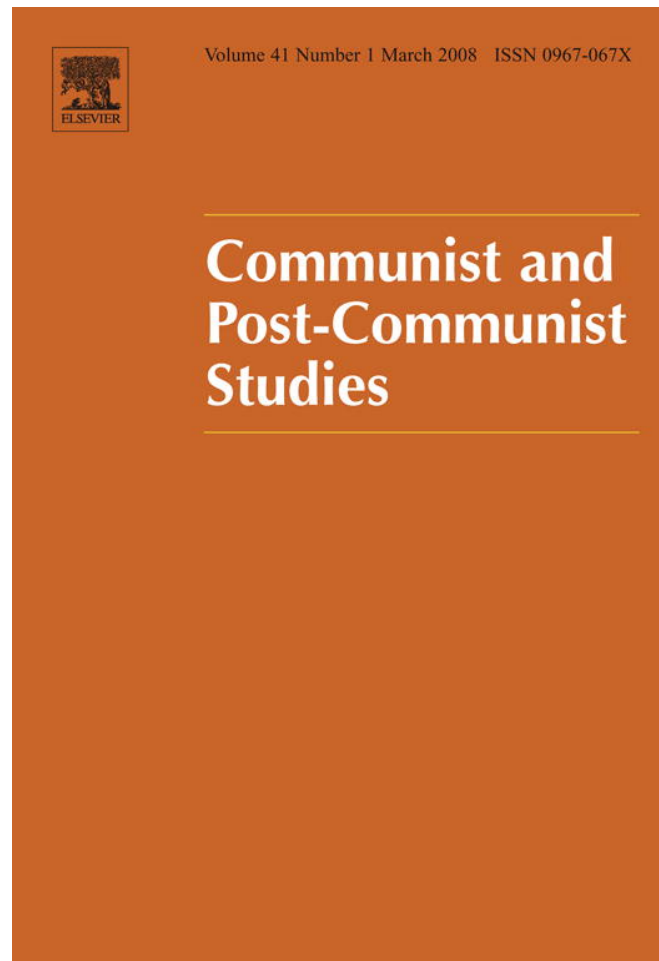


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# Patronage and betrayal in the post-Stalin succession: The case of Kruglov and Serov

Timothy K. Blauvelt

*American Councils for International Education (ACTR/ACCELS),*

*Chavchavadze 27/29, 0179 Tbilisi, Georgia*

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## Abstract

This paper will examine the phenomenon of betrayal in patronage networks in Soviet higher politics by considering one of the most high-profile and significant cases: the betrayal of Lavrenty Beria by two of his top lieutenants, Sergei Kruglov and Ivan Serov, during the post-Stalin succession contest in the spring of 1953.

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*Keywords:* Patron–client relations; Clientelism; Stalin; Beria; Khrushchev; Soviet Union

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The Soviet Union has been called one of the most important cases of patronage systems in the modern world, and the Stalinist period of Soviet history provides the test of the maximum role that patronage and informal relations can have in a modern industrial society (Fairbanks, 1983: 344). There seems to be little doubt that patron–client relationship and informal networks were both the result and the cause of important structural and institutional arrangements in the Soviet system.

This paper will consider one of the more interesting questions regarding the functioning of patronage networks in higher politics in the Stalin era and the post-Stalin succession—that of how cohesive and exclusive were patronage networks, and what were the opportunities and punishments for clients to defect and betray their patrons—by examining in detail one of the most high-profile and significant cases of betrayal of the period: the betrayal of Lavrentii Pavlovich Beria while

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at the height of his power in the spring of 1953 by two of his top deputies, Ivan Aleksandrovich Serov and Sergei Nikiforovich Kruglov.

I will begin by examining the literature on patron–client relations in the Soviet Union in this period in order to put the case of Kruglov and Serov’s betrayal into the context of the political landscape of the contending patronage networks in the period, and to show how the case can serve as an empirical test of some of the contending views within that literature regarding the issue of betrayal.

### **Nests and tails**

Merle Fainsod (1963) paid particular attention to informal patronage relations in his classic *How Russia is Ruled*:

Diverse interests exist below the outwardly placid surface of Party uniformity and manifest themselves in devious maneuvers, in struggles for power, and even in conflicting conceptions of proper strategy and tactics. Informal organization of the party approaches a constellation of power centers, some of greater and some of lesser magnitude, and each with its accompanying entourage of satellites with fields of influence extending through the Party, police, and the administrative and military hierarchies... There is abundant indication that careers are still made by clinging to the coat tails of the Great Lords of Communism, and that cliques rise and fall in the Soviet hierarchy depending on the fortunes of their patrons (236).

Charles Fairbanks pointed out the paradox that while the Stalinist system sought to “atomize” both the population and the political elite, Stalin’s tolerance of informal patronage networks “was an exception to the tendency to ‘atomize’ solidarities that might impede the ruler’s ability to turn the society in the direction he chooses,” and the leader “displayed less desire to disturb formation of partially autonomous local units than less totalitarian earlier regimes” (Fairbanks, 1983: 341).

