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March of the chekists: Beria's secret police patronage network and Soviet crypto-politics

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ABSTRACT

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Lavrentii Beria built up one of the most powerful patronage networks in Soviet history. Its success represents a unique case in Soviet history in which a regionally based secret police patron–client network, comprised primarily of representatives of ethnic minorities, took control first of the civilian leadership of one of the major regions of the Union, and then of the most powerful institution in the USSR, the national secret police, and subsequently became one of the main competing factions in the “crypto-politics” of the late-Stalin era. The fact that the Beria network emerged from the secret police gave it certain advantages in the political struggles of the period, but it also held weaknesses that played a role in Beria's final undoing. The evolution and political struggles of Beria's network also shed light on the inner workings of the competition among informal networks that made up the crypto-politics of the period. Using recent memoirs, new archival sources and interviews, this article will examine how Beria developed, managed and advanced his informal network, giving particular attention to the specific and unique outcomes that resulted from the rooting of this network in the secret police, at five critical junctures in Beria's career.

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Lavrentii Beria built up one of the most powerful patronage networks in Soviet history, and the fact that this network was based in the organs of the secret police made it very different from the other informal networks with which it competed for influence and power. Starting in the secret police in the South Caucasus in the 1920s, Beria's network took over the leadership of the Transcaucasian republics in the early 1930s and then by the end of that decade moved on to Moscow to head the Union-level secret police. While his network retained control in the Transcaucasus, Beria became the first professional secret policeman to head the Soviet security organs,¹ and his extensive network of secret police veterans was capable of both ruthlessness and remarkable effectiveness, carrying out some of the regime's most complex tasks during the war with Nazi Germany and in the years afterwards. After surviving the Byzantine intrigues of Soviet politics during Stalin's last years, when the dictator finally died in March 1953 Beria used his network to make a swift and daring grab for power. He proposed far reaching reforms and nearly succeeded in permanently shifting the locus of power away from the party apparatus to the institutions of the Soviet government, sidelining the leadership role of the Communist Party.

Beria's bid for power in the spring of 1953 ultimately failed: the extent of his reform agenda and the fear that his control of the secret police instilled in his colleagues among the Soviet leadership in the end allowed his main rival, Nikita Khrushchev, to outmaneuver him. Beria was arrested during a session of the Presidium on June 26, 1953, and was tried and executed in secret six months later. His top lieutenants were also arrested and shot. Many of them were ethnic Caucasians, and all had worked with Beria in the secret police for decades. More of Beria's clients were shot over the next several years, and dozens

¹ In contrast to his predecessors, professional revolutionaries such as Felix Dzerzhinskii, Geinrikh Yagoda and Viacheslav Mezhlinskii, or the career party apparatchik Nikolai Ezhov.

more were imprisoned, dismissed from their positions or demoted, and the security and interior ministries were decisively split into separate organizations that were fully subordinated to the authority of the Party.

Yet despite Beria's ultimate failure, the success of his network represents a unique case in Soviet history in which a regionally based secret police patron-client network (a "*khvost*" or "tail" in the jargon of the period) comprised primarily of representatives of ethnic minorities took control first of the civilian, as opposed to police, leadership of one of the major regions of the Union, and then of the most powerful institution in the USSR, the national secret police, then called the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, or NKVD, and subsequently became one of the main competing factions in the "crypto-politics" of the late-Stalin era.² The fact that the Beria network emerged from the secret police and maintained its essential basis in that institution (or set of institutions) gave it certain advantages in the political struggles of the period, but it also held weaknesses that played a role in Beria's final undoing. The evolution and political struggles of Beria's network also shed light on the inner workings of the competition among informal networks that made up the crypto-politics of the period. This article will examine how Beria developed, managed and advanced his informal network, giving particular attention to the specific and unique outcomes that resulted from the rooting of this network in the secret police, at five critical junctures in Beria's career: the formation and consolidation of his network in the 1920s; the expansion from the secret police to the Transcaucasian party apparatus in the early 1930s; the ascension to the Union-level secret police in 1938; the byzantine court politics of Stalin's last years; and Beria's grab for power following Stalin's death in 1953.

1. Network formation and consolidation: 1921–28

Beria began developing the nucleus of his network from the very start of his career in the secret police, when after being involved in murky underground activities in Baku and in Georgia he joined the Azerbaijani "Extraordinary Committee," or *Cheka*, the Bolshevik secret political police, at the age of 22 in April 1921. There he began a career-long relationship with the then head of the Azerbaijani *Cheka*, Dzhabar Bagirov, who within a month made Beria his deputy and also head of the Special Operational Section. Beria met Vladimir Dekanozov at this time, an ethnic Georgian from Baku who joined the Azerbaijani *Cheka* in June 1921 and soon became Secretary of the Special Operations Section. Beria here also came to the attention of the three important Bolshevik leaders who were then based in the Caucasus: G.K. "Sergo" Orjonikidze, then Chairman of the Caucasus Bureau, Sergei M. Kirov, then Secretary of the Azerbaijani Central Committee, and Grigorii N. Kaminskii, Secretary of the Azerbaijani Central Committee and Chairman of the Baku Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies.

Beria, with Dekanozov in tow, transferred to the Georgian *Cheka* in November 1922, most likely on the initiative of Orjonikidze, who became 1st secretary of the newly formed Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, as an ally in the latter's campaign to bring Georgia into the centralized system and to undermine the "nationalist Communist" Georgian leadership (Knight, 1993: 27; Kremlev, 2008: 62–6). Beria may have seen more opportunity for advancement in Georgia as its capital, Tiflis, became the administrative center of the Transcaucasian republic after 12 March 1922. Georgia was also rife with underground political opposition and banditry, which presented challenges and opportunities for the secret police. The fact that Beria started his career and network in Georgia was both significant and serendipitous for him. After the Bolshevik's conquest of Georgia in February 1921, the newly created Georgian *Cheka* was staffed largely by personnel from the military intelligence section of the 11th Red Army, who were by and large ethnic Russians, Latvians, Jews and Ukrainians and who were highly suspicious of the local Georgian population, the scarcity of suitable personnel is demonstrated by the recruitment and rapid advancement at this time of Vsevelod Merkulov, a literate ethnic Russian without relevant experience and of questionable social background – the bourgeois son of an aristocrat and Tsarist officer.

Once in place in the Georgian *Cheka*, Beria concentrated his efforts on the work of the Secret Section, which was responsible for anti-Soviet political parties and the Counterintelligence Section, responsible for espionage and counter-revolution. This work involved the most serious high-profile cases, and success in dealing with them provided the best opportunities for advancement. Beria also used his powers of appointment and promotion to cultivate new clients that would remain bulwarks of his network for decades to come. Many of these appointees were ethnic Georgians, such as S. Goglidze, Yu. Sumbatov-Topuridze, A. Rapava, L. Tsanova, and A. Sadzhaia; but there were representatives of other nationalities as well, such as the Abkhaz A.S. Agrba, the Armenian Kobulov brothers, Bogdan and Amayak, and the Jewish T. Borshchev, S. Mil'shtein, A. Khazan and V. Gul'st. The "indigenization" policy through which the regime at that time encouraged the recruitment and development of local cadres most likely helped Beria's recruitment effort. Although the Russian Merkulov temporarily sided with the "old guard" in the *Cheka*, Beria recruited him into his team, in part because he was a skilled writer who would serve as Beria's main speechwriter and editor, but also because it was useful to have a benign Russian face in prominent positions on the team.³ In so doing, Beria continued to develop and refine his approach to managing his network:

² The term 'crypto-politics' was used in a 1965 article by T.H. Rigby, one of the leading Western scholars of Soviet patron-client relations, to refer to the political system of the late-Stalin period in which nearly the total scope of activities was subject to direction by the state, open or partially open politics were suppressed, and actual decision making was shielded behind 'the elaborate façade of pseudo-political institutions.' (Rigby, 1965: 145).

³ Merkulov made this point explicitly in the exculpatory letter that he wrote at the request of Khrushchev in 1953. Long secret (and held in Tsentr khraneniia sovremennoi dokumentatsii (TsKhSD), f. 5 o. 30, d. 4), it has recently been published in the Russian media, including in *Vlast'* No. 25 (778), June 30, 2008.

finding and promoting capable people who were efficient and comparatively well educated, often bringing them in to the center from regional *Cheka* and GPU bureaus.⁴

The hostility that Beria and his appointees faced from the established clique in the Transcaucasus secret police who had come to the region as part of the Caucasian Army, such as A.K. Zalpeter, who in 1924 was head of the so-called “Eastern Department,” responsible for monitoring Georgian nationalism, A.M. Ershov-Lur’e, V.S. Valik, I. Volkovskii, M. Volkov, Ya. Viner, and A.S. Shtepa, further consolidated the corporate spirit of Beria’s network. Beria made headway in his struggle against this resistance through promoting his own appointees and by his prominence and success in operations to suppress uprisings, particularly the large-scale Menshevik uprising in Georgia in August 1924. In December 1926 he became deputy head of the Transcaucasian OGPU and head of the Georgian GPU. But the higher position of head of the Transcaucasian OGPU remained out of his reach. Although that position had become vacant following the death of the previous incumbent, S. Mogilevskii, in an airplane crash in March 1925, an incident in which some observers have suspected that Beria might have played a role, it was filled in early 1926 by I.P. Pavlunovskii, an experienced Russian secret policeman who supported the “established clique” in their struggle against Beria’s expanding network.

Yet Beria was able to outmaneuver these opponents and Pavlunovskii as well, most likely through the support of Orjonikidze, judging from the regularity with which Beria appealed to the latter through correspondence. Orjonikidze moved in 1926 from 1st Secretary of the Transcaucasian republic to Moscow as chairman of the Central Control Commission and became a candidate member of the Politburo and a full member from 1930. In late 1928 Pavlunovskii was recalled to Moscow, and Zalpeter, Lur’e and Valik were transferred out of the Transcaucasus. Over the next several years Beria used support from Orjonikidze in the center (who presumably served as a direct conduit to Stalin) and the capacity of his network in the secret police to gather compromising material and information, real or insinuated, on rivals and opponents to sideline and remove them one by one, until finally Beria himself attained first the leadership of the Transcaucasian secret police and finally the leadership of the Transcaucasian and Georgian party apparatus itself. As Merkulov wrote in his letter to Khrushchev in 1953, “It should be said that the people sent from Moscow for the post of Chairman of the Transcaucasian *Cheka* (Pavlunovskii, Katsnel’son, Kaul’) truly did not shine with particular ability. Beria ably outmaneuvered them one by one until finally he achieved the post for himself” (*Vlast’*, June 30, 2008).

