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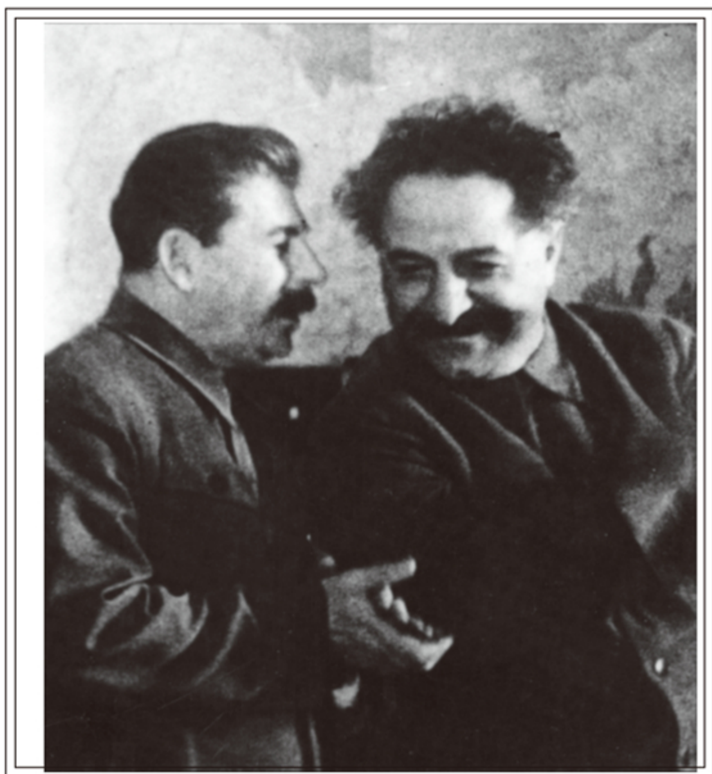

Oleg V. Khlevniuk

Edited with an Introduction by **Donald J. Raleigh**

In Stalin's Shadow

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Editor's Introduction

Until recently, historical studies on the dark years of Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin were hindered by the Kremlin's cloak of secretiveness. The inaccessibility of essential documents compelled investigators to snatch at whatever bits of information became available, including rumors and various other suspect sources, in constructing their narratives. The lack of hard data, however, did not prevent some historians from pleading their cases with passion and conviction. Not surprisingly, the intrusion of the authors' personal biases into their works has been characteristic of much of the writing on the Stalin period.

The opening in the post-Soviet era of some—but not all—of the archives needed for a full-scale reassessment of the Stalin years has led to a historiographical revolution of sorts, as has the fact that Russian historians have been freed from the constraints of Soviet dogma and rhetoric. Excited by the prospect of reinterpreting a pivotal era in their country's history, they have begun to contribute fresh analyses of the 1930s and 1940s. But despite serendipitous discoveries, it appears that the archives might not hold answers to all the burning questions. The imperfect record on some critical issues can nonetheless be put to good use by careful historians extending the parameters of debate, raising new questions, and throwing light on the most obscure chapters of Soviet history. A case in point is Oleg Khlevniuk's absorbing study of Grigorii K. (Sergo) Ordzhonikidze, *In Stalin's Shadow.*

Ordzhonikidze? Although not well known in this country outside academic circles, the name Ordzhonikidze is more than familiar to

Russian readers, thanks to a minor personality cult Soviet officialdom constructed around him. Schools and institutes, streets and highways, towns and farms carried and still carry his name. His ashes remain buried in the Kremlin walls, among the pantheon of fallen revolutionary heroes. Despite the efforts of Soviet historiography to present an "official" interpretation of his career, however, Ordzhonikidze has been the subject of sustained speculation and hearsay ever since his death in rather mysterious circumstances in 1937, a year in which so many other Old Bolsheviks perished at the hands of the secret police.

As one of Stalin's closest associates and most powerful and influential economic managers, Ordzhonikidze, a fellow Georgian, played no small role in Kremlin politics during the years leading up to his death. While keeping Ordzhonikidze as his focal point, Khlevniuk examines the career of Sergo to probe larger questions of Soviet political history. Was Stalin powerful enough to have the Politburo do his bidding, or did top party leaders play a significant role in decision making? Was there opposition to the "party line" within the organization's general membership or the inner sanctums of the Kremlin and, if so, did it ever emerge as a viable alternative to Stalinism? Were there conflicts between Stalin and his closest comrades? If so, how far did they go to oppose him?