As Fainsod noted, patronage networks for the central authority, that is for Stalin, “represent evils which must be destroyed,” since the center “seeks a rationalized impersonal hierarchy which will respond sensitively to its every wish... [the patronage network] creates a nodule of autonomous power which alludes control and frustrates the execution of central policy.” The center used its coercive institutions, and also “independent, centrally directed hierarchies” to keep tabs on and ultimately break up patronage networks wherever they come to light. But Fainsod (1963) also pointed the resilience of informal patronage networks:

Despite the most drastic disciplinary measures, family circles and mutual protection associations persist in reappearing even after they have been theoretically extirpated. Their continuing vitality is a reminder of the difficulties which the totalitarian Party confronts in seeking to fulfill its totalitarian aspirations (237).

Later writers, such as Andrew Walder (1986) and Sheila Fitzpatrick (2001), argued that patronage networks were not simply hindrances to or unintended consequences of the Stalinist system, but rather the very essence of the system itself. In a phenomenon that Walder refers to as the “unintended social consequences of the party’s ideological orientation,” in Communist party states the ruling party can gain loyalty and ideological adherence by giving preferential treatment to officials and other individuals at various levels of the hierarchy. The standard mode of exercising authority in such systems requires, in turn, the cultivation of stable networks:

...[P]arty branches develop stable networks of loyal clients, who exchange their loyalty and support for preference in career opportunities and other rewards. The result is a highly institutionalized network of patron–client relations that is maintained by the party and is integral to its rule: a clientelist system in which public loyalty to the party and its ideology is mingled with personal loyalties between party branch officials and their clients (6).

What both Walder and Fitzpatrick emphasize is that patron–client relations in Communist states are unlike those in other kinds of system because of the nearly total control by the government over resources and their distribution—a government and state based around the “reality of deficit” (Fitzpatrick, 2001: 89).

In addition to being mechanisms for the distribution and awarding of resources, patronage networks developed in particular regions (“*gnezda*,” or “nests”) and along vertical lines (“*khvosty*”, or “tails”) because they were useful for patrons in that they helped the patron to accomplish his tasks; they provided protection in case rules had to be bent in accomplishing tasks, which was the normal state of affairs; and they gave necessary incentives for subordinates. As Fairbanks points out, a patron–client relationship gives personal motivation for fulfilling a superior’s orders since the goals of the patron become the most vital interest of the client: “The boss’s interest is your own interest; if he advances because of the successful implementation of a policy demanded from above, you can expect to be helped out in turn.”

As Gerald Easter (2000) has demonstrated, from the very start of the Soviet state, “various personal networks [in the regions] competed for access to and control over the new state’s organizational distribution points of resources and rewards,” and in turn various central leaders made efforts to expand their own networks into the region, tying horizontal regional networks (the “nests”) into their vertical centrally-based networks (their “tails”) (Easter, 2000: 34). The opportunities for promotion for regionally based networks then came to be linked with central elites who had most access to organizational resources, and their clients’ success ebbed and flowed with their own. Smaller networks over time were consolidated into larger ones, as “regional actors engaged in a constant game of alliance building and alliance shifting with centrally located patrons” (Easter, 2000: 35). The principal patrons, in turn, tried as much as possible to routinize the whole relationship in order to consolidate their political machines and to achieve their assignments, advance their interests, and fight off threats from other elites.

### Stalin and patronage networks

Stalin's closest lieutenants tended to fall into two categories: "yes men" who lacked the capacity to be a threat, and cunning operators with particular efficiency and ruthlessness. The former perpetuated the circular flow of power which was a good strategy for maintaining authority, but it was not necessarily effective at developing the most talented cadres. The latter constituted elites who understood the rules of the game only too well.

Thus there were two fundamental threats to this system of control: entrenched and self-sustaining local fiefdoms, and rival central elites with the ability to create their own client networks, either in geographical regions or in institutions. While Politburo members such as V.M. Molotov, L.M. Kaganovich and K.E. Voroshilov carved out particular spheres of activity in which they specialized and made only modest use of patronage (Knight, 1993: 145), Stalin's most efficient and effective lieutenants, such as G.M. Malenkov, N.S. Khrushchev and L.P. Beria used all resources at their disposal to built up expensive patronage networks that transversed the institutions and regions of the Soviet state.

As Fairbanks points out, Stalin seemed reluctant to move directly against those lieutenants with significant patronage networks, either because he was actually afraid of the power that those networks transmitted or because patronage networks were so central to administration and coordination that the system could be undermined by the chaos that would result from suddenly dismantling one of these networks (Fairbanks, 1983: 341). As Robert Service (2003) has argued, Stalin in his later years "felt compelled to accept that the Soviet order imposed restrictions on even him as a despot to transform state and society." "Tails and nests" were manifestations of compromise, since despite his efforts to eradicate them, he found that the Soviet Union could not be governed without them: "The entire administrative mechanism of Party and government would be put at risk without informal networks" (Service, 2003: 17)

In the late-1930s Stalin moved violently against both regionally-based patronage fiefdoms and against other types of clientelistic networks that began to show a common sense of identity or corporate interests, and many historians believe that at the very end of his life he was gearing up for another large-scale offensive against the apparatus.

