

Examination of the Kirov Assassination

By Brian J. Lalor

During the afternoon hours of Saturday December 1st, 1934, Sergey Mironovich Kirov, head of the Leningrad Communist Party, entered the Smolnyi. On the way to his third floor office was shot in the back of the neck by a Nagan revolver. He died quickly as his assassin, Leonid Nikolayev, fell to the ground nearby. The mystery surrounding the assassination of Kirov continues to be debated by many scholars to this day. Many of the details surrounding the murder were changed or eliminated by the NKVD, the Soviet secret police, for political reasons.

Immediately following the death of Kirov, Josef Stalin unleashed one of the greatest political purges in history. The show trials organized by the Communist Party implicated thousands of political opponents in the conspiracy to kill Sergey Kirov. This information, coupled with the fact that Stalin may have seen Kirov as a political rival, as well as the strange circumstances surrounding the assassination, has led many to assert that Stalin played a role in the murder. Politically Stalin did benefit from the demise of Sergey Kirov, but that alone is not enough evidence to prove his guilt. The truth surrounding the Kirov assassination may never be known, but the evidence supporting and refuting each theory must be analyzed before any conclusions can be made. The evidence presented will show that the simplest explanation is by far the most likely. The explanation presented is that a poor, desperate, and unstable man, Leonid Nikolaev, acting alone, took it upon himself to strike a blow at the bureaucracy he felt was destroying his ability to exist.

Sergey Kirov was born March 27th, 1886, in the small Russian town of Urzhum. At the age of eighteen he joined the Communist party and began his journey to becoming one of the most powerful men in Soviet society.¹ After serving loyally during the Russian Revolution and the unstable aftermath, Kirov was appointed secretary of the Leningrad Territorial Committee of the Communist Party.² Kirov had a very close relationship with Josef Stalin, two days after his death *The Times* reported that “M. Kirov had the reputation of being M. Stalin’s firmest and most unwavering associate.”³ Many scholars argue that by the time of the Seventeenth Congress of the Communist party Kirov and Stalin had split ideologically on many issues. Robert Conquest

¹ "Kirov, Sergey Mironovich." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2006. Encyclopædia Britannica Premium Service. 6 Feb. 2006 <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?tocId=9045633>>.

² Unknown. "A Soviet Leader Shot Dead." *The Times of London*. 3 Dec. 1934: 13.

³ Unknown. "A Soviet Leader Shot Dead." *The Times of London*. 3 Dec. 1934: 13.

argues that Kirov resisted Stalin's killing of political opponents and was a moderate that many in the party saw as a potential replacement for Stalin.⁴ This theory is supported by the fact that during the February elections of 1934, close to three hundred members of the Communist Congress voted against Stalin, while only three sided against Kirov.⁵ While at first convincing, the argument that Stalin feared losing power can be refuted by many of Kirov's actions.

The notion that the Seventeenth Congress drove a wedge between Stalin and Kirov is extremely overstated. Stalin and Kirov were not ideologically identical, but during the Seventeenth Congress Kirov made his loyalties well known. In consecutive speeches Kirov and Stalin both laid out plans to bring dissident leaders to the Stalinist view of Soviet society by turning attention to political indoctrination and reeducation.⁶ The argument that Kirov was a moderate and soft on the opposition can also be contested by more of his words at the Seventeenth Congress. Historian Arch Getty notes that "Kirov ridiculed members of the opposition, questioning their 'humanity' and the sincerity of their recantations."⁷ It should also be noted that when approached by party leaders dissatisfied with Stalin about the possibility of becoming General Secretary, Stalin's position, Kirov firmly refused the proposal.⁸

The most damning, as well as circumstantial, pieces of evidence used to implicate Stalin in the assassination of Kirov are the "Great Purges", carried out on Soviet citizens in the years following the murder. Stalin quickly and ruthlessly ordered the capture, trials, and executions of political opponents. On December 4th, 1934, *The Times* reported, "Thirty-nine people in Leningrad and twenty-two in Moscow were arrested as class enemies...Obviously Moscow's reply to the shooting of Kirov on Saturday."⁹ Two weeks later a new explanation for who was responsible was offered by both the Communist leadership in Moscow and Leningrad. *The Times* again reported on Soviet affairs printing,

Kirov was murdered by enemies within the Communist Party... This latest official version of the murder does not tally with the earlier version and the consequent executions of seventy-five persons in Leningrad, Moscow, and Minsk as class enemies sent from abroad.¹⁰

⁴ Conquest, Robert. Stalin and the Kirov Murder. New York: Oxford Press, 1989. p. 23.

