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Boris Bajanov, who was one of Stalin's secretaries when Lenin was still alive, described how Stalin would pace up and down his office smoking, hour after hour. Then, he would stop, pick up the phone and order some functionary to move someone and replace him with someone else. Thus he built his network. Lavrenti Beria was the sort of man he was looking for. First, he was a good administrator: if you told him to do something, that something would be done. Second, he was completely ruthless: he would do anything you told him to do. Third, he was obedient: no questions. Finally, he was loyal or, at least, could convincingly simulate loyalty, which, with a man who never once relaxed his suspicion, was no small ability. He was a good Stalinist and, indeed, was to Stalin what Stalin had been to Lenin.

Amy Knight has searched through the available information, both pre- and post-perestroika, and written what will probably stand as the most complete biography of Beria that there will be for many years. Even so, the story is told from the outside, as it were. We never learn much about the man himself. But, that is how he would have liked it. Like other Soviet leaders, he constantly re-wrote his biography and concealed himself from those around him. When anyone might suddenly become your enemy in the unending power struggle, personal secrecy was an asset.

Knight's book shows clearly the mental flexibility required to be in Stalin's inner circle. She also reminds us of how fundamentally sleazy the whole system was. Everyone appears to have kept front and centre in his mind the necessity to tell the boss exactly what he wanted to hear - there is a good description of Beria berating agents who brought in news of the coming attack in 1941 - and to be ready, at all times, to betray a colleague. It was a truly horrible system.

Beria's career was an illustration of Graeme Gill's thesis that the Stalin system was patrimonial everywhere there were little Stalins with their tails of sycophants and thugs. There were an inordinate number of Georgians (although, by the names, many were Ossetians or Abkhazians and not Kartvelians) in Beria's Cheka and he, to a greater extent than Stalin's other lieutenants, kept his power base in the Caucasus. He never relinquished control of Georgia and the Azerbaijan party boss was one of his creatures. Independent tails were dangerous to Stalin and Beria's tail, no doubt, must have been one of the reasons Stalin turned against him at the end. The "Mingrelian plot" was clearly aimed at Beria, whose links to his native Mingrelia were the strongest of all.

Knight's account makes it clear that Stalin was preparing the ground for purging Beria and his whole tail and that his death saved Beria from a show trial. Of course a show trial was held in the end and it is perhaps fitting that Beria received the last Stalin-style show trial. We still do not know whether the trial was really held with a live defendant. Knight repeats the rumors of Beria's immediate death upon arrest (the reviewer has heard one story with a good pedigree that Marshal Konyev shot him right there and then). Nonetheless, the documents as published describe a Stalin-style trial. Beria was accused

of having been an agent of the Mussavat from the beginning. This, of course was the problem with the show trials: you could never accuse a man of murder they were all murderers. You could never say that he had been loyal but had then changed that might cast questions on Stalin's judgement. So you had to say that he had always been a traitor and devilishly good at dissimulation. And say it so loudly and menacingly, that no one would dare say different.

In her final chapter, Knight speculates about what kind of Soviet ruler Beria might have been and, as she reminds us, he came very close to supreme power. Based on his actions after Stalin's death, he might have better dealt with the national question - there is evidence that he would have allowed more local autonomy - and he might have started de-Stalinizing sooner than Khrushchev did. She argues that he was too competent an administrator and too intelligent not to understand that the Stalin system could not continue as it was. Perhaps - she makes a good argument - but we will never know.

One of her sources are the reports from the US Embassy in Moscow at the time and what stands out in these reports was just how good George Kennan was at reading the tea leaves. Time and time again, a Kennan report accurately weighed the power struggle and accurately forecast events. A very rare skill both then and now.

Altogether, she has written the best book yet possible on the leading "little Stalin" of the Stalin period. The twentieth century has given us many monsters of totalitarian democracy and this book is a necessary addition to that library.

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[The opinions expressed are exclusively his own.]