Beria created his network in the secret police in the early part of his career in a way that was similar to other ambitious people in the early years of Soviet power: the first goal was mutual protection, the second mutual advancement. These goals are particularly evident in the relationship that Beria formed with Bagirov – each was in possession of information that was potentially harmful to the other,⁵ and each was in a position to give positive recommendations that would advance the career of the other. While the element of mutual protection appears to have remained in Beria’s relationships with early clients, very quickly his ambition and ability seem to have dictated that he would take a leadership role and that his network ties would become more vertical than horizontal.

Under Beria’s leadership, his clients consolidated a cohesive network, based in part on shared characteristics of background, education, age, and the danger and excitement of secret police work. Most were born between 1900 and 1910, had partial secondary or secondary educations (and in some cases partial higher education), joined the party in the mid-1920s, and for most employment in the secret police was their first and only professional work experience. This gave them a very different outlook from their seniors in the secret police and from the cohort of party chiefs of the 1920s. The latter were professional revolutionaries forced to become administrators through the crucible of the civil war and the necessity of implementing state power in the vast and underdeveloped regions of the Union. Beria’s clients instead were professional secret police bureaucrats who were unburdened with romantic revolutionary ideas and ideology. Their primary goals were survival and career advancement.

While informal ties and networks were common throughout the Soviet Union, this form of social organization was, and still is, particularly crucial in the Caucasus. Traditionally, in the absence of binding contracts or of functioning formal laws, as Mars and Altman (1983) have pointed out, in the Caucasus the basis of interpersonal trust is honor, and the basis of honor is position within networks: “In a highly personalized society, where a person is measured on his honor – and on the honor of his closest associates – the body of people to whom he can personally relate and through whom he can extend relations with others who might latently prove significant becomes an individual’s major resource” (*Ibid.* p.549). The “cores” of such networks tend to be based on family and kinship, but they “are supplemented by peer group membership” (*Ibid.* p.550). What resulted from this was a disdain for and even a resentment of formal rules and restrictions, and a set of values that fundamentally contradicted those of the official Soviet state: recruitment and promotion should be based on familiarity and nepotism rather than impartial merit; decisions are based on personal obligations and commitments rather than rules or formal lines of subordination; and authority derives from position within networks rather than from abstract roles. Informal networks were the sole mechanisms for distribution of resources in the Caucasus well before this became the norm throughout the Union in the high Stalin period (Fitzpatrick, 2001), and nowhere was membership in networks and having

⁴ The *Cheka* became the State Political Administration (*Gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie*, or GPU, in February 1922, although because of ‘difficult conditions’ in the Transcaucasus it kept the name *Cheka* until 1926 (Petrov, 1995).

⁵ This is particularly the case with regard to the issue of Beria’s service in the *Mussavat* counterintelligence in Azerbaijan that dogged him throughout his career and the date of his entry into the party, and the allegations that Bagirov had taken the identity of his older brother in order to cover his own criminal past (Antonov-Ovseenko, 1991: 81–3).

a powerful patron more crucial for survival and advancement, to the point that to call somebody “*upatrono*”, or “lacking a patron,” is a serious put down in Georgian (Nizharadze, 2001).

The ethnic aspect of Beria's early network also seems to have played a significant role in creating a sense of cohesion and identity among Beria's clients in Tiflis, as Caucasians struggling for position against the dominant Russian and Latvian elites in the secret police. This was probably also because the “cores” of informal networks tended to be based in family and kinship groups. Many of Beria's clients were Mingrelians, for example, but probably this was not because Beria had particular trust or affection for his fellow Mingrelians in the abstract, but rather because these peer networks arose from Mingrelian kinship networks. And while many of Beria's earlier clients were Georgians, Georgian ethnicity for Beria did not seem to be a critical criteria, since he recruited a number of Armenians and Jews, and even recruited junior ranking ethnic Russians (such as Merkulov) and Latvians (such as A.P. Eglit) over to his side. But nevertheless the sense of consolidation that resulted from the shared characteristics, including a sense of “otherness” in relation to the dominant Russian ethnicity, and early struggles continued in Beria's network when it shifted from the secret police to the party apparatus.

The cohesion in Beria's network should not be mistaken for interpersonal friendship, however. Beria often assigned people who disliked each other to positions in close proximity as a means of control. As P.I. Pimenov said about his interaction with former Beria clients in Vladimir Central prison following the demise of Beria:

[Beria] guaranteed loyalty to himself by joining together in close positions individuals who hated each other. This nipped in the bud any plots against him: these people would sooner inform on one another. And although by the time I met them all these Beria-ites had already weathered the storms of life and had sat in jail for more than a decade, it was noticeable that they continued to despise one another (Sokolov, 2003: 75).

Beria also maintained loyalty by seeking out compromising information on his clients or recruiting people about whom he knew compromising facts:

In the biography of practically each of Beria's clients there were “dark spots.” Beria, gathering such people in one team, assumed that this dark past would cement them around their boss and leader, since they all understood that they owed their careers and prosperity to Lavrentii Pavlovich personally. Without his help and support they could be thrown from the “wagon of history” at any moment (Tumshis, 2004: 206).

Yet Beria's approach to personnel management was not based primarily on fear. He seemed to have understood early on that the key to an effective informal network in the developing Soviet system was to recruit and maintain clients who were capable and personally loyal. He appears also to have understood from early in his career how to best ensure this personal loyalty of his clients. While many early Soviet leaders cultivated the image of the hard-nosed Party boss who harassed and shouted at subordinates – and such behavior was not foreign to Beria – few of them realized the importance of rewarding and protecting their subordinates as well as cajoling them. In the words of one of Beria's more notorious clients, Pavel Sudoplatov (quoted in Sokolov, 2003):

Gradually the feeling of fear disappeared from those who worked with [Beria] over several years, and there came a sense of certainty that Beria would support them if they successfully fulfilled the most important economic tasks. Beria, in the interests of the job, often encouraged freedom of action among the main players in resolving complex issues. It seems to me that he got these qualities from Stalin: harsh control and the highest demands, but at the same time the ability to create an atmosphere of certainty in a director, that if he successfully fulfills the tasks he is given he will be guaranteed support.

More than 50 years after Beria's downfall, his client A. Mirtskhulava described similar sentiments: “We knew that we could rely on Beria and that he would support us if we were honest with him and did our work well.”⁶

Beria and his clients seem to have understood well the circular nature of the patron-client relationship: that the goals of the patron are the most vital interests of the client, since when the patron advances the client can expect to be advanced in turn. The patronage network allowed the patron to accomplish his tasks, while they provided protection in cases when rules had to be broken while fulfilling those tasks – which in the Soviet system was the normal state of affairs – and they provided the necessary incentives for the clients. From the point of view of Beria as patron, the goals of furthering his career and developing his network became inextricably linked.

Throughout the 1920s, the regional patronage networks that developed to allow the state to function in the absence of a developed infrastructure became consolidated into larger networks, and as central elites made efforts to expand their own networks into the regions they began to tie horizontal regional networks into their vertical centrally based networks. The patrons of locally based networks “engaged in a constant game of alliance building and alliance shifting with centrally located patrons,” while centrally based elite patrons in turn tried as much as possible to consolidate their political machines by making this relationship routine, thereby allowing them to achieve their assignments, advance their interests, and fight off threats from other elites (Easter, 2000: 35). As Rigby (1981: 23–4) pointed out, local networks sometimes involved groups “which reflected and exploited some strong pre-existing factor of social identity and solidarity,” such as ethnicity. By the early 1920s local networks were increasingly tied in to national-level networks of Moscow-based patrons. The party elites in the

⁶ Interview with the author in Tbilisi in April 2004.

Transcaucasus created one of the most powerful such linkages of local and central networks through their connection with Orjonikidze and Kirov. Beria also used his connection with Orjonikidze for self-promotion and eventually to oust the party based network in the leadership and replace it with his own secret police based network, and for a time after this change took place the regional-center tie of the Transcaucasus network (now Beria's network) with Orjonikidze in the center continued.

2. Expansion to the Transcaucasian party apparatus: 1929–38

During the period 1929–31, Beria was able to use the issue of the tempo of collectivization and peasant resistance as a tool in his struggle with the local party leadership. This party leadership, made up of people such as M.I. Kakhiani, L.I. Kartvelishvili, S.A. Mamulia, L. Sukhishvili, V.I. Polonskii and I.D. "Mamia" Orakhelashvili, were Stalinist hardliners with career patterns and orientations that were similar to the other "provincial *komitetchiki*" elsewhere in the Union who had been so effective in implementing Soviet power in the regions through their informal patronage networks in the early years of the regime. They were a cohort of Party administrators, mostly born around 1895, who had developed a sense of cohesion and shared identity through membership in the Bolshevik party prior to the "October Revolution" in 1917 and the experience of the Civil War and the establishment of Soviet power. The Transcaucasus party leadership made use of the advancement of Orjonikidze to the center to become one of the most powerful regional-center patronage networks of the period (Easter, 2000: 101). As Easter points out, the collectivization campaign became an issue of conflict between the regional networks of the "provincial *komitetchiki*" not because of disagreement about the policy itself, but rather because the desire of the central leadership to dictate how the policy should be implemented threatened the corporate interests of these regional networks and their conception of their role as autonomous actors within the institutional framework of the state (Easter, 2000: 116–31). The "provincial *komitetchiki*" clashed with the center over collectivization not "out of a sense of identity with [society]," but rather as a response "to the efforts of the center to shut them out of the policy process," and in so doing they sought to institutionalize a power sharing system with the center (Easter, 2000: 131–2).