⁵ Conquest, at p. 29.

⁶ Getty, J. Arch. Origins of the Great Purges. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985. p. 23.

⁷ Getty, at p. 93.

⁸ Conquest, at p. 28.

⁹ Unknown. The Times of London. 4 Dec. 1934: 13.

¹⁰ Unknown. New Explanation by Soviet. The Times of London. 18 Dec. 1934: 13.

The dissidents, who less than a year before had been allowed back into the party, were captured and tried as members of an anti-Soviet terrorist group called the Moscow Center. Those found guilty included Stalin enemies Zinoviev and Kamenev, as well as seventeen of their allies.¹¹ The purges eventually would claim the lives of countless Soviet citizens.

The final evidence used in the argument that Stalin was related to the murder deals with the events and circumstances directly associated with the assassination. The events at the Smolnyi on December 1st, as well as the individuals involved, must be analyzed to acquire any level of comprehension.

By all accounts Sergey Kirov spent the majority of Saturday, December 1st, 1934, at home preparing a speech to announce the end of bread rationing in Leningrad. Around four o'clock in the afternoon, Kirov called his driver to take him to the Smolnyi. At approximately 4:30 Kirov arrived and was met by four plain clothed NKVD guards, as well as his personal bodyguard Borisov.¹² Borisov is described as "an elderly man, physically weak, not talkative, and a modest person."¹³ This seems like an odd match for Kirov, who was an outgoing forty-eight year old in good health. Aleksandrov, one of the guards on duty that day, later explained that it was in fact a fine match because Kirov did not like guards.¹⁴

After entering the building, Kirov made his way to the third floor, stopping to chat with lower level party members on the way. The seemingly dubious fact that none of the guards assigned to the third floor were at their posts upon Kirov's arrival is another essential contention for those supporting a Stalin led conspiracy.¹⁵

According to the testimony given by Leonid Nikolaev, after the assassination, Kirov proceeded down the corridor past the lavatory where Nikolaev was hiding. Nikolaev turned toward the wall, so as not to be noticed, and then followed Kirov around a corner. Once around the corner, Nikolaev shot Kirov in the back of the neck with a Nagan revolver.¹⁶ It was at this moment when much of the controversy and mystery originate. What is known is that a second shot was fired and embedded in the ceiling. Two of the theories claim that this shot was intended for the brain of Nikolaev, while the third involves a conspirator lurking behind the scenes. One report postulates that an electrician, S.A. Platych, threw a screwdriver hitting Nikolaev in the head and knocking the pistol off course, while Nikolaev fainted. The second is that the

¹¹ Knight, Amy. Who Killed Kirov?. New York: Hill and Wang, 1999. p. 14.

¹² Knight, at p. 189.

¹³ Knight, at p. 189.

¹⁴ Knight, at p. 189.

¹⁵ Conquest & Knight.

¹⁶ Knight, at p. 190.

electrician was not in the hallway, but arrived as the assassin fainted while trying to commit suicide. The last states that someone hit Nikolaev in the head and then fled the scene, leaving the gun lying next to Nikolaev's body.¹⁷ Whether or not any of these accounts are the truth cannot be known given the evidence still in existence.

Borisov was the first person at the scene, but soon by many others followed. Nikolaev was left unconscious on the floor, while Kirov was dragged into an office where all attempts at resuscitation failed. Party officials immediately called Moscow to inform Stalin. Stalin, along with the head of the NKVD and other ranking Communist officials, promptly met and then left for Leningrad to conduct the investigation themselves.¹⁸ The fact that Stalin dropped everything to conduct the investigation personally has led many to believe the murder and cover-up were already planned.

The day following the assassination is shrouded in ambiguity, but it is certain that Stalin arrived in Leningrad to conduct the investigation. Nikolaev was interrogated by both the NKVD and Stalin, and his house was searched, diaries containing a plot to murder Kirov.¹⁹ No record exists of the interview between Stalin and Nikolaev, although some reports contend that Nikolaev did not recognize Stalin until an official picture was presented.²⁰ Nikolaev was quickly tried and put to death that night.