In less extraordinary times, however, the center used a number of bureaucratic mechanisms against patronage networks, such as rotation of personnel and oversight by Party control bureaus, prosecutors and the secret police. And in the cases of his key lieutenants, Stalin used three additional strategies: playing elites' networks off against one another, often by duplicating assignments and responsibilities; encouraging the appointment of personnel from rival networks in elites' institutional or regional strongholds; and creating and maintaining his own patronage networks to hinder, obstruct and disarm those of his lieutenants (Blauvelt, 2007: 219–23). As Easter has argued (2000: 166), ultimately Stalin himself preferred an arrangement in which personal cliques intrigued against one another for position in his court to an institutionalized system of power allocation based on legally defined roles and rules.

### Patronage and betrayal

But how cohesive were these patronage networks in fact, and how tightly were patrons and clients bound to one another? Could a client be recruited into two or several patronage networks simultaneously or consecutively? How sure could a patron be that the clients he promotes and supports will stay loyal to him in crisis situations? Could a client defect from the network of one patron to that of a rival, and what rewards or penalties could he expect?

As T.H. Rigby (1986) points out, a good patron in the Stalinist system had a similar rationality to that of a mafia boss: he needed both to be obeyed and to secure himself against conspiracy. He, therefore, had to instill fear in his clients but at the same time not make the “obvious mistake of so abusing his power as to drive his entourage to collective desperation.” It was in the interests of patrons to make sure that he knew the strengths and weaknesses of his clients intimately, and that the loyalty of clients be tested over many years and many interactions. The clients, in turn: “need reasonable expectations of [the patron’s] continued favor and protection, or they may decide that the dangers of betraying him are less than the dangers of continued loyal service” (Rigby, 1986: 231).

Robert Conquest (1961) argued that a Soviet client would seek “to secure himself (at least in many cases) by a system of reinsurances and ambiguity of position,” and “allegiances and alliances change. This sort of *Realpolitik* applies even more to the secondary figures, most of whom are practically compelled to live in a world of complicated reinsurances” (Conquest, 1961: 72). And Oleg Khlevnyuk (in press) has outlined several “ideal types” of patron–client relationships, according to one of which the “secretary-dictator” type, domineering and tyrannical regional Party secretaries were known to sell out their subordinates at the first opportunity in order to deflect blame for mistakes or deficiencies away from themselves—a strategy that often backfired on them.

But Fairbanks (1983) has speculated, based on his study of clientalism in Georgia in the late Stalin period, that while shifting of alliances are fairly common in most other modern clientelist systems, patronage networks in the Soviet Union tended to be unusually stable, and clients showed a high degree of functional loyalty to their patrons. “In a system where clientage was so important,” he writes, “informal rules may have grown up discouraging disloyalty to patrons.” Indeed, Fairbanks argues that there was a higher degree of stability and loyalty in Stalinist patronage networks than in most other states in which patron–client arrangements are prominent. He attributes this to the scarcity of high offices, which is one of the main resources that patrons in higher politics in the Soviet system had to offer. Since appointment possibilities were limited, offering a position as a lure to a client of a rival patron would mean denying that position to or demoting one’s own client: “a patron would only rarely have the motive to reward a change of sides at the expense of his own clients.” This preserves the stability of patronage networks, as “clients would only rarely change sides in the hope of such a reward.” What is more, a patron would be reluctant to be seen to reward a defector from another network because of the dangerous precedent that this would set for his own network (Fairbanks, 1983: 365–6).



This paper will attempt to test these assumptions by looking at one of the most famous clashes of patronage networks in Soviet history: the post-Stalin succession. This confrontation pitted the patronage networks of Stalin's three most powerful lieutenants—Beria, Malenkov and Khrushchev—against one another in a desperate struggle for dominance, and ultimately turned on the betrayal of several key Beria clients.

### Patronage networks in the late Stalin period

Lavrenty Pavlovich Beria was one of the unquestioned masters of the intricacies of Stalinist politics, and arguably one of the most effective organizers and implementers of the 20th century. Stalin appointed Beria, first as Secretary of the Georgian Party organization in 1931 and then as a head of the Transcaucasian Federal Union Republic in 1932, as an outsider to the existing political clans in the region. Beria began to build himself a power base by ingratiating himself with Grigorii Konstantinovich “Sergo” Ordzhonikidze and taking advantage of Ordzhonikidze's powerful Caucasian “*khvost*” (Easter, 2000: 137; Knight, 1993: 19). Throughout the 1930s, Beria built up his own network of appointments throughout the Caucasus, displacing the existing networks with the help of the various purges of that decade, culminating with the violent physical purge of 1936–1938. Beria was also able to develop a close relationship with Stalin while the latter spent his holidays in the Black Sea resorts and to demonstrate his loyalty and effectiveness. This, in due course, resulted in Beria's transfer to Moscow in 1938 as a head of the NKVD.

Beria became the quintessential patron throughout the Stalin period and adroitly recruited and maintained a vast client network throughout the South Caucasus and in the secret police. The basis of this network was his associates from his days in the Caucasus, but although there were many ethnic Georgians (and especially Mingrelians), he was able to inspire loyalty from clients of a variety of ethnic groups, including Armenians, Azeris, Abkhazians and Jews, as well as Russians and Ukrainians. Beria's network carried out the most brutal and organizationally complex tasks of the Stalin period, such as the deportations of the “enemy peoples,” the mass executions of Polish officers, and the transfer of factories and production equipment from European Russia to behind the Urals in the first months of the Second World War.