This conflict provoked the central leadership to move against the informal regional networks in the mid-1930s, culminating in the physical destruction of the cohort of "provincial *komitetchiki*" in the Great Terror of 1936–8. In the Transcaucasus, however, things developed in a unique way. Using his network connections in the center, at first through Orjonikidze, and his lines of secret police reporting, and also physical proximity to Stalin while the latter vacationed in dachas in Abkhazia and Sochi, Beria made the case that his own network in the secret police would be more effective in dealing with the challenges of collectivization than the local party leadership (Knight, 1993: 47–53; Suny, 1994: 237–42). Over the course of 1931–32 this campaign proved ultimately successful: the Transcaucasian party leadership was transferred out of the republic, and Beria was named 2nd secretary of the Transcaucasian regional committee (Zakkraikom) and 1st secretary of the Georgian Central Committee in October–November 1931, and finally 1st secretary of the Transcaucasian regional committee in October 1932.⁷

The recently published correspondence between Kaganovich and Stalin sheds new light on the details of how this confrontation played out. While Beria continued making written appeals to Orjonikidze at least through May 1930 (Kremlev, 2008: 81), it seems that by the summer of 1931, when open conflict broke out between Beria and Orjonikidze's clients in the Transcaucasus party leadership, Orjonikidze broke with Beria and firmly backed his party clients. The Kaganovich-Stalin correspondence clearly demonstrates that this conflict was followed very closely by the Politburo, and that Beria increasingly enjoyed the support of Stalin himself. On August 26, 1931, the leaders of the Zakkraikom, the secretaries of the Georgian Central Committee, and several officials from Azerbaijan brought their conflict to Stalin in person on the Black Sea, where Orjonikidze's clients, except for Orakhelashvili, made a poor impression on the leader:

The squabble among them is unbelievable, and apparently it won't finish anytime soon. From what I see, the entrenched character of the clash and the stubbornness of the combatants can be explained by the fact that the squabblers are certain that they have impunity in their anti-party "work," because they count on Sergo "covering their backs" no matter what happens.

I made peace, and for now the thing is settled, but not for long. They are all lying and conniving, starting with Kartvelishvili. Beria, Polonsky and Orakhelashvili aren't lying. But Polonsky makes a number of tactless errors and mistakes. Mamulia (Secretary of the Central Committee of Georgia) makes the most unpleasant impression. Georgian *Sovnarkom* chairman Sukhishvili makes a comical impression – he's a hopeless moron ["*balbes*"]. It's just shocking that both of these characters were recommended by Sergo.

If we don't intervene, these people can wreck things through their stupidity. They've already messed things up with the peasantry in Georgia and Azerbaijan. Without serious intervention from the Central Committee, Kartvelishvili and the whole Zakkraikom are powerless to improve things, if they even want to improve things (Khlevnyuk et al., 2001: 68–9, document no. 28, Stalin to Kaganovich).

Stalin ordered a fundamental "cleaning out" and the preparation of a report to the Orgburo by the Zakkraikom and the Georgian and Azerbaijani Central Committees by the time of his return to Moscow in the end of September. On 10 September Mamulia was removed as secretary of the Georgian Central Committee on the proposal of the Zakkraikom itself ("upon receipt

⁷ By the spring of 1932 Beria was able to stack the Transcaucasian Central Committee with his own clients: Agrba, Agniashvili, Arutiyunov, Grigorian, Dekanozov, Sturua and Tsitlidze. (Partarkhiv TsK KPG, o. 13, d. 5).

of [Stalin's] telegram") and replaced by Kartvelishvili, who also remained as Secretary of the Zakkraikom. Kaganovich reported to Stalin about this: "This is an appropriate decision, particularly at the present stage, until fresh people are advanced." The Transcaucasus party leaders' report to the Orgburo was delayed until 19 October. The session, with Stalin's participation, "turned into yet another clarification of relations between the conflicting sides" (RGASPI, f. 17, o. 114, d. 265, l. 75–137). A commission was created under Kaganovich to prepare the decision that was confirmed by the Politburo on 31 October. The decree stated that "an unprincipled struggle for influence has taken place among the leadership cadres of the Transcaucasus of both the Zakkraikom and the republics by certain individuals (elements of *'atamanshchina'*), on the basis of which the selection of leading cadres and the assignment of personnel has taken place in many cases not according to party or objective criteria, but rather according to belonging to one grouping or another" (RGASPI, f. 17, o. 3, d. 857, l. 9, 12–19). On the same day, the Politburo ordered a personnel shakeup in the Transcaucasus, removing Kartvelishvili as First Secretary of the Zakkraikom and replacing him with Orakhelishvili, and naming Beria as both Second Secretary to Orakhelishvili in the Zakkraikom and his replacement as First Secretary of the Georgian party Central Committee (RGASPI, f. 17, o. 3, d. 857, l. 9). Thus Orjonikidze's network suffered a serious blow with the removal of Kartvelishvili and the advancement of Beria, yet balance was maintained with Kartvelishvili's replacement by Orakhelishvili.

The confrontation continued, however, until the next summer, when on June 21, 1932, presumably after sustained attacks by Beria's network on that of Orakhelishvili, a note, entitled "On facts of patronage (*'gruppovshchina'*) in the Transcaucasian party organization," was sent (apparently on the initiative of Beria's apparatus in the Georgian Central Committee) to Stalin, Kaganovich and Postyshev. The note stated that the Georgian Central Committee had considered on June 10 the issue of "patronage work" (*'gruppovaya rabota'*) on the part of Orakhelishvili's wife, Maria, and others, "who through disseminating false rumors tried to set the Georgian Central Committee off against the Zakkraikom and to discredit particular leaders of the Central Committee and the Tiflis committee (in particular, Comrade Beria)," for which Maria Orakhelishvili was reprimanded and removed from her position (RGASPI, f. 17, o. 120, d. 82, l. 88). Several days later Mamia Orakhelishvili petitioned both Stalin and Orjonikidze, requesting to be relieved from his position in the wake of Beria's attacks. Stalin replied about this to Kaganovich, Postyshev and Orjonikidze:

My opinion: for all the rudeness (*"uglovatost"*) of Beria's "actions," it's Orakhelishvili that's wrong in this. His request must be refused. If Orakhelishvili does not agree with the decision of the Georgian Central Committee he can appeal to the Zakkraikom, and finally to the Party Central Committee. There's no reason for him to go. I fear that with Orakhelishvili pride has come to the fore (they're attacking "his" people), and not the interests of the job and positive work. Everyone says that the positive work is going very well in Georgia, and the mood of the peasants has improved. That's the most important thing in the work (Khlevnyuk et al., 2001: 185, document no. 141).

In his reply letter to Stalin on June 23, Kaganovich shows that things were moving in Beria's favor:

A new row is really raging in the Transcaucasus. You're absolutely right that the healthiest approach is on the side of Beria. Orakhelishvili represents the worn-out and unproductive circles. But the thing didn't end with Orakhelishvili's letter. Maria Orakhelishvili came here and gave an official declaration to the Central Control Commission requesting that the demerit made against her be reexamined. . . I think the Commission should not hasten with this reexamination, so as not to blow this thing up further or to encourage further group struggle against the Georgian Central Committee (Khlevnyuk et al., 2001: 188–9, document no. 146).

A final blow to Orakhelishvili's network in the Zakkraikom came with their attempt to lower the grain requisition quota the following month, in June 1932, which drew Stalin's ire, as reflected in his letter of July 24 to Kaganovich and Molotov, in which he criticizes the Zakkraikom leadership's "completely unacceptable insubordinate action" (2001: 241–2, doc. no. 214). Beria wrote to Kaganovich on 13 July that he had twice been to see Stalin and "had a chance to inform him in detail about our affairs" (RGASPI, p. 17, o. 120, d. 75, l. 15). Stalin's letter to Kaganovich of August 12 confirmed Beria's victory over Orakhelishvili's group and his pre-eminence in Stalin's eyes:

Beria makes a very good impression. A good organizer and a businesslike and talented worker. In looking over Transcaucasian affairs, I become all the more convinced that in the sphere of selecting personnel Sergo is an irremediable bungler (*"golovotyap"*). Sergo insisted on the candidacy of Mamulia for the post of secretary of the Georgian Central Committee, but now it's obvious (even to the blind) that Mamulia isn't worth Beria's left foot. I think that Orakhelishvili will have to be removed (he's been consistently requesting this). Even though Beria isn't a member (or even a candidate member) of the Central Committee, all the same he will have to be promoted to the post of First Secretary of the Zakkraikom. Polonsky (his candidacy) is not appropriate, since he doesn't speak any of the local languages (2001: 276, doc. no. 251).

Thus on 9 October, the Politburo accepted Orakhelishvili's request to be relieved of his position, replacing him with Beria. Beria also kept his position as first secretary of the Georgian party Central Committee (RGASPI, f. 17, o. 3, d. 903, l. 8).

With this move from the secret police to the party administration, Beria filled nearly all of the top positions in the party apparatus and government with clients from his secret police network – in what has been called a "*chekizatsia*" of the party organs" (Tumshis, 2004: 208). Beria's clients from the secret police were assigned as regional party chiefs throughout the republic. Eventually by the end of the 1930s they made up 40% of the Transcaucasian politburo, including the autonomous

republics and oblasts. Thus, unlike in any other major region of the Union, in the Transcaucasus the leadership was completely taken over by a fully formed secret police based network.

Beria remained 1st secretary of the Transcaucasian regional committee until the dissolving of the Transcaucasian Federative Republic in December 1936, and the head of the party apparatus in Georgia until August 1938. He maintained control over the Azerbaijan party apparatus through his client Bagirov, and through his client G.A. Arutinov in Armenia, both the 1st secretaries in their respective republics, thus making the dissolution of the Transcaucasian republic an insignificant formality from the point of view of Beria's authority. Beria kept control of the Transcaucasian secret police through his client S. Goglidze, and several other important clients, such as A. Rapava and B. Kobulov, also remained in the secret police. Beria also began to cultivate new clients among career administrators in the party apparatus with party rather than police backgrounds, such as Mikheil Baramia and Aleksandre Mirstkhulava.

The fact that the Transcaucasian party apparatus was controlled by a secret police based network, and one that was distinct from the central secret police networks in Moscow,⁸ meant that the great purges of the 1930s took on a very different complexion there. The crucial signaling event in Stalin's assault on the party elite was the February–March Plenum in 1937, at which he made clear his intention to destroy elite patronage networks. He stated that certain local leaders were creating defensive “clans” and trying to gain independence from the central leadership, and warned the party bureaucrats that they should not bring their “tails” along with them from one region to another when they were transferred. And in order to uproot the “family groups,” Stalin made clear that he intended to resort to democratic principles: the plenum resolution called for regional and republican secretaries all over the Union to be criticized and subjected to reelection by lower party organizations through secret ballots (Tucker, 2006: 682–4).⁹ Yet, as Khrushchev later stated, the “final word” in these supposedly secret elections “belonged to the NKVD, and only the NKVD,” (Khrushchev, 1970: 81). As Tucker (*ibid*) pointed out, the democratic principles involved were but a smokescreen, a mechanism designed to prevent the “leading party cadres,” most of whom were about to be destroyed, from controlling the results of the elections and to put the entire process into the hands of the NKVD.