Drawing on newly opened files in both the former Communist Party and Soviet government archives, the author builds on the two extant points of view found in the scholarly literature about Ordzhonikidze's role in Kremlin intrigues. Some authors, basing their arguments on memoirs and personal accounts, argue that Ordzhonikidze prepared to challenge Stalin openly and consequently paid with his life. A counter viewpoint is that no one among his contemporaries considered Ordzhonikidze a serious opponent of Stalin's policies, especially that of state terror, and that Sergo took his own life. Weighing both perspectives, Khlevniuk offers an alternative explanation that is more subtle and nuanced. And more convincing.

Khlevniuk's Ordzhonikidze is a tragic figure. A "soft Stalinist" deeply troubled by unfounded accusations of industrial sabotage and no longer able to comprehend and accommodate that which was going on around him, Sergo became defensive and confused. The ensuing crisis consumed him—and resulted in his murder. Or was it suicide? Khlevniuk interrogates the available sources and offers an answer to this

recurrent question. What is so attractive about his compelling argument is that it helps explain how the Stalinist system worked.

Khlevniuk's study can be recommended to readers for several other reasons. His is not only the first published study of the Politburo in the 1930s based on recently declassified materials, but it is also one of the few works available that delves into the vital interlude between Sergei Kirov's murder in 1934, often viewed as the opening salvo of the Stalinist terror, and Ordzhonikidze's demise in 1937. Deftly weaving a tale of suspense and intrigue, Khlevniuk frequently lets the documents speak for themselves. Whenever the sources are silent or difficult to decode, he offers plausible versions of what might have been. Unlike many of his contemporaries who in the current scholarly atmosphere in Russia highlight the moral turpitude and historical guilt of Soviet leaders, Khlevniuk adopts a detached tone in passing judgment on his protagonists.

It is my pleasure to invite readers to enjoy this, the second volume in a series of historical works in translation, *The New Russian History*, whose purpose is to make available to English readers the finest works of the most eminent historians of Russia today. Born in 1959, Oleg Khlevniuk defended his candidate degree in history at the Institute of History of the then-Soviet Academy of Sciences in 1987. His dissertation and early publications treat of Soviet urbanization and the formation of a working class in the 1930s. During the Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev years, Khlevniuk joined the editorial collective of the journal *Kommunist* (Communist), an official organ of the Communist Party. He also gained access to the Communist Party archive in Moscow. Using materials from it and related repositories, he published a second book in Moscow in 1992 entitled *1937–i: Stalin, NKVD i Sovetskoe obshchestvo* (The Year 1937: Stalin, the NKVD, and Soviet Society). Khlevniuk is presently rewriting the book for publication in this series, incorporating newly declassified documents made available since its first publication. He also works as an editor of *Svobodnaia mysl'* (Free Thought), a Moscow public affairs journal that superseded *Kommunist*.

The English-language edition of Khlevniuk's study of Ordzhonikidze and Kremlin politics represents a team effort. David Nordlander good-naturedly took up the task of translating the work, finishing a draft translation and revisions I suggested on the early chapters before he left the country to carry out dissertation research in Moscow and Magadan.

I assumed full responsibility for the project at that time, checking the entire translation against the original and editing it. I was very ably assisted by Kathy S. Transchel, who helped nurture the manuscript through several additional drafts.

It is a pleasure for me as well to thank David R. Shearer for introducing me to Oleg Khlevniuk's work, and Sheila Fitzpatrick and J. Arch Getty, who called this particular volume to my attention. I also wish to acknowledge the assistance of Susan Beam Eggers, who prepared the index. Finally, I wish to express my thanks to Patricia A. Kolb and her staff at M. E. Sharpe Inc., Publisher, for their unflagging support of this monograph series and for their sound professional advice, which made this a better book.

Donald J. Raleigh
Chapel Hill, NC

Russian Terms and Abbreviations

CC	Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CCC-RKI	Central Control Commission of the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate
gorkom	city party committee
Gosplan	State Planning Commission
GPU (or OGPU)	the State Political Administration
ITR	Engineer-Technical Worker
Komsomol	All-Union Leninist Communist Youth League
kraikom	regional party committee
NEP	New Economic Policy
NKTP	People's Commissariat of Heavy Industry
raikom	district party committee
RSFSR	Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic
RSDRP	Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party
Sovnarkom	Council of People's Commissars
STO	Council of Labor and Defense
VSNKh	Supreme Council of the National Economy
VTsIK	All-Russian Central Executive Committee

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IN STALIN'S SHADOW

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Introduction

Some of the most controversial questions in Soviet history concern the activities of the higher echelons of the party-state leadership, especially the Politburo. The Politburo stood at the apex of power in the USSR. This body brought together the networks of administration and made major decisions that determined the country's fate. How did this come about? Were Politburo resolutions merely the secret personal orders of the leader, the result of so-called collective leadership, or the by-product of more complex interests and conflicts among groups or individuals? The answer to such questions depends, of course, on formulating a more general understanding of the political system and how it functioned, as well as of its stages of development and logical evolution.