Perhaps fearful of the strength of Beria's network in the NKVD, in 1945 Stalin divided the functions of the secret police into two agencies, the Ministry of State Security (MGB) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), and reassigned Beria to oversee heavy industry and the project to develop the atomic bomb, the so-called “Special Committee.” As Vladimir Naumov points out, “Stalin removed Beria from the Lubyanka, but he used him as a scarecrow. Beria understood that harshness drew Stalin's approval. The leader did not have a high opinion of his subordinates, and thought that the Party comrades might display spinelessness. All except Beria” (Mlechin, 2002: 370).

Beria was an acknowledged master at recruiting loyal and effective clients, and in maintaining their devotion. In the words of one of his more notorious clients, Pavel Sudoplatov:

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 (cited in Solokov, 2003: 217).

But Beria was not the only successful patronage operator in the Stalin period. Andrei A. Zhdanov built up a formidable client network in the Leningrad city organization over the course of 14 years until his death in 1948, after which his network was dismantled in the so-called “Leningrad Affair” in 1948–1949. Georgii M. Malenkov was also able to use his positions as Secretary of the Central Committee and as head of the Cadres Administration (*Upravleniye kadrov*) of the Central Committee to build up a powerful patronage network.

Another great cultivator of patronage in the late Stalin era was Nikita S. Khrushchev. Despite actively cultivating an image of himself as a harmless and good-natured provincial, Khrushchev had, like Beria, built up a multi-dimensional patronage network with both geographical and institutional bases: in the Ukraine, in the military and in the Moscow city Party organization.

In Stalin’s last years, Beria, Malenkov and Khrushchev maintained an outward show of comradeship and kept in close proximity to one another. At Stalin’s famous late-night feasts, for example, they often shared rides to and from the Kremlin, while inwardly Stalin encouraged an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust among them.

Starting in 1952, Stalin in part used surreptitious support from Malenkov and Khrushchev to move against Beria’s network. Using the rival network of Akakii I. Mgeladze in Georgia, as well as Nikolai M. Rukhadze, the General Prosecutor in Georgia and a defector from Beria’s network, Stalin launched the so-called “Mingrelian Affair” that was directed against supposed Mingrelian nationalism in Georgia and that led to the arrest and removal of many of Beria’s clients (Aslanishvili, 2005). And although part of a larger campaign, about the ultimate aims of which we can only speculate, the so-called “Doctor’s Plot” and the ensuing anti-Semitic campaign that followed, has also been seen as directed against Beria, and particularly against his network in the security organs. Stalin built up and supported MGB head Semen D. Ignat’iev, who undertook a sweeping purge of Beria’s appointees in the MVD and MGB, replacing them with cadres with Party background (Mlechin, 2002: 349–51).

### **Beria’s gambit and Khrushchev’s conspiracy**

At the 19th Party Congress in November 1952 Stalin made a more general move that has been seen as directed against all of his senior lieutenants. In dissolving the



Politburo and creating an expanded Presidium of the Central Committee, Stalin was perhaps preparing the ground to install a new generation of leaders made up primarily of his own clients.

Therefore Beria, Malenkov and Khrushchev were probably more relieved than distraught when Stalin finally died on March 5, 1953. Beria made the first grab for power, using an alliance with Malenkov. In the March 6 power arrangement, Beria was able to have the MGB and MVD reunited and he himself named as head of the joint organ. With Beria's support, Malenkov was named as both General Secretary of the Party and Chairman of the Council of Ministers, that is, as head of both the Party and the government. Malenkov relinquished the former post at the second iteration of power dealing on March 14, although it was clear that the main goal of the Beria–Malenkov alliance was to place the locus of power firmly in the government institutions, where the patronage networks of both men were strongest, and to marginalize the role of the Party, where Khrushchev's network was stronger (Conquest, 1961: 211–3). Khrushchev was named as Party Secretary, although he was forced to give up his post as Chairman of the Moscow city Party committee.

From the middle of March, Beria made a series of aggressive moves to strengthen the position of the MVD and most importantly to strengthen his patronage network. By 1953 Beria had not had direct control of the security organs for several years, and the majority of his clients had been removed or arrested during the directorships of Viktor S. Abakumov and Ignat'iev. Beria's first moves, therefore, were to declare both the "Doctor's Plot" and the "Mingrelian Affair" to be hoaxes, and to amnesty his fallen clients and appoint them to leadership positions in the MVD, while at the same time purging appointments of the predecessors. The unraveling of the "Mingrelian Affair" also allowed Beria to solidify his network in Georgia and the Caucasus. He then undertook a number of other bold policies that are also seen as attempts to bolster his patronage network and to undermine the networks of his rivals: appealing to nationalist sentiment within the apparatus in the union republics by criticizing Russification policies, particularly in Western Ukraine, Belarus and the Baltics; declaring amnesty for certain categories of prisoners in the GULAG; proposing fundamental changes in the role of the Party and the relationship between the Party and the government; proposing to fundamentally revise the approach toward commerce and the market within the Soviet Union; and proposing liberalization in Eastern Europe and unification of Germany.