But while in some regions local patrons may have had some of “their people” in the local secret police, in Georgia Beria's network nearly entirely subsumed the local NKVD, so thus Beria was able to fend off the criticism and assure the reelection of most of his clients: as Suny wrote, “Beria's machine had largely been reinstated, seemingly thwarting the intentions of the February plenum” (Suny, 1994: 275). This did not escape the attention of the center. A front-page article appeared in the March 20, 1937 *Pravda* (precisely during the Georgian party plenum devoted to discussing the results of the February–March Central Committee plenum) entitled “A Serious Warning to the Southern Regions” criticizing Beria and Bagirov, among other regional leaders, of sluggishness in attending to agricultural and industrial policies in the wake of the Central Committee plenum. An even more hostile article appeared in *Pravda* on May 22 following the conclusion of the “reelection” campaign and the 10th congress of the Georgian Communist party, censuring Abkhazian 1st secretary M. Gobechia and government head A.S. Agrba and Ajarian SSR 1st secretary Kochlamazashvili for insufficient “self-criticism.”

In other republics, such language often signaled the start of mass arrests of the local leadership. Yet Beria and his elite network endured the tumult and emerged intact. While the purges took a fearsome toll in the Caucasus on the intelligentsia, the mid-level *nomenklatura* and Old Bolsheviks, including the former party Transcaucasian leadership that had been removed in 1931–32, Beria's clientele among the party and secret police in the Transcaucasus remained remarkably secure. Of the fifty or so clearly identifiable Beria clients in top level leadership positions during this period only two of them appear to have been sacrificed during the terror: A.S. Agrba¹⁰ and Abkhazian NKVD head V.G. Zhuzhunava.¹¹ Agrba (an ethnic Abkhaz) and Zhuzhunava (a Georgian) both served in Beria's police network in Abkhazia and had helped Beria dismantle the network of Abkhaz local boss Nestor Lakoba in early 1937. It is possible that they incurred Beria's displeasure by their apparent association with his rival Tito Lordkipanidze (footnote 10).

⁸ The independence of Beria's secret police network is amply demonstrated by an incident in 1938 when Ezhov apparently tried to launch a preemptive strike against Beria by having him arrested on treason charges, but the head of the Georgian NKVD, Beria's client S. Goglidze, refused to carry out the order and instead informed Beria of the plan (Knight, 1993: 87–8; Gazarian, 1982: 119–20). The veracity of this story is questioned by Mlechin (2002: 200–1).

⁹ The transcripts of most of the February–March Plenum were kept classified until the collapse of the USSR. They were published in the journal *Voprosy istorii* from 1992 to 5, and have recently been made available in full online by the organization Memorial: <http://www.memo.ru/history/1937/>.

¹⁰ Agrba was also accused in testimony under torture by Zhuzhunava, who in turn had been implicated of ties with Tito Lordkipanidze, a *Cheka* veteran and former Transcaucasian GPU head under Beria. Lordkipanidze had made a successful career in the secret police under Beria, but apparently grew too ambitious and criticized his boss. He was transferred to an NKVD post in Crimea in 1935 before being arrested and shot in 1937. That both Zhuzhunava (the NKVD head in Sukhumi) and Agrba worked in Abkhazia (both were accused of conspiring with Lakoba) might have allowed Beria to represent their arrests as an isolated incident from the rest of his network. (ssusa, fond 6, file 15969–60 (37860–07)). Agrba seemed to have already fallen out of favor with Beria: during the discussion at the March plenum of the Georgian party Beria read out the March 20 *Pravda* article (mentioning that it hadn't been published yet) and criticized it for not mentioning Agrba: “Apparently things are going better in Abkhazia, Comrade Agrba is in a rather happy mood. And it just happens that, according to our information, in Abkhazia things are worse than anywhere else” (Partarkhiv TsK KPG, f. 14, o. 11, d. 33, l. 362). It is also worth mentioning that while Agrba and Gobechia were subsequently arrested and shot, Kochlamazashvili, who was also criticized in the May 22 *Pravda* article, was promoted to 2nd secretary in Georgia in August 1938 and warmly praised by Beria (Partarkhiv TsK KPG, f. 14, o. 12, d. 24, l. 131). Thus the criticism of Agrba in the May 22 *Pravda* article may not have been a direct cause of his downfall.

¹¹ Sokolov (2003: 101) argues that Beria tried to protect Zhuzhunava, noting that the latter's arrest was delayed by several months following his exclusion from the party, perhaps because as a colleague of Beria in Azerbaijan in the early 1920s he may have known details about Beria's questionable early party credentials. Once this proved impossible, Beria ordered that Zhuzhunava be heavily beaten (“Krepko izlupit’ Zhuzhunava”) in order to discredit whatever confessions he might make. This command does in fact appear appended to the protocol in Zhuzhunava's criminal file: (ssusa, f. 6, d. 15969–60, 37860–07), l. 375.

At the same time, Beria and his network continued to oversee a massive program of development in the Transcaucasus region in the fields of construction, agriculture and industry (Toptygin, 2005: 48–53). As party chief of a major region, Beria now had direct access to the central leadership in Moscow and to Stalin himself. Beria traveled often to Moscow to meet with Stalin and other top party elites on various matters, he received them frequently in the resorts in Abkhazia, and like other Union republic heads he sent nearly daily telegrams personally to Stalin on a range of issues, from the construction of ports and the planting of particular kinds of wheat to prison conditions and the sale of grain to shepherds on state farms (Partarkhiv TsK KPG, 1937, o. 14, file 152). Beria also had to make the same kinds of appeals that his predecessors in the party leadership made for things like reductions in production quotas and extra financing, and often his position and connections in the center helped him in this regard as well, as in a letter sent to Kaganovich in December 1936:

No matter how hard we try to escape this difficult situation with finances, things here are still bad. We are very far behind on salaries, and we won't be able to catch up on our own. Why is this? 1) Few goods reach our region. 2) There are no goods for commercial sale. You know that I'm better than anyone in the Union in gathering monetary resources. But the absence of goods is cutting us. You have to help us somehow. I'll do everything, but I can't deal with salaries without help from the center. Help us. Regards. Lavrentii (Sokolov, 2003: 83).

The sense of identity and cohesion in Beria's secret police network helped it significantly during this period, when the arena of conflict moved to Georgian and Transcaucasian party politics. The ability to collect and disseminate compromising information gave Beria advantages over his rivals, and the fact that his network emerged from the secret police rather than from the party apparatus allowed it to survive the turmoil of the 1930s. While the informal networks of the "provincial *komitetchiki*" were marginalized and eventually destroyed because they were seen to aspire to an institutionalization of their position in a power sharing arrangement with the center, Beria's secret police based network became the instrument used by the center against the previous party leadership in the Transcaucasus. Once that task had been accomplished, the secret police background allowed Beria's network to successfully appeal to the center in ways that party based networks could not. It also allowed Beria to protect, for the most part, his higher level clients during the Great Purges of 1936–8 and to emerge from them with his network still strong and in position for further advancement.

3. Ascension to the Union-level secret police: 1938–41

Beria's effectiveness in the Transcaucasus seems to have brought him to Stalin's attention as an effective organizer. At the end of 1938, when Stalin finally decided to wind down the Great Terror, he included Beria in the four-person commission that was set up to "investigate" the excesses of the All-Union NKVD under its Commissar, Nikolai Ezhov. Apparently based on a recommendation by G. Malenkov's department of Leading Party Organs, Beria was named as First Deputy People's Commissar of Internal Affairs of the USSR in August 1938, a move that has been seen as a further step in Stalin's project to undermine and remove Ezhov and his network. Ezhov struggled back by appointing his own clients to Beria's secretariat. At first Beria was only able to bring one of his own people to Moscow, his assistant A.P. Kapanadze, as deputy head of his secretariat. Over the next four months Beria gradually worked more of his secret police network into the central organs of the NKVD: in September Merkulov was transferred from head of the Georgian Transport and Industrial Department to become deputy head of the Main Administration for State Security (GUGB) of the NKVD, and in October he simultaneously became a head of the Counterintelligence Section of the GUGB NKVD. B. Kobulov became a head of the Secret Political Department; P.A. Sharia became a head of the NKVD Secretariat; Dekanozov became a head of the Foreign Section; S.P. Mil'shtein became a head of the Investigative Section with V.A. Kakuchaya as his deputy; and Sh. Tsereteli became a deputy head of the Special Department. I.A. Gagaa, V.N. Gul'st and A.Ya. Gul'ko from the Georgian NKVD became deputy heads of the Security Division, under Stalin's personal bodyguard N.S. Vlasik.

When Ezhov was finally removed as USSR Commissar for Internal Affairs and replaced by Beria on November 25, 1938 the stream of Beria's clients from the Transcaucasus party apparatus and secret police into the central apparatus NKVD became a flood, and they immediately set to work purging Ezhov's clients at all levels in the NKVD. 22.9 percent of the total NKVD personnel were removed over the course of 1939.¹² In place of Ezhov's men, Beria's clients were assigned to leading positions in the NKVD throughout the Union: M.M. Gvishiani in the Far East region, A.Z. Kobulov in Ukraine, I.F. Nikishov in the Khabarovsk region, A.N. Sadzhaya in Uzbekistan, L.F. Tsanova in Belarus, Goglidze in Leningrad oblast. 40 percent of the Georgian politburo joined Beria in the NKVD apparatus: V. Merkulov, S. Mamulov, S. Goglidze, V. Dekanozov and P.A. Sharia (Tumshis, 2004: 214–5). The proportion of ethnic Georgians in NKVD leadership positions jumped from 3.13 percent in January 1938 to 7.84 percent in July of 1939, while the overall percentage of Georgians in the USSR comprised only 1.33 percent according to the 1939 census (Petrov and Skorkin, 1999: 495).¹³ In the oft cited words of Merkulov, "So many officials came from Georgia that later Beria had to reassign some of them back, since, it seems, Comrade Stalin paid attention to this"

¹² That percentage comprises 7372 people. (Tumshis, 2004: 216). Of these, 695 were removed from the central apparatus.