During the entire reign of the Communist Party, factions and groups opposed to the "general line" appeared within the party and suggested ways to reform the regime. These currents acquired real political strength, however, only if they had support in the Politburo. From this supreme body emanated all efforts at reform, from the deepening of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the 1920s and de-Stalinization in the 1950s and 1960s, to the policy of perestroika. How and when did these reformist groups take shape, and which other currents of reform or counterreform appeared in the Politburo? These questions gain special significance in light of the fact that most of Soviet history represents the gradual and inconsistent reformation of Stalinism from above.

Many issues merit our utmost attention regarding the 1930s, the

period of the so-called Stalin Revolution.* Debate revolves around several questions: When did Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin (1879–1953) assume absolute rule—at the end of the 1920s following victory over the Bukharin group, or later, as a result of the mass purges of 1937? What real power did Stalin's associates in the Politburo have? Finally, did forces exist in the Stalinist Politburo of the 1930s that had the potential to revise the general line, even if they did not institute any principal changes?

In answering this last question, many historians have focused mainly on two members of Stalin's Politburo—Sergei M. Kirov (1886–1934) and Grigorii K. (Sergo) Ordzhonikidze (1886–1937). Several versions regarding the circumstances of their deaths have long circulated. The main question that still has not been answered centers around whether there was a link between the tragic deaths of Kirov and Ordzhonikidze and their opposition to Stalin. Would it be fair to say that they represented a relatively moderate strand of party leadership, a center of opposition to Stalinist extremism and a distinctive brand of "soft" Stalinism? If this in fact was the case, then another question arises: To what extent were these associates of Stalin prepared to take decisive and independent actions in opposing the leader?

Such questions obviously require concrete answers. In this context, general arguments are inappropriate and hypothetical reflections and suppositions are of little interest. If Stalin and his associates actually clashed over differences of opinion, then it is necessary for the historian to present facts and evidence to document this. Moreover, as in historical research generally, it is obviously not enough to rely on memoirs and rumors. If conflicts actually existed, one can find traces of them in the archives even if the materials are not always informative

*Stalin Revolution. The period of revolutionary change that the USSR underwent at the end of the 1920s and early 1930s associated with the launching of the First Five-Year Plan. The main features of the Stalin Revolution were rapid industrialization, forced collectivization of agriculture, cultural revolution, and eventually the use of terror, as a result of which Stalin consolidated his own personal dictatorship. During the Stalin Revolution the so-called command-administrative system was established, which gave the Soviet Union its basic political, economic, social, and cultural forms until recently.—Ed.

and candid. Reminiscences must be supported by historical documents.

This work represents an attempt to do just that. In researching this project, I have collected and analyzed documents on the relationship between Stalin and Ordzhonikidze in the 1930s. These include materials from the Politburo Archive; the archives of the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom), the Supreme Council of the National Economy (VSNKh), and the People's Commissariat of Heavy Industry (NKTP—which Ordzhonikidze led); and Ordzhonikidze's personal archive as well as those of his Politburo colleagues. These documents are located in the Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of the Documents of Modern History (RTsKhIDNI), the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), and the Russian State Archive of Economics (RGAE). Papers in the so-called Kremlin Archive (Archive of the President of the Russian Federation, the former archive of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union [CC CPSU]), remain closed to researchers. Something needs to be said regarding these depositories.

Judging from available information, the Kremlin Archive contains the protocols and records (stenograms were not always kept) of Politburo meetings, including decisions stored in a "special file," preparatory materials for Politburo resolutions, all Central Committee plenums, records of party congresses and conferences, and personal archives of individual party activists. At first glance, the inaccessibility of this set of documents would seem to doom any attempt at studying the history of the highest echelons of power in the Soviet party-state. However, extensive archival experience and comparison of available documents with those materials from the Kremlin Archive published periodically in the press, indicate that the classification of Kremlin archive documents as confidential serves more to satisfy the self-esteem of the bureaucrats than to interfere with the historian's task. The current availability of previously closed archival files of the Politburo, Sovnarkom, and departments of the People's Commissariats, as well as the personal papers of party leaders, and so forth, will either prove to duplicate documents in the Kremlin Archive or provide information that sheds light on a majority of the most secret acts of the country's leadership in the prewar period. For specialists, there was nothing sensational about the well-publicized excerpts from the Kremlin Archive

concerning the shooting of Polish prisoners of war, the secret protocols of the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact, or resolutions on conducting mass arrests and executions in 1937. Of course, new documents define things more precisely, and to a certain degree dot the *i*'s, but they usually only supplement what was previously known with good and colorful examples.