On the same day Stalin ordered Borisov, Kirov's bodyguard, to meet with him and be interviewed. The truck Borisov was riding in on his way to meet with Stalin was in an unexplainable accident that left Borisov as the only casualty.²¹ The death of Kirov's bodyguard immediately following his assassination is the final piece of the puzzle for those implicating Stalin. Conspiracy theorists also argue that Nikolaev had been detained by the Leningrad NKVD months before, with the same pistol, and released on orders from above.²²

The evidence implicating Josef Stalin in the assassination of Sergey Kirov seems overwhelming, but it is circumstantial. Leonid Nikolaev was a card carrying member of the Communist party who could have gained access to the Smolnyi and then snuck onto the third floor to wait for Kirov. He was a common man with a license to carry the Nagan revolver and could have very well been released when previously detained for minor infractions. Lastly, the untimely death of Borisov can be attributed to disgust for his inability to protect Kirov, more

¹⁷ Knight, at p. 190.

¹⁸ Knight, at p. 191.

¹⁹ Conquest, at p. 41.

²⁰ Knight, at p. 207.

²¹ Knight, at p. 5.

²² Conquest, at p. 13.

easily than a wide reaching government cover up. If the romance of a political assassination conspiracy is pushed to the side, a much simpler and logical answer begins to unfold.

In December of 1934, Leonid Nikolaev was thirty years old, married, with two small children, unemployed, unhealthy, and a member of Leningrad Soviet society. Nikolaev grew up extremely poor and suffered from rickets as a child, which stunted both his growth and physical capabilities.²³ He joined the Communist Party at the age of sixteen and for the next fourteen years was unable to keep a steady party job. Nikolaev was unable to do most manual labor jobs and unwilling to accept many of the others offered by the party. He wrote letters to both Kirov and Stalin complaining about the, “heartless attitude toward him on the part of the bureaucratic officials.”²⁴ According to Matt Lenoe, his diary presented him as an “isolated loner full of rage against party bureaucracy.”²⁵ These factors alone are weak, at best, in showing motive to assassinate a high level government official.

A *London Times* article regarding the circumstances of Kirov’s death, printed on December 4th, 1934, reported that, “The Soviet press today says he was shot when about to explain to the masses of Leningrad the historic decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party to abandon food rationing.”²⁶ The population of Leningrad already had heard about this announcement and, according to Lesley Rimmel, “many ordinary people, especially urban workers, received the news with panic, despair, and anger, since the new prices seemed prohibitive to them.”²⁷ Rimmel details the extreme dissatisfaction of many Leningrad citizens who felt almost no compassion after the death of Kirov. Finally, two more entries from Nikolaev’s diary give an extraordinary view into the mind of the assassin leading up to the winter of 1934. Leonid wrote that, “The money has run out, we will borrow. Today my supper consisted of two glasses of sour clotted milk.”²⁸ Finally an entry dated in October of 1934, Nikolaev resolves that, “I am now ready for anything and no one can stop me. I am making preparations like Zhelinbov did.”²⁹ The man Nikolaev is referring to, Zhelinbov, was the assassin of Tsar Alexander II in 1881.

²³ Knight, at p. 202

²⁴ Knight, at p. 203.

²⁵ Lenoe, Matt. “Did Stalin Kill Kirov and Does It Matter?.” *Journal of Modern History*. 74 (2002): 352-380

²⁶ Unknown. *The Times of London*. 4 Dec. 1934: 13.

²⁷ Rimmel, Lesley. “Another Kind of Fear: The Kirov Murder and the End of Bread Rationing in Leningrad.” *Slavic Review*. 56 (1997): 481-499.

²⁸ Knight, at p. 203.

²⁹ Knight, at p. 203.

Leonid Nikolaev was a desperate man who felt that his government had failed to show compassion for the very people who made the Communist state run. He endured years of hardship, but remained a loyal servant to the party, and in return both he and his family faced even greater suffering. Nikolaev and the rest of Leningrad knew the announcement to end bread rationing was near. Nikolaev had nothing but contempt for the uncaring party leaders and saw an opportunity to strike a vicious blow at the Soviet elite. There are many unanswered questions regarding the assassination; however, the secrecy of Russia under Communist rule only added to the mystique and mystery of the murder. The death of Kirov enabled Stalin to wipe out his enemies, all under the guise of a terrorist plot. Josef Stalin benefited immensely from the actions of this assassin, but like most political assassinations, the simplest answer is almost always correct. The most logical and likely explanation for the murder of Sergey Kirov is that one man, acting in desperation, made a choice and then carried out his plan.

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