¹³ It is also interesting to note that the percentage of Ukrainians among the NKVD leadership quadrupled in that period, from 3.13 percent to 12.42 percent, and the proportion of ethnic Russians increased from 45.31 percent to 66.67. These increases clearly came as a result of the loss of the ethnic Jewish, Latvian and Polish cadres in the NKVD, who were particularly well represented in Ezhov's network. The percentage of Jewish personnel among the top leadership dropped from 27.34 to 3.92 percent in this period.

(*Vlast'*, June 20, 2008). As Knight (1993: 91) argued, because the purge of the Ezhov's network had been so extensive, Beria's network became essential: "Beria's ruthless team of police comrades provided the kind of expertise necessary for the efficient functioning of the NKVD."

In order to fill all the open positions Beria began recruiting new clients into the security apparatus, primarily ethnic Russians and Ukrainians from the party apparatus and officer candidates from the military academies. In this category are P.M. Fitin, S.N. Kruglov, B.A. Liudvigov and I.A. Serov.¹⁴ Some new clients were recruited from outer NKVD outposts and assigned to responsible positions in the Moscow NKVD apparatus, such as V.T. Sergienko from Khabarovsk krai and N.S. Sazykin from Stalingrad region. Some of the stars of the foreign intelligence service (P.A. Sudoplatov, N.I. Eitingon) survived the Ezhov purge to become key members of the Beria client network. At the same time, many of Beria's clients in the party and secret police apparatus in Transcaucasia remained in place. Beria's replacement as 1st secretary of the Georgian party was Kandid Charkviani, previously a 3rd secretary and former editor of the Georgian-language Komsomol newspaper *akhalgazdeba komunisti*. Although Charkviani seems to have been an outsider to Beria's network who was probably appointed by Stalin as a means of reining in Beria's dominance in Georgia (Beria had attempted to place his protégé V.N. Bakradze in that position),¹⁵ Charkviani and Beria soon found a *modus vivendi*, and Beria continued to maintain control of his network in Georgia and to draw strength from it for his position in Moscow.

Thus with Beria's promotion and move to Moscow in late 1938, his network extended its control over both the territorial base in the Caucasus as well as the Union-wide apparatus of the NKVD, an unprecedented phenomenon in Soviet history, and the first time that a secret police head came to the position with his own powerful informal network. The influence and sphere of activity of Beria and his network also expanded rapidly after the move to Moscow. Beria had been elected as a member of the Central Committee during the 17th Party Congress in 1934, and now during the 18th Party Congress in 1939 he became a candidate member of the Politburo. Beria was also part of the commission set up to conduct a purge in the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, following which several members of his network, especially Dekanozov and A. Kobulov, took high positions in that organization. Meanwhile, following the purging of the Ezhovites and the winding down of the Great Terror, Beria's network in the NKVD began carrying out several other large scale "special tasks," such as the Sovietization of the parts of eastern Poland taken by the Soviet Union in 1939 under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the subsequent large-scale executions of captured Polish officers, policemen, engineers and others in Katyn Wood, Smolensk, Kalinin and elsewhere, and the assassination of Trotsky in Mexico in August 1940. The NKVD under Beria also continued to oversee the massive forced labor camp system of the GULAG.

According to Khlevnyuk (1996), the strengthening and expanding of the NKVD staff contingent under Beria was part of a larger project of redistribution of functions from the party apparatus to the government under the Council of People's Commissars or SNK, which would later become the Council of Ministers. The culmination of this tendency came when Stalin himself became Chairman of the SNK on May 7, 1941, while retaining his post as First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Party. The same day Beria, while retaining his post as Commissar of Internal Affairs, became one of 15 Deputy Chairman of the SNK with responsibility for the Peoples Commissariat for State Security¹⁶ and the Commissariats of Forestry, Non-ferrous metals, Oil industry and River Transport. Beria's personal access to Stalin, according to Kremlin reception records, increased dramatically: from two meetings in 1937 to 33 in 1938 (a total of 68 h and 35 min) and 34 times in 1939 (80 h, 20 min) (Toptygin, 2005: 77). According to Mikoyan, Beria became part of an abbreviated politburo, along with Stalin, Molotov, Malenkov and Mikoyan, that dealt with foreign policy issues and "operational matters" from 1939 (Lewin, 2005: 87).

That fact that Beria's network was based in the regional secret police and had developed independently from the network of Ezhov in the central secret police bureaucracy in Moscow presented Stalin with an ideal instrument with which to destroy and replace Ezhov. Thus when Beria ascended to the chairmanship of the central NKVD in late 1938 he moved his main clients from their civilian party positions in the Transcaucasus back into their secret police roles in Moscow, and in so doing was able to provide a complete leadership cadre that was ready not only to take over the leadership of the NKVD, but to carry out the wholesale purge of their predecessors from Ezhov's network as well. The move to Moscow gave Beria remarkable reach and authority, allowing him to extend his network from its regional base in the Transcaucasus to take over the most powerful Union-level state bureaucracy. But it also created challenges of overreach for Beria, since it meant that he had to take in new cohorts of clients very quickly in order to fill all of the necessary jobs in the central and regional NKVD apparatus. He had to bring in new people, often through recruitment by existing clients, as Merkulov brought Serov to Beria's attention after having worked with him in western Ukraine, or through intermediaries such as Malenkov in the party apparatus, without being able to develop relationships with them as carefully as he had with his earlier clients in the Transcaucasus. The range of necessary assignments geographically throughout the Union also meant that some clients had to be assigned far from the center, where they were difficult to supervise and were exposed to overtures by other potential patrons such as Tsanava in Belarus, who defected to

¹⁴ 14,506 new people were brought in when Beria took over, of which 45% were "operational" staff. 11,062 were from the Party and Komsomol, and 347 came from the military academies. 1129 were "promoted" from clerical or technical positions within in the NKVD (Toptygin, 2005: 73).

¹⁵ Charkviani's son Gela included footage of his father stating this in a five-part television documentary shown in Georgia in 2005. Aleksandre Mirts-khulava, then the 1st secretary of the Georgian Komsomol, said that Stalin wanted to transfer Bakradze to Moscow, but Beria insisted that he remain in Georgia as Chairman of the *Sovnarkom*. Interview with the author in Tbilisi, April 2004.

¹⁶ Which was officially separated from the NKVD in February 1941, with Beria's client Merkulov at its head. This separation has been seen as a move to limit Beria's authority, although given that he was able to retain control of both institutions, it may be better regarded as a move to limit the power of the secret police more generally.

Abakumov, and Serov in Ukraine who seems to have developed a working relationship there with Khrushchev. Yet this expansion was necessary for Beria, motivated by his own ambition and by the necessity of being perceived of as both effective and essential, and also by the need to expand appointment opportunities for old and new clients.

4. Court politics in the late-Stalin period: 1943–53

With the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 and its involvement in the Second World War, Beria's network appeared to reach its peak of influence and widest expanse of roles. When the State Defense Committee (GKO) was set up on 30 June 1941 to coordinate the conduct of the Soviet war effort Beria became a key member, responsible for the production of weaponry and munitions while continuing his role as Commissar for Internal Affairs. In 1942 Beria took over responsibility for tank production from Molotov within the GKO, and in December of that year he became Chairman of the Operational Bureau of the GKO, which gave him control over the entire defense industry complex. In this capacity, Beria's network undertook one of the most crucial and complex operations of the war: the relocation of Soviet heavy industry from the European part of the Union behind the Ural mountain range. At the height of the war Beria's network was essentially running a large part of the Soviet economy. Elements of Beria's network also implemented some of the other more difficult and logistically complex operations that the Soviet leadership undertook during the war, such as the deportation of the so-called "enemy peoples," first the Volga Germans and Koreans in 1941 and later the Karachi, Kalmyks, Ingush, Chechens, and Crimean Tatars, and their "resettlement" in Central Asia; and also the defense of the Caucasus in 1943–44.¹⁷

At the close of the war Beria took full control over what had become the regime's most pressing secret project, the development of a Soviet nuclear bomb. Beria headed the so-called "Special Committee," and brought along two of his deputies from the interior ministry, A.P. Zevnyagin and V.A. Makhnev. This project required the coordination of a number of the aspects of Beria's network: organization and coordination of Soviet scientists; foreign intelligence for collection of information from Manhattan Project; the vast prison labor force for the mining of uranium and other essential minerals; the exploitation of captured German scientists; and the overall management of the project and the maintenance of security and secrecy.

Simultaneously, Beria continued to have formal oversight authority over the secret police through his position as a Deputy Chairman of the Councils of Ministers, although in December 1945–January 1946 he relinquished his position as a head of the NKVD. In 1943 the organization had again been divided into the NKVD – after 1946 renamed the Ministry of Internal Affairs, or MVD, headed by Beria's former deputy Kruglov, and the NKGB – after 1946 renamed the Ministry for State Security, or MGB, headed first by Beria's client Merkulov and then taken over in May 1946 by V.S. Abakumov. Beria maintained the control of his network in Georgia and the Transcaucasus, and his standing improved when he became a full member of the Politburo in March 1946.

Yet while Beria's network was reaching the heights of its authority and influence during and after the war, it seems that Stalin had already begun making efforts to curtail this power. One of the first moves in this direction was the attempt to undermine Beria's regional network in the Transcaucasus by wresting one of its most important parts from his grasp – in February 1943 Stalin appointed Akaki Mgeladze, a former Komsomol and party apparatchik, to the position of first secretary of the regional committee of Abkhazia. (Mgeladze, 2001: 40–1). The so-called "Soviet Riviera" was one of the most agriculturally productive regions of the Caucasus (especially in tobacco, citrus and tea), and Beria's network had been firmly in control there since the destruction of the local network of the previous party potentate there, Nestor Lakoba, in 1937. Mgeladze was encouraged to cultivate his own patronage network in Abkhazia that would become a base for challenging the dominance of Beria's clients in Tbilisi (Blauvelt, 2007: 222–3).