Khrushchev had apparently decided early on that his only option for survival would be to undermine Beria's grab for power and neutralize him and his network. In a well-recounted series of events, Khrushchev, in a conspiratorial manner, won the support of the key members of the Presidium one by one and planned his move against Beria (Knight, 1993: 195–200; Medvedev, 2006: 90–3).

One key to Khrushchev's plan was to wrest the support of Malenkov away from Beria. Malenkov was essential to Beria for three reasons: Malenkov had a much more extensive network throughout the government apparatus and the Council of Ministers that would be essential to hold power since Beria's main power bases were in the MVD and in Georgia; Malenkov had authority as Stalin's apparent

successor, while Beria's reputation was too closely linked to the security organs; and most importantly, Malenkov was crucial to Beria's plans as a malleable figurehead leader, since Beria well understood that another Georgian would never be able to rule after Stalin.

Beria and Malenkov were inseparable in the months following Stalin's death, and each gave the other vital support. Khrushchev's chances of turning Malenkov against Beria were helped by several apparent mistakes that the latter made in his haste, such as removing the First Secretary of the Party in Ukraine and threatening to do the same in other republics, and also by the radical nature of the reforms Beria was proposing. Some authors consider the unrest in Germany in June 1953 to be the turning point that forced Malenkov to betray his Georgian ally and turn to Khrushchev's camp.

### **Inside men: Kruglov and Serov**

The actual coup against Beria on 26 June 1953 and the steps that Khrushchev and his Presidium allies used to arrest Beria in the Kremlin are also well recounted in the historical literature (Knight, 1993: 194–200; Nekrasov, 1991: 262–96; Sul'ianov, 2005: 489–525). The arrest was a very risky and complex undertaking, given that Beria and his network controlled the secret police surveillance, the Kremlin Guard, and the Interior Ministry troops stationed in Moscow.

Two of Beria's right-hand men, his two First Deputy Ministers of Internal Affairs, Sergei Kruglov and Ivan Serov, played key roles in Beria's arrest and downfall.

Both Kruglov and Serov were ethnic Russians from poor rural families, Kruglov from a worker family in Tver' oblast' and Serov from a peasant family in Vologda, and both worked their way up through the Komsomol and the Red Army. After the removal of N.I. Yezhov as Commissar of State Security in November 1938, Beria unleashed a major purge of Yezhov's clients. A great many vacancies appeared in the NKVD, and Beria faced a shortage of qualified personnel who were not associated with the former Commissar. He turned therefore to younger cadres from the Party and Komsomol organs, and also to fresh graduates of universities and military academies. Both Kruglov and Serov fell into this flow, and were very quickly appointed to high positions within the Commissariat (Petrov, 2005: 17–8).

After leaving the Red Army in 1930, and despite having a minimal secondary education (and having worked for a time as a shepherd), Kruglov demonstrated himself to be a bright self-starter, and attended the Moscow Industrial Institute from 1930 to 1937, and the Institute of Red Professors in 1937–1938. Kruglov worked for several months in 1938 in the Central Committee apparatus in Moscow, and then was recruited into the NKVD in December of that year. Within two months he was appointed as Deputy Commissar and Head of the powerful Division of Cadres of the USSR NKVD (Toptygin, 2005: 337).

Serov was appointed upon graduating from the Frunze Academy in 1939 to the central apparatus of the NKVD as Deputy Director of the Worker-Peasant Police, *militsiya* (Serov, 1939). Within a month, Beria promoted Serov to Director of the national *militsiya*. Five months later he was promoted to simultaneous appointments as

Director of the 2nd Division (or “Secret-Political” Division) of the Main Directorate for State Security (GUGB) and the Deputy Director of the GUGB NKVD itself, a post that had previously been held by one of Beria’s closest clients, Bogdan Kobulov. In the words of Nikita Petrov, Serov’s rapid advancement to such lofty and responsible posts can be explained by only one factor: Beria liked him and took him to heart (“*prishelsia [Berii] po dushe*”) (Petrov, 2005: 21).

Both Kruglov and Serov thus owed their rapid advancement directly to Beria’s patronage, and in turn they each played important roles in Beria’s network. After the division of the NKVD in 1941 Kruglov became Beria’s first deputy, and then in 1943–1945 he served as First Deputy Commissar of the NKVD. When Beria was reassigned to create the “Special Commission” to develop the Soviet nuclear program in 1946, he had Kruglov named as Commissar (soon changed to Minister) of Internal Affairs as a means of maintaining his hold on that agency despite his transfer. Kruglov became Beria’s link to the MVD, and played a key role in organizing the GULAG labor force necessary for the atomic bomb project. In August 1949 Kruglov was awarded the Order of Lenin after the successful test of the Soviet nuclear bomb, and he apparently remained in daily contact with Beria throughout the period (Toptygin, 2005: 339).

Serov played a similar function in the NKGB during its brief period of separation from the MVD in early 1941, and then he served from July 1941 on as First Deputy to Beria as Commissar of Internal Affairs, and the two remained in close contact up until December 1945 when Beria left the NKVD. In March of 1944 both Kruglov and Serov (along with Beria and Bogdan Z. Kobulov) were awarded the Order of Suvorov 1st Degree for their work in the deportations of the Chechens, Ingush and Balkarians, and Kruglov and Kobulov were awarded the Order of the Red Star for the deportations of the Crimean Tatars and Greeks (Petrov and Skorkin, 1999: 381). Beria sent Serov’s reports on the conduct of the deportation operations directly on to Stalin (Petrov, 2005: 34–5).