Likewise, little new awaits us in the unpublished materials from the personal files of the Presidential Archive. For example, the recent publication of the correspondence between Stalin and his wife Nadezhda S. Allilueva (1901–1932) unquestionably contains many interesting details and is an important source.[1] But it does not provide answers to many critical questions—especially, what happened in the Stalin family in 1932? Did political disagreements between Stalin and Allilueva bring about her tragic death? It is clear that a complete selection of letters from 1932 does not exist. The reason for this is explained in the preface to the publication: "The journal begins publication of documents from the personal archive of I.V. Stalin. The archive was kept by Stalin. It contains documents reflecting his party and state activities from 1916 to 1931, personal correspondence, biographical materials, and photographs from 1888 to 1953." Apparently, Stalin compiled his archive from those documents that presented the great leader and his deeds in the best possible light, and conversely, those that exhibited the worst traits of his political opponents.[2] It is appropriate to remember that a search, conducted over several years in the Politburo Archives for serious evidence concerning Kirov's murder, was undertaken during the tenures of both Nikita S. Khrushchev (1953–1964) and Mikhail S. Gorbachev (1985–1991) without success. This quest only revealed that documents capable of shedding some light on this secret had been destroyed.

Of course, this does not mean that historians do not need the Kremlin Archive materials, but rather shows that they can conduct extensive research without "presidential decree" to open these party files.

It is necessary to note that previously, in spite of the complete inaccessibility of the archives, historians produced a considerable number of significant works that remain important. This is true of the topic under study. In the historical literature there are two opposing points of view regarding the conflict between Stalin and Ordzhonikidze. One is

based primarily on memoirs. Its supporters believe that serious disagreements existed between Stalin and Ordzhonikidze stemming from the arrests of the latter's friends, colleagues, and relatives. According to this version, Ordzhonikidze was ready to challenge Stalin openly, and eventually paid with his life (either was driven to suicide or was murdered). Currently, this is the prevalent point of view found in numerous scholarly, popular, and belletristic works, and is most fully presented in the studies of Roy A. Medvedev, Robert Conquest, and Robert Tucker.[3]

Another less common, skeptical viewpoint is advanced by J. Arch Getty, whose interpretation is supported by several recently declassified documents. He maintains that Ordzhonikidze was not considered a serious opponent of the Stalinist Terror. Under the best of circumstances, Ordzhonikidze was prepared to defend his colleagues, but not all of them. In particular, Getty questions whether Ordzhonikidze tried to defend Georgii (Iurii) L. Piatakov (1890–1937).[4]

After studying available materials, I have come to the conclusion that both viewpoints contain some truth. Archival sources support memoir accounts concerning the existence of a serious conflict between Stalin and Ordzhonikidze, which began in the late 1920s or early 1930s. This does not mean, however, that Ordzhonikidze was ready to actively and openly oppose Stalin or seriously struggle against the so-called Great Terror. Ordzhonikidze was not an independent political figure, and almost always followed Stalin's lead. The documents show that many of the initiatives attributed to Ordzhonikidze in the literature were not his own, but Stalin's. As a Stalinist, Ordzhonikidze was not able to go beyond clearly defined limits in his opposition—he was able to argue with Stalin in private or use his power to sway some decision. In the end, he could take his own life as an act of protest, but he could go no further.

Of course, this does not mean that Ordzhonikidze wielded no influence over defining the general political line or shaping Stalin's decisions. Ordzhonikidze can be examined as a typical, in fact, most active, representative of the moderate wing of the Stalinist Politburo whose opinion Stalin had to consider to a certain degree.

Apart from the question about the nature of Stalin's conflict with Ordzhonikidze, the literature addresses several other questions connected to Ordzhonikidze's activities in the Central Control Commission of the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate (CCC–RKI), VSNKh, and

the People's Commissariat of Heavy Industry, and his position regarding specialists and the campaign against "saboteurs" of the Stakhanovite movement, and so forth. My study utilizes much of this earlier work. A critique of the ideas presented in the literature can be found in the appropriate chapters of this book.

Chronologically, my project encompasses the period from the end of the 1920s to Ordzhonikidze's death in February 1937. Special attention is given, however, to the events of 1935–37, when the conflicts between Stalin and Ordzhonikidze peaked. The first chapters survey the history of the relationship between Stalin and Ordzhonikidze and present a series of familiar and revealing conflicts between them throughout the period of their work together.

The nature of the documentary materials greatly shaped the focus of my research, which attempts to reconstruct events on the basis of well-known and revealing documents.