Also in the spring of 1943 the task of military counterintelligence was taken away from the NKVD and given over to the newly created Main Administration for Counterintelligence (GUKR) or SMERSH within the Defense Commissariat. In charge of the new organization was V.S. Abakumov, who had been in the secret police since 1933 and had later worked in Rostov NKVD in the late 1930s. Abakumov was one of the "vydvizhentsy" from the regions that Beria brought in to fill positions in the center, making him his deputy commissar of Internal Affairs together with S.N. Kruglov. In SMERSH, however, Abakumov answered directly to Stalin, and he began to build up his own client network of military intelligence officers, independent from Beria's network. On 4 May 1946 Abakumov replaced Beria's client Merkulov as Minister of State Security, and he started removing Beria's clients throughout the ranks of the MGB and replacing them with his own appointments.¹⁸ In May 1947 an Information Committee was formed in the Council of Ministers headed by Molotov, and later A.Ya. Vyshinskii, that took control over political and military intelligence, including the 1st Main Administration of the MGB and the GRU of the Defense Ministry, as well as the information structures of the Central Committee and Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade. This move has also been seen as an attempt by Stalin to weaken the MGB and the intelligence community more generally.¹⁹

¹⁷ The primary coordinators of the deportations were S. Mamulov, B. Kobulov, I. Serov, S. Kruglov and S. Mil'shtein, although in a number of cases Beria took personal control of the operations (Rayfield, 2005: 403–7).

¹⁸ As Mlechin (2002:293) argues, the appointment of Abakumov was probably intended to counterbalance the growing power of the military as much as the power of Beria's network.

¹⁹ In January 1949 the GRU was returned to the control of the military, and in November 1951, after the arrest of Abakumov, the political intelligence function was returned to the MGB. (Mlechin, 2002: 323).

On the political front, as the war drew to a close Stalin began advance the standing of Andrei Zhdanov, who had build up a powerful client network in Leningrad as a 1st secretary of the city and regional committees there for a decade between 1934 and 1944 and had overseen the defense of the city under the German siege. Zhdanov had also been a secretary of the Central Committee since 1934 and a member of the Politburo from March 1939, and in 1944 he became Central Committee secretary for ideology. In March 1946 he became Chairman of the Supreme Soviet, and with Stalin's connivance began a campaign against Western influences on Soviet life and arts, the so-called "*Zhdanovshchina*." The influence of Voznesenskii, the head of Gosplan and a client of Zhdanov from Leningrad, also began to increase in the government in the sphere of economic planning. Also in March 1946 A.A. Kuznetsov, the 1st secretary of the Leningrad regional committee, was promoted to the Secretary of the Central Committee and assigned to oversee the MGB and MVD on behalf of the party – which either severely reduced or eliminated altogether Beria's oversight function of the secret police as a deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers. Kuznetsov also played a central role in implementing the so-called "Aviation Affair" that appeared to be aimed at Beria's then ally G.M. Malenkov over supposed technical defects in aircraft supplied to the Soviet Air Force during the war. At the same time that Abakumov was named head of the Ministry of State Security (6 May 1946) Malenkov was removed from his powerful position of a CC secretary for personnel and sent off to Central Asia, replaced as a secretary for personnel by Kuznetsov.

Thus from the spring of 1946 Beria was facing restraints on the reach of his network on a number of fronts: in his regional stronghold in the Transcaucasus, in the secret police, and in the larger political arena. Beria focused his primary attention in this period on the atomic bomb project. A number of Beria's major clients were sent to occupied Germany to work in the Main Administration for State Property Abroad of the Ministry for Foreign Trade (Merkulov, Dekanozov, B. Kobulov, Vlodzimirskii), in the Main Administration for Prisoners and Interned People (A. Kobulov) and in the civil administration (Serov). These placements were useful in procuring resources from the occupied territories for the atomic project, but they contributed to the growing isolation of Beria's network from the affairs in the secret police and from domestic Soviet politics more generally.

While still being assigned to special tasks, Beria was now engaged in a constant struggle to maintain position in the face of Stalin's efforts to balance his power off against the networks of other lieutenants. Beria found himself constantly on the defensive: the divisions of the security ministry from the interior ministry during and after the war, the duplication of functions, the displacement of Beria's main clients from the top leadership positions and the diluting of Beria's oversight functions meant that after the war Beria was becoming cut off from the secret police. Many of his clients were purged and others were forced to work in different areas, and his dominance in the Transcaucasus came under threat from the emergence of counter elites there supported directly by Stalin.

Beria's fortunes improved somewhat with the death of Zhdanov in August 1948 and the wholesale destruction of the Leningrad party network, including eventually Voznesenskii and Kuznetsov, in 1949–50 during the so-called "Leningrad Affair," implemented, presumably on Stalin's orders by Abakumov and Malenkov, who had again returned to favor with Stalin. Beria may have played a role in the restoration of Malenkov, but he appears to have remained mostly on the sidelines during the "Leningrad Affair." He was also buoyed by the successful test of the first Soviet atomic device on August 29, 1949.

Stalin attempted again after the demise of the Zhdanov network to create a counterbalance to the existing arrangement of forces by bringing N.S. Khrushchev from his position as 1st secretary of the Ukrainian party organization to Moscow in December 1949 as head of the Moscow city and regional party committees (Khrushchev had previously been 1st secretary of the Moscow city committee in 1932–34). In addition to being a member of the Politburo since 1938, Khrushchev in his new role in Moscow was also elected as a secretary of the Central Committee. In the past only Kirov and Kaganovich had held such a status while being an oblast' committee 1st secretary (Medvedev, 2006: 75). This position was a powerful base from which Khrushchev could continue to cultivate the already strong patronage network that he had built up in the party apparatus in Ukraine and also among the military leadership during the war, allowing him to create a regionally and institutionally based network with the capacity to rival Beria's network.

The destruction of Zhdanov's network and the return of Malenkov also seem to have precipitated the demise of Abakumov. According to his biographer Stolyarov (1997), "Abakumov had been promoted by Zhdanov, who had pressed the other politburo members to make him minister. After the death of Zhdanov Abakumov was doomed."²⁰ Both Malenkov and his ally Beria took advantage of this situation: "Malenkov's people removed Abakumov and put in their person – the party bureaucrat Semen Denisovich Ignat'ev, and Beria stuck him with Sergei Goglidze as his first deputy" (Mlechin, 2002: 324).

The pretext for Abakumov's removal in early July 1951 was a denunciation from a subordinate, Mikhail Ryumin, who accused Abakumov of negligence and incompetence in a number of areas.²¹ In the weeks after Abakumov's arrest a number of his clients in the security ministry were arrested in quick succession (Petrov, 2005: 104–5). Stalin in turn began to use Ryumin, now head of the investigative section of the MGB – the "sledstvennaya chast' po osobo vazhnyim delam" – to implement preparations for his newest campaign, the anti-Semitic "Doctors' Plot."²² While the new security minister Ignat'ev may have been at first a client of Malenkov, Stalin began dealing with him directly to move forward the supposed plot. In his last years, and particularly in the last months of his life, Stalin began to pay inordinate attention to the security ministry. He

²⁰ Khlevnyuk (2001: 538) notes that Abakumov may have provoked Stalin's distrust earlier by deciding issues directly with Kuznetsov rather than bringing them to Stalin himself.

²¹ According to Mlechin (2002: 325), Ryumin wrote the denunciation letter in Ignat'ev's office, and it was later reworked in Malenkov's office.

²² Stalin apparently ordered Ignat'ev in October 1951 to "remove all the Jews" from the MGB (Petrov, 2005: 106).

encouraged Ignat'ev to instigate yet another purge of personnel in the secret police, and in particular to bring in a new cohort of young party officials into the investigative section (Mlechin, 2002: 352). The anti-Semitic direction and the Doctors' Plot have been seen by many historians as an indirect threat against Beria because some of the language of its statement in the official organs made mention of "failures of vigilance" on the part of the secret police in the past, because Beria was known to have supported Jewish institutions (the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee during the war and a Jewish museum in Georgia), and because several important members of Beria's client network were Jews (Knight, 1993: 170–1; Fairbanks, 1978).

Meanwhile, in the Transcaucasus Stalin continued to encourage the development of Mgeladze's network in Abkhazia. In September 1950 an article was published under Mgeladze's name in the Georgian-language party newspaper *komunisti* on the importance of proper management and encouragement of cadres, and criticizing cases in which "people are promoted because they are relatives of those already in top position... and despite their laziness the bosses still try to cover for them and prevent them from being fired" (*komunisti* 193(8738), September 1, 1950). This article has been seen as a "signal" to the Georgian party leadership in Tbilisi (Knight, 1993: 156). In November 1951 an administrative change took place in the structure of the Georgian SSR, presumably on Stalin's initiative, that divided the republic into two oblasts, Tbilisi oblast' in the east and Kutaisi oblast' in the west. Mgeladze was named as first secretary of the Kutaisi oblast', which positioned him to significantly increase his standing in the republic and to strengthen his client network.

In the fall of 1951 Stalin began his most direct attack on Beria and his network, the so-called "Mingrelian Affair." At the end of September Stalin met in Tskhaltubo, in Georgia, with the Georgian security minister N.M. Rukhadze, a Beria client, to discuss the Georgian émigré community and the state of bribery in Georgia (Petrov, 2005: 112).²³ On November 9 the Politburo issued a resolution "on bribe taking in Georgia and on 'the anti-party group of Baramia'" that, developing the criticisms earlier expressed in Mgeladze's 1950 article in *komunisti*, criticized the Georgian party leadership for allowing the unrestricted practice of corruption and patronage, particularly among ethnic Mingrelians. The supposed leader of a subversive Mingrelian nationalist group was Mikheil Baramia, the second secretary of the Georgian Central Committee, and a known Beria's client. Other Beria's protégés, such as A.N. Rapava, V.Ya. Shonia and K.G. Chichinadze were also criticized. The resolution also mentioned that the Georgian émigré community in Paris was being used for espionage purposes by the Americans in Georgia, and that this community, under the leadership of E.P. Gegechkori – Beria's uncle-in-law – had particularly close links with Mingrelians (Klevnyuk et al., 2002: 349–51).²⁴ Over the next few months the Georgian MVD under Rukhadze began to arrest Beria's Mingrelian clients in leadership positions in Georgia.