Both men, however, had exposure during their careers to rival patrons. Kruglov became acquainted with Malenkov while both worked in the apparatus of the Central Committee in 1938. Kruglov was Malenkov’s subordinate in the Department of Directing Party Organs, and according to Nikita Petrov, it was Malenkov who had proposed Kruglov for a leadership position in the NKVD (Petrov, 2005: 141).

Beria sent Serov to Ukraine as Commissar of the Ukrainian NKVD in September 1939 to replace another important client, Amayak Z. Kobulov, who had just been sent to Berlin as the NKVD station chief (*rezident*). Another of Beria’s key clients, his First Deputy Vsevolod N. Merkulov, was also sent to Ukraine at this time to oversee the Sovietization policies in the areas of Poland and western Ukraine that had just been acquired under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and Serov and Merkulov worked closely together. The two became involved in several bureaucratic clashes with the then First Secretary of the Ukrainian Party organization, Nikita Khrushchev. In their first encounters, Serov was apparently appalled by Khrushchev’s crude manner. He sent a report to Beria in which he complained about Khrushchev screaming profanity at him in a hysterical voice, and described Khrushchev as “arrogant” and craving flattery. “I will take all measures,” Serov wrote, “to

establish business-like relations in work, but I am not able to be like some of those in his entourage” (Khrushchev, 1999: 764–6). Despite this early animosity, however, it seems that Serov and Khrushchev were indeed able to get to know one another and establish a working relationship over time.

Both Kruglov and Serov, as Minister and First Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs, respectively, became involved in a protracted series of struggles over prerogatives and responsibilities from 1948 to 1951 with Abakumov, the head of the rival Ministry of State Security. Serov had worked in occupied Germany in the years following the Second World War, and he and several of his subordinates became involved in the murky business of sending “trophy” goods back to the Soviet Union, which made him particularly vulnerable to attacks from Abakumov. Both Serov and Kruglov repeatedly appealed for assistance to Beria, and also on a number of occasions directly to Stalin (Petrov, 2005: 79–99; Mlechin, 2002: 439–41).

When Beria took over the reins of the reunited MVD in March of 1953, he appointed Kruglov and Serov to key positions as two of his three First Deputy Ministers (the third was his long time client Bogdan Kobulov<sup>1</sup>). Kruglov was assigned to head the group examining cases of former personnel who were arrested during the chairmanship of Ignat’iev, and Serov was responsible for transport counterintelligence, the police, the fire department, the prison administration, and most importantly, the Interior Ministry troops (*Voiska vnutrennei okhrany Respubliki*, or *VOKhR*) (Petrov, 2005: 140; Yakovlev, 2000: 112–3).

Thus when Khrushchev and Malenkov launched their daring coup against Beria on June 26, 1953, Kruglov and Serov were in key positions to betray Beria. Co-opting them into the plot was crucial for its success. On the eve of his arrest, Beria had just returned from a trip to check on the situation in East Germany, and on his arrival Serov and Kruglov presented him with reports that assured him that all was calm in Moscow (Toptygin, 2005: 393; Nekrasov, 1991: 254). Kruglov in particular would have received all of the wiretap intelligence on the elite, both he and Serov were most likely tasked with keeping any suspicious information from Beria (Toptygin, 2005: 394; Taubman, 2003: 255; Sokolov, 2003: 244). Serov was crucial in keeping MVD troops loyal to Beria in the dark about the operation, and in subduing the threat from the Kremlin guard (Medvedev, 2006: 94; Nekrasov, 1991: 282; Sukhomlinov, 2003: 16–7). According to G. Zhukov’s account, Serov played a central role in the actual detention of Beria and in smuggling him out of the Kremlin in the back of a staff car (Nekrasov, 1991: 282–3).

Immediately following Beria’s arrest Kruglov was confirmed as Beria’s replacement as Minister of Internal Affairs, and Serov was appointed as Kruglov’s First Deputy. Both men then coordinated the campaign to arrest and remove Beria’s remaining clients in the government and in the security organs. Both also played a role in persecuting Beria’s immediate family, sending reports on surveillance of them from Tbilisi, and sending the request that they be deported from their residences and native cities (Naumov and Sigachev: 1999: 392–4). They also helped to restrain

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<sup>1</sup> Both Kabulovs, Amayak and Bogdan, were brothers.



opposition to Beria's arrest among the staff officers in the MVD in the aftermath of the coup, since Beria had significant popularity there (Knight, 1993: 203).

### Motivations and consequences

Since Khrushchev knew and apparently trusted Serov,<sup>2</sup> and Malenkov knew Kruglov, it is not surprising that they would attempt to co-opt the two into their coup plot, given their key positions in the MVD and their proximity to Beria. It seems that both were made aware of the magnitude of the plot, and made the decision to switch to Khrushchev and Malenkov's side without much hesitation.

