims of the Leningrad Affair—compelling documentation that I secured years ago before I committed to my erstwhile institutional narrative. As it turns out, this pivot to prosopography has been transformative and had led to the drafting of a much more dramatic, gripping and even suspenseful story of conspiracy, betrayal and jealous self-interest.

## 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. In its investigation of this mysterious bout of political violence, *The Purge of Stalin's Would-Be Successors* resolves key debates about the Leningrad Affair while also offering rare insight into the trials and tribulations of the victims of this savage infighting.

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