In March 1952 Stalin summoned the entire Georgian Politburo to the Central Committee in Moscow, where Charkviani was made to report to the Politburo on the situation in Georgia and the efforts that the Georgian leadership had undertaken since the November resolution. According to Mgeladze, Beria took the floor first after Charkviani's report. He accused Baramia's group of "taking patronage" over Mingrelia, saying that "nobody undertook any measures to stop this outrage." He then said: "I am also guilty. I myself recommended certain members of this anti-party group to responsible posts. I do not try to deny my responsibility, it was I who recommended it that You have the candidacy of Rapava for the post of Minister of Internal Affairs." "Thinking that with this he could end with the self-flagellation," Mgeladze inserted, "Beria added: 'The other members of the anti-party groups were not promoted by me. Baramia worked for me as a regional party secretary, I knew him as a weak worker, and his wife as a woman of unseemly morals. Nevertheless, he always seemed to advance. The further they promoted him, the more corrupt he became'" (Mgeladze, 2001: 194). The decision was taken at this meeting to remove Charkviani as the 1st Secretary of the Georgian Central Committee and to name Mgeladze in his place, a decision announced in a resolution of the Politburo "on the state of affairs in the Georgian Communist Party" of March 27. It was also decided to call a plenum session of the Georgian Central Committee to discuss the decree, and to send Beria to Tbilisi to take part in the work of this plenum session (Khlevnyuk, 1996: 352–4).

Thus Stalin sent Beria to Georgia to participate in the repression of a part of his own client network. In the words of the Russian historian Petrov (2005: 114):

... Stalin's goal was not to destroy Beria (if he had wanted to do he would have done this), but to keep a hold on him and to remind him from time to time who is the "boss" in the country. As concerns Stalin's decision to send Beria himself to Tbilisi, this is entirely typical of his approach. Being on tenterhooks with Stalin, Beria would not dare to show any sympathy to the Mingrelians and, to the contrary, would be demonstratively harsh with them. What's more, Beria knew the situation in Georgia better than anybody in the Kremlin. Thus nobody could better carry out Stalin's line than Beria, who was afraid of being seen as disloyal or partial.

At the same time, the trip presented Beria with the opportunity to take the development of the situation under his own control.

Just such an opportunity presented itself in the spring of 1952. Arrests continued in Georgia under the direction of Mgeladze and Rukhadze. Thirty seven party officials were removed and arrested, and around 10,000 people were deported from Georgia to Kazakhstan (Naumov and Sigachev, 1999: 34, 399). Then Rukhadze, who apparently did not understand the underlying political goals of the campaign, began to gather similarly incriminating evidence of corruption and patronage on Mgeladze and his network, which he sent directly to Stalin. On June 4 Stalin sent an angry telegram to Mgeladze and the

²³ In his memoirs Mgeladze describes a similar conversation with Stalin in Abkhazia in the fall of 1951, although he does not indicate the exact date.

²⁴ The draft of the resolution contains extensive handwritten corrections to the text by Stalin himself.

members of the Bureau of the Georgian Central Committee criticizing Rukhadze for bypassing the Georgian Party and government leadership. Beria appears to have taken advantage of the situation and his presence in Tbilisi to remove Rukhadze as Minister of State Security (confirmed by a Politburo resolution on June 9) (Ibid., 357). Although Beria was unsuccessful in his attempt to put one of his closest protégés, S. Goglidze, in Rukhadze's place, he was able to get agreement on the candidacy of another of his clients, A.I. Kochlavashvili, as the new security minister, with Goglidze assigned to head the commission for transferring files to the new Georgian MGB leadership. Rukhadze and his deputy Tabdishvili were arrested the following month (Petrov, 2005: 115). Despite the purges in Georgia, Beria “managed to protect many of his protégés from arrest, moving some to lesser posts rather than seeing them dismissed entirely” (Knight, 1993: 167).

In the shorter term the assault on Beria's Mingrelian clients was a demonstration of the limitations of his power. Although many of Beria's clients were in fact Mingrelian, it could be argued that he personally never demonstrated affinity for a distinct Mingrelian national identity – in the early 1930s he purposely demolished the attempts of the Mingrelian regional party leader Isaak Zhvania to codify a Mingrelian grammar and alphabet and to create a specific sense of Mingrelian national identity (in his early career, Beria arguably had as little use for a distinctive Mingrelian identity, as somebody trying to rule all of Georgia, as Stalin did for a distinctive Georgian identity, as somebody trying to become the Tsar of all the Russias). The Mingrelian affair probably purposely targeted Mingrelians because Beria himself was one (“Go after the big Mingrelian,” Stalin allegedly told Rukhadze), and because it allowed Stalin to focus the accusations on Beria's client network without endangering the network of his protégé Mgeladze. Threatening the thing that his top lieutenants valued most became one of Stalin's favorite means in his last years of demonstrating his control over them: having arrested, for example, Molotov's wife and Kaganovich's brothers. In the Mingrelian affair Stalin targeted what was most valuable for Beria: his network.

The incident also demonstrated the ambiguous way that policy was implemented in the late-Stalin era. According to Mgeladze's (2001:181–2) memoirs, Stalin seems to have been genuinely appalled at official corruption in Georgia. Yet it is difficult to imagine that the situation elsewhere in the Union could have been much different: according to Moshe Lewin (2005: 135), in the late-Stalin period the party control organs reported enormous amounts of corruption. “Bribes were not simply offered; they were solicited, even demanded... [t]he offices of the State Prosecutor were heaving in documents concerning cases against Party bosses accused of misconduct or criminal behavior.” Potentially compromising information was available on any leading party official, as demonstrated by the information that Rukhadze gathered on Mgeladze. The case of Rukhadze shows how Stalin was able to use his personal authority to dig into Beria's network and co-opt his clients at will. Rukhadze had been a clear Beria's client throughout his career, although not as close a protégé as his predecessor, a Georgian interior ministry chief, A. Rapava, who had been demoted to party work in 1948 because his brother had been a German prisoner of war. Stalin often launched policies not through issuing directives or orders, but through sending “signals,” as he did in setting Rukhadze in motion in Tskhaltubo in 1951. That Rukhadze missed the deeper point of this “signal,” that the campaign against corruption in Georgia was meant exclusively as a campaign against elements of Beria's network, was a consequence of that indirect approach, even when the signal was delivered directly in person.

Rukhadze's misunderstanding also demonstrates a larger aspect of the crypto-politics of the late-Stalin era: although the outlines of the intrigues and machinations of Stalin and his top lieutenants seem clear to observer from today's perspective, many of the actors at the time – even key actors – seem oblivious to the possibility that politics could have worked in that way or that Stalin could have been responsible for fabricated the various “affairs” of the period. Mgeladze seemed to earnestly believe that Stalin was motivated to launch the Mingrelian affair out of concern for the level of corruption. For Charkviani, who lost his position as Georgian 1st Secretary because of the affair, the real issue was conflict between Mgeladze's faction and Beria's faction represented by Baramia over personnel issues. In Charkviani's opinion, the deceitful and ambitious Mgeladze used his proximity to Stalin to convince him of slanderous half-truths to use against Mgeladze's own political enemies (Charkviani, 2004: 260–1).²⁵ Similarly, Mgeladze's successor Mirtskhulava, who was among those arrested and imprisoned during the Mingrelian affair, blamed the dishonesty and connivance of Mgeladze and Rukhadze, and said that the incident did not diminish his respect and love for Stalin.²⁶

The Mingrelian affair seems to have been one element of Stalin's larger plan for a massive shake up of the Soviet leadership, on the scale of the purges in the late 1930s. Several of Stalin's most senior lieutenants, Molotov, Mikoyan and Voroshilov, had already been excluded from decision making, and Stalin's secretary Poskrebyshev and chief bodyguard Vlasik were removed from the inner circle. After the 19th Party Conference in October 1952 the Politburo was disbanded, and replaced with an expanded Presidium of 25 members and 11 candidate members that included Stalin's newly advanced younger protégés, including Mgeladze, with whom Stalin apparently intended to replace the old elite. Stalin's death on 5 March 1953 most likely brought Beria reprieve from destruction together with his colleagues among the senior leaders of the Politburo.

5. Beria's bid for power: 1953

Following Stalin's death the structure of Soviet higher politics changed rapidly. At a special plenum session held on March 5 in the Kremlin of the Central Committee, the Council of Ministers and the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, the Presidium

²⁵ In his memoirs, Charkviani also mentions that the November 9, 1951 Politburo resolution that launched the Mingrelian affair came to him as a complete surprise.

²⁶ Interview with the author in Tbilisi in April 2004.

(the former Politburo) was reduced to eleven members thus removing Stalin's new protégés; Malenkov was made Chairman of the Council of Ministers and Beria was named head of the newly reunited Ministry of State Security and Ministry of Internal Affairs. Beria, Molotov, Bulganin and Kaganovich were named as deputy Chairmen of the Council of Ministers. Khrushchev retained his post as secretary of the Central Committee, but lost his position as 1st secretary of the Moscow committee (Medvedev and Medvedev, 2004: 43–6). With Malenkov, controlling the Council of Ministers, and Beria, controlling the secret police, in an apparent alliance, it seemed that the center of power was moving decisively from the party organs to the government ministries. Beria moved quickly over the succeeding weeks, issuing orders to overturn the Doctors' plot and the Mingrelian affair and to rehabilitate the victims of those campaigns (Naumov and Sigachev, 1999: 17–41).

As Petrov points out, "Beria's first goal after the death of the leader was to liberate his people – the *chekists*." On March 11 he sent Malenkov and Khrushchev a letter stating that "a significant part of the secret police ('*chekist*') cadres with experience has been smashed" under Abakumov and Ignat'ev. "It will be essential to examine the materials on the arrested *chekists*, and depending, on the results make a decision about using them for work in the MVD" (Petrov, 2005: 133). Beria appointed B. Kobulov, Serov and Kruglov as his new first deputies and appointed a number of his other clients, several of whom had only just been released from prison, to important positions throughout the MVD while at the same time conducting an extensive purge of Abakumov and Ignat'ev's appointees, both in the central MVD apparatus and in the regions. In undoing the Mingrelian affair Beria also reasserted his political control in Georgia. Mgeladze was removed as the 1st Secretary (and subsequently arrested for bribery) and replaced with Beria's client Mirtskhulava, who had been imprisoned during the Mingrelian affair. Bakradze was appointed chairman of the Council of Ministers and Dekanozov as Minister of Internal Affairs, and Beria's clients Dekanozov, Mamulov, Sturua, Baramia and Zodelava took over the membership of the newly purged Georgian Central Committee (Knight, 1993: 187).