Donald Rayfield (2005) has suggested recently that Kruglov and Serov may have been disgruntled that Beria promoted so many people from the Caucasus region to high positions at the expense of ethnic Russians. It is difficult to know if they indeed had such sentiments. The only person who might be considered senior to Kruglov and Serov in Beria's entourage at the time was the other First Deputy Minister of the MVD, the Armenian Bogdan Z. Kobulov. One of the striking things about Beria's network (outside of Georgia, in any case) is that he recruited loyal clients from across ethnic lines: besides Georgians like S.A. Goglidze and V.G. Dekanozov, there were Russians like V.N. Merkulov and L.E. Vlodziimirskii, Ukrainians like P.Ia.Meshik, and Jews like S.R. Milshtein and L.F. Raikhman.

In his testimony at the July Plenum that was dedicated to hearing evidence against Beria, Kruglov did make a point of emphasizing that during Beria's reign he and Serov were kept in the dark about major policy changes in the MVD, and that everything was being done by Beria and Kobulov. He claimed that they were excluded from affairs of the investigative branch (the *sledstvennaia chast' po osobo vazhnym delam*), and that they were shunted off from dealing with police and fire department issues. He seemed especially discontented with the role of Jews in Beria's intelligence apparatus, referring to Etingon several times as "Etingof".<sup>3</sup>

Kruglov may also have been dissatisfied with the changes and reforms that Beria was introducing into the foreign intelligence service, such as reappointing people who had previously been disgraced (like Etingon and Sudoplatov), and recalling approximately two hundred *rezidenty* and intelligence officers from overseas posts (Toptygin, 2005: 422).

Serov might also have had ideological differences with the direction that Beria's changes were taking. Beria had tasked Serov with cleaning out the Moscow and Leningrad *militsiia*, and Serov spent a month during May and June 1953 in Leningrad, keeping him out of loop with regard to many of the swift changes that Beria was introducing. Upon returning to Moscow in the third week of June, Serov apparently

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<sup>2</sup> In his memoirs, Khrushchev wrote the following about Serov: "I didn't know Kruglov well, but I knew Serov better, and I trusted Serov. I thought then and I think now that Serov is a very honest person in his Party loyalty (*v svoei partiinosti*). And if there was something in his past, as with all, shall we say, Checkists, then he was also a victim of the general policy that Stalin carried out" (Khrushchev, 1999: 104).

<sup>3</sup> Although this might have been the error of the transcriber: see Naumov and Sigachev, 1999: 153–5.



flew into a rage during a meeting devoted to Beria's proposals to improve conditions for internal exiles and deported peoples, declaring that "[d]uring the war and under the most difficult conditions we fulfilled the decision of the Party and the government, we resettled these people, and now some Alidin [the speaker] wants to blacken our work and throw it out of the window. I object to these proposals." Kruglov, who was chairing the meeting, knew that the proposals had come straight from Beria and reined Serov in (Petrov, 2005: 141).

In the immediate term after Beria's removal, both Kruglov and Serov profited from their betrayal. When the security apparatus was divided again into the MVD and the MGB, Kruglov remained as head of the MVD, and Serov was named head of the MGB, and later the first Chairman of the KGB.

Kruglov's fortunes did not last long, however. It seems that Khrushchev had misgivings about him from the start. When Beria was first arrested, Khrushchev said in his memoirs that the initial plan was to hand Beria over to Serov and his people in the MVD. This plan was apparently cancelled because of distrust of Kruglov. According to Roy Medvedev, Khrushchev rehabilitated his old client A.V. Snegov and had him appointed to the Board (*коллегия*) of the MVD and deputy head of the Political Department of the GULAG specifically in order to have a trusted hand in the MVD to keep an eye on Kruglov (2006: 106).

Possibly because of this distrust, or possibly simply because he had now come to be seen as a client of Malenkov rather than of Khrushchev, Kruglov did not survive the spirit of the Twentieth Party Congress: in January 1956 he was dismissed from his position, and was eventually stripped of his medals and his party membership as one of those held accountable for abuses during the deportation of the "enemy peoples" during the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> He died in obscurity, falling under a train in 1977 (Petrov and Skorkin, 1999: 251–2).

As an apparently trusted client of Khrushchev, Serov on the other hand fared rather better. Despite his past and his involvement with many of the NKVD's crimes of the Stalin era and his shady dealings in occupied Germany, he became the first Chairman of the KGB in 1954. He remained in that position and close to Khrushchev until 1958, when he was transferred to the directorship of Soviet military intelligence, the GRU. Along with Georgii Zhukov, Serov played a leading role in bringing Khrushchev's regional Party Secretary clients to Moscow for a sitting of the Central Committee in order to undermine the coup attempt of the Presidium members in the so-called "Anti-Party" affair in June 1957. Serov only lost favor over the Oleg Penkovsky espionage scandal in 1963, although the year before, by the decision of the Presidium of the Central Committee, he was among those stripped of medals awarded for the deportations of the 1940s.

It is interesting also to compare Serov's case with that of another Beria client, Vsevolod Merkulov. Although a long-time client of Beria, Merkulov had served in the Ministry of State Control from 1946 and had not been involved in the security

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<sup>4</sup> Specifically, for the destruction of an *aul* in the Checheno-Ingushetian ASSR by the NKVD in 1944 (Medvedev, 2006: 166–7).

services or with Beria's activities since that time. He was not among the clients whom Beria named to ministerial posts during his brief bid for power in the Spring of 1953, although Beria did ask for Merkulov's assistance in editing his speech for Stalin's funeral, and Merkulov was not among those initially detained after Beria's arrest. As with Serov, Khrushchev had past interaction with Merkulov, and apparently liked him: "I'll admit that I had great respect for Merkulov, and considered him a loyal Party person (*partiinyi chelovek*). He was, unquestionably, a cultured person, and overall I liked him" (Nekrasov, 1991: 280).

On 11 July 1953 Merkulov sought an audience with Khrushchev to offer his devotion, and Khrushchev promised him that the leadership was convinced of his innocence with regard to Beria's crimes, and that "he should have nothing to worry about and can calmly resume his work in the tasks the Party has assigned to him" (Tumshis, 2004: 290–1). Within several weeks, however, Merkulov was summoned for questioning by the USSR General Prosecutor. He was arrested two months later, for crimes that were no more serious than those that Serov might have been accused of, and was shot together with Beria and his other main lieutenants on 18 December 1953.

Clearly, Khrushchev was not interested in appearing to give assistance to any more of the people closely associated with Beria or in taking on any new clients from among Beria's old associates.

### **Betrayal and network stability**

It is tempting, as some authors do, to attribute Kruglov's and Serov's betrayal of Beria to the argument that they were not true Beria clients to begin with (Medvedev, 2006: 93; Sul'ianov, 2005: 494). But as we have seen, this is demonstrably false: although they had interactions with other leading figures, both Kruglov and Serov owned their positions and advancement to Beria and had been deeply involved in the actions that Beria's network carried out during the Stalin years. What is more, at the time of Beria's arrest they were among his highest ranking and closest subordinates, and were associated with him among the elite. They were clearly not simultaneously part of Malenkov or Khrushchev's networks as well as Beria's.

Ultimately, the issue of the betrayal of Kruglov and Serov ties into some of the larger questions about how as effective an operator as Beria allowed himself to become deceived and undermined. Either Beria trusted Kruglov and Serov as reliable clients (or reliable enough, given the time and staffing constraints that he was under) and did not suspect that Khrushchev and Malenkov would be cunning enough to co-opt them, or he knew that they both had associations with his rivals and wanted to keep them close to himself (and perhaps in so doing to reassure Khrushchev and Malenkov). In either case, Beria clearly did not see the danger that they represented, just as it seems that he underestimated the astuteness and ability of his main rivals.

For Khrushchev and Malenkov, co-opting such high-profile figures as two of Beria's First Deputy Ministers could not have been without risk for the precedent that it would have set of betrayal of a powerful patron by highly placed clients. Yet it would seem that for them the potential payoff was worth the risk. Aside from the

obvious advantages of having inside men during the complex operation to arrest Beria, Malenkov would have the advantage of his new client Kruglov named as head of the security organs, and Khrushchev would have his man Serov in place to keep an eye on Kruglov. What is more, by preserving these two, a signal must have been sent to lower level cadres in the security organs that the witch-hunts would cease with the higher-level stratum of Beria's clients, and association with Beria and his policies in the past might not be sufficient grounds for removal. And indeed, although the purge of Beria's clients was significant, the lower levels of Beria's network, especially in the security service, were left in place.

The issue of scarcity of high offices, and the argument that patrons might be reluctant to encourage betrayal by a rival's clients because rewarding turncoats would mean demoting or denying positions to one's own clients, does not seem to have acted as a block in the case of Kruglov and Serov. Part of the explanation for this might have been the fact that Khrushchev's main client base, and the constituency to which he most hoped to appeal, was in the central and regional Party apparatus (Rigby, 1990: 156–61). This clientele might have been just as happy to leave even the highest security services appointments to experienced professionals. Further, as Khlevnyuk (in press) has shown, Party secretaries and other functionaries seem to have had their own conception of "Party etiquette" that governed behavior to a certain degree among Party officials. They might not have seen machinations among security service personnel as a precedent for themselves. Finally, it is possible that in this period of transition there simply was not as big a deficit in high offices to be filled that there might have been in other periods.

Khrushchev clearly saw benefit from the co-optation and continued patronage of Serov. That usefulness continued for a number of years, and Khrushchev does not seem to have been overly concerned with the precedent of rewarding betrayal. It also seems, though, that Khrushchev was not eager for the precedent to become more widespread. Although he tolerated Kruglov for some time, Khrushchev never trusted him, and was perfectly willing to leave him to his fate as Malenkov's fortunes declined.

Thus, in conclusion, it would seem that the case of Kruglov and Serov represented an exception to the more usual tendency in network stability in Soviet patron–client relations. In extraordinary circumstances, betrayal became a viable strategy for Kruglov and Serov, as well as for their new patrons, Malenkov and Khrushchev, at least in the short term. In the chaotic situation following Stalin's death, both clients and patrons were willing to take the risks of betrayal (and of rewarding betrayal) for tactical advantage as the new power balances began to emerge. From Khrushchev's behavior towards Kruglov and Serov in the longer term, however, we see that Khrushchev indeed attempted to ensure that such behavior would remain an exception, and that the stability of the ethos of Soviet patronage relations should remain stable.

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