By quickly introducing liberalizing changes, such as the April 4 order preventing the use of physical coercion or force on arrested suspects and the May 9 general amnesty for certain categories of prisoners, Beria appears to have been attempting to win political support, especially among government cadres, by showing himself as a statesman rather than as secret policeman. The disavowal of the Mingrelian affair and the Doctor's plot, together with the empowering of national cadres in Georgia, seems to have been part of a larger effort on Beria's part to gain political support from non-Russian minorities by presenting himself as a champion of minority rights throughout the Union against the Great Russian chauvinist tendencies of the Stalin era.

Beria had begun using appeals of support for minority rights months before Stalin's death, during the 19th Party Congress in October 1952. While other speakers at that congress repeated the official line of criticizing minority issues as "bourgeois nationalism" and emphasizing the centrality of the Russian people in the Soviet state, Beria diverged significantly from this line by emphasizing the multinational character of the Union and criticizing Russification in the national republics (Fairbanks, 1978: 181). During the first weeks of his ascendancy in the spring of 1953 Beria agitated for more local national appointments in the Baltic republics and in Belarus, and demonstratively replaced the local security ministers there with titular nationals and instructed the secret police organs in the regions to report on the ethnic compositions of local Party organizations and on how they were performing in this area. The crucial battleground took place in Ukraine, Krushchev's fiefdom, where the newly appointed MVD chief, Beria's protégé Pavel Meshik, ordered a review to be made of the Russification and anti-Ukrainian policies of the local party leadership in western Ukraine. The ensuing report led to criticism of the party leadership for appointing Russian cadres from the eastern part of the republic to leadership positions and for imposing teaching in Russian in western Ukrainian universities. As a result of this report, and a Presidium resolution based on it, the 1st secretary in Ukraine, L. Mel'nikov, was removed from his position on June 10.

Although Beria's informal network dominated in the Transcaucasus, and he held formal and informal control over the secret police organs, as a number of authors have pointed out his overall political position in the spring of 1953 was rather tenuous. Although the fact that republic level ministers of security were members of the Bureaus of party committees gave Beria significant power at the Union republic and local levels, as demonstrated by Meshik in Ukraine, he had very little support in the government and party apparatus outside of the Transcaucasus. As Fairbanks noted, of the 120 members and 103 candidate members of the Central Committee of the Party in mid-March 1953 only five members and seven candidate members could be identified as Beria's clients.²⁷

This precarious political situation explains Beria's attempt to gain political support through his image as a reformer and through his courting of national minorities. But the most crucial element of Beria's strategy was his tactical alliance with Malenkov against Khrushchev's powerful network. Malenkov had a substantial network throughout the government apparatus and in the Councils of Ministers (and 24 full members and 14 candidate members of the Central Committee that could be identified as his clients), and had perceived authority as Stalin's apparent successor that could complement Beria's image as head of the police organs. And finally, given that Beria understood well that another Georgian would not be able to rule after Stalin, Malenkov was useful to Beria as an easily manipulated front man (Blauvelt, 2008: 9).

Thus the key to Krushchev's strategy in undermining Beria's position was to break this alliance by convincing Malenkov to defect. In a well recounted series of moves, Khrushchev accomplished this in May and June 1953 after first winning over one by one the other important members of the Presidium. Khrushchev was able to exploit the fears that the other elites held

²⁷ In addition, at least twelve of the ministry representatives and ten of the 38 1st secretaries of RSFSR provinces in the Central Committee were associated with Malenkov (Fairbanks, 1978: 181).

towards Beria and the prospects of what would happen if he were able to consolidate power. He was helped in this by the rapidity of Beria's moves in the weeks following Stalin's death and the perceived radical nature of some of Beria's policies: the speed with which he was able to regain control over the MVD, the removal of Mel'nikov in Ukraine and the threat that he might do the same in other republics, and his suggestions of de-Stalinization. In addition, some authors think that the unrest in Germany in June 1953 might also have played a role in encouraging Malenkov to break his alliance with Beria and join Khrushchev. The culmination of Khrushchev's maneuvering was the daring arrest of Beria in the Kremlin on June 26, 1953 (Knight, 1993: 194–200; Nekrasov, 1991: 262–96; Sul'ianov, 2005: 489–525).

6. Conclusion

Informal patronage networks like those of Beria filled a void in the high Stalin period, as the dictator privatized and personalized institutional power in the Soviet Union, fragmenting the formal political institutions and sapping them of their substance (Lewin, 2005: 84). Yet functions still had to be fulfilled and tasks undertaken, including difficult and complex ones, and in the absence of formal institutions Stalin relied on competing informal patronage networks to accomplish these things. Stalin himself obstructed the emergence of a real "bureaucratic" institutional system, and in its place he seemed to prefer a system of "court politics" in which the main lieutenants served as patrons for extensive client networks that the leader balanced off against one another (Easter, 2000: 166). The fact that Beria's informal network was created on the basis of the secret police gave it a particular coherence and capacity, and combined with Beria's personal ambition, ability and ruthlessness, it became an ideal instrument for Stalin's goal of elevating the secret police above the control of the party, subordinating it directly and exclusively to himself, and using it to destroy and renew the party apparatus. During and after the war Stalin undertook efforts to keep Beria off balance by weakening his network and distancing from the secret police and by diluting and fragmenting the secret police itself, but he still used Beria's network to accomplish particular tasks and to balance off against the networks of other elites. The intention is not to argue here that there is anything particularly unique about patron-client relations in the Soviet system or that other elites were not attempting to make use of similar mechanisms in the same time period. Rather, Beria was simply particularly adept at using such relations to his advantage and to accomplish complex tasks, thus contributing to the overall effectiveness of the system.

As Rigby (1965:151) has pointed out, the various instruments of control over political elites in the Stalin era prevented them from cohering in groups as in other political systems. Stalin himself "appears to have devoted considerable effort to preventing his lieutenants from becoming too closely identified with particular interests," he "entrusted responsibility for particular institutions to two or more rival leaders" and he often reallocated jurisdictions and responsibilities among them. In such an environment institutionally cross-cutting informal networks certainly persisted and again, were actually encouraged, but they rarely served to articulate particular policy interests beyond the protection and personal and career advancement of the patron and clients. Beria understood that it was extremely dangerous for an informal network to be perceived to have aspirations to represent policy interests or corporatist positions.²⁸ Nevertheless, in the Transcaucas in the 1930s, for example, Beria's network made appeals for resources and reduced collection and production targets that were similar to the appeals that had cost their predecessors from the party apparatus their jobs and eventually their lives, and again, the fact that Beria's network came from the secret police most likely gave it a certain latitude to accomplish such things. In at least one case at the very end of the Stalin period, Beria seems to have used his network to take a stand on behalf of a corporatist interest: the closest thing resembling interest articulation on the part of his network was Beria's appeals to national minority rights during the 19th Party Conference in October 1952, in contradiction to the continuing tendency towards Great Russian chauvinism characteristic of Stalin's policies at the time (Fairbanks, 1978: 180). This may have been motivated by a strategy of mobilizing his network (that indeed continued to be heavily dominated by representatives of ethnic minorities) given Beria's understanding of Stalin's real intentions of conducting another purge of the entrenched elites (hence leaving Beria nothing to lose), or in preparation for the struggle that he expected once Stalin was out of the picture.

Even though Beria had been kept at a distance from the secret police after the war, the speed with which he resurrected his network in the reunited security and interior ministry demonstrated the latent strength of his network connections there (Fairbanks, 1978: 181). The vigor with which Beria acted to rehabilitate and reinstate his Mingrelian clients (there were rumors that he immediately sent a specially equipped train to Tbilisi for this purpose) and secret police clients who had been purged under Abakumov and Ignat'ev was a clear signal to the client base that Beria was a loyal patron and that big things were ahead for his network. The fact that Beria's network was again based primarily in the secret police gave it significant advantages in the post-Stalin succession struggle, but also ultimately fatal disadvantages. Beria was able to act surprisingly quickly and to seize the initiative in the spring of 1953. The fact that interior ministry chiefs sat on republican and regional politburos gave his clients the ability to pressure the party apparatus. Much was made during the July Plenum of statements of Beria's clients, especially the testimony by Serdyuk, implying that Beria intended to subvert the power of the party to the interior ministry (Naumov and Sigachev, 1999: 260–5). This was probably true, in the sense that the logic of Beria's strategic alliance with Malenkov was to consolidate their position by institutionalizing a shift of power from the party to the government ministries. This strategy might ultimately have been successful, if it were not Khrushchev's success in breaking

²⁸ Beria apparently told his deputy Epishev in the early 1950s: "An enemy is not just one who does harm, but one who doubts the correctness of the line of the party." (Volkogonov, 1989: 202).

the Beria-Malenkov alliance and reaffirming the powerbase of the circular flow of power in the party apparatus. In the end, the ethnic issue may have played a particular role in Beria's undoing: one of the reasons that Beria's deputies Serov and Kruglov betrayed him and defected to Khrushchev and Malenkov may have been their discomfort with the number of Caucasians again in high positions (Blauvelt, 2008: 116). The use of the police apparatus to report on the Party during Beria's grab for power, particularly on the issue of national minorities policies, emerged as one of the more frequent accusations leveled against Beria during the July plenum, and for decades following Beria's fall, cadres from the Transcaucasus and from Georgia in particular were in practice severely restricted from rising to high positions in the central secret police and government apparatuses. The degree of danger that Khrushchev and his allies perceived from a consolidated network in the secret police is perhaps demonstrated by the harshness of the punishments netted out to Beria's secret police clients. All of those who were shot in connection with the "Beria affair" were clients in the secret police or who had started their careers there. Some, like Merkulov and Bagirov, had been distant from secret police work for many years. Many of Beria's former clients with party backgrounds were not only spared punishment, but were actually allowed to continue their careers in the local or central party apparatus, such as Baramia and Mirtskhulava. Khrushchev was eager to build support in the regional party apparatus, but was making it clear that informal networks in the secret police would be restricted and would no longer be able to compete in Soviet higher politics, and by all appearances he succeeded at this.

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