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The Kirov Murder and Soviet History.
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Nonetheless, Geukjian highlights the complexity and historical nature of the relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan. By examining the various actors, from Russia, Persia, Turkey and Europe, Geukjian explores how this relationship has been pushed and pulled, with a particular emphasis on the Soviet nationalities policy. The genealogy provides an extended view of the region economically, politically and geographically like a time-lapse film that conveys continual change, emphasising that neither party is completely innocent. The book is essential reading for anyone with an interest in the South Caucasus region, and for scholars working on ethnicity and nationalism.


MATTHEW LENOE’S STUDY OF THE MURDER OF SOVIET LEADER SERGEI Mironovich Kirov is an exemplary piece of scholarship based on exhaustive research in Russian archives. The book reads like a combination of crime novel and police homicide report. At times the study is so engrossing that it is hard to put down. Lenoe takes an empirical, evidence based approach to his work, unburdened by jargon-riddled post-modernist methodologies.

The narrative is not only about the murder of Kirov and the subsequent investigation; it is also about the conspiracy after the murder, organised by I. V. Stalin, to destroy all opposition to his leadership. One reacts with incredulity and growing outrage at the details of the framing of some two million citizens and the execution of nearly 700,000 victims between 1936 and 1938. ‘For what?’ many of them wanted to know. ‘For nothing’, was the iconic reply.

The author begins his study with a short biography of Kirov. Sergei M. Kostrikov was born in 1886 in the town of Urzhum, about 200 kilometres north of Kazan. Young Kostrikov’s father was an alcoholic and abandoned the family; his mother died of tuberculosis when he was seven years old. Sergei ended up in an orphanage where, with the help of family friends, he received a good secondary and technical education. He became involved in the revolutionary movement, as many of his generation did, having run-ins with the police and doing time in tsarist jails. Eventually, he became a journalist in Vladikavkaz in the northern Caucasus, taking the pseudonym Kirov in 1912.

In 1917, as revolution erupted in Russia, he became a Bolshevik, if not a particularly remarkable one. He was in the thick of the civil war in the Caucasus where he met Stalin and his associates. After the civil war he ended up in Baku, but became involved in the leadership struggles in Moscow after V. I. Lenin’s death in early 1924.

Lenoe provides a brief description of Stalin’s gathering of power in the 1920s. The narrative has been told many times, but what strikes the reader in Lenoe’s account is Stalin’s intolerance toward any criticism of or opposition to his policies. In this struggle for power Kirov climbed the ladder of authority by supporting ‘the boss’. In 1926 he became head of the Leningrad party organisation replacing ‘Left Oppositionist’ G. E. Zinoviev. In 1928 it was the turn of the ‘Right Deviation’ of N. I. Bukharin and others. No mercy was given to the opposition; all were sacked or demoted. Journalists who published articles in favour of the opposition were at once ousted. Stalin’s bête noire, L. D. Trotsky, was exiled from the Soviet Union. In the meantime Kirov consolidated his position in Leningrad as a regional leader with regional concerns. As Lenoe suggests, he was not really a national leader who could or wanted to compete with Stalin. Indeed, Lenoe’s Kirov was a cautious, opportunistic cadre, who might not have attracted much interest from historians, except for one important event.

At 4.30 pm, on 1 December 1934, an unhappy, psychologically disturbed communist, Leonid Vasilievich Nikolaev, shot Kirov in the back of the head and killed him instantly. The assassination took place a few paces from Kirov’s office in the supposedly well-guarded Smolny Institute. News of
Kirov’s murder caused a sensation in the press. What had happened? How could a senior Soviet official be killed with such impunity? Obviously Stalin wanted answers, fearing for his own security and that of other senior officials, and he rushed to Leningrad to lead the investigation.

Even without knowing the details of Kirov’s murder, many anticipated that blood was going to be spilt in retaliation, though no one imagined just how much (p. 453). Stalin’s easily aroused suspicions were intensified by the death of Mikhail Vasilievich Borisov, Kirov’s personal guard at Smolny, who was apparently killed in a motor accident the day following the murder. Borisov’s death aroused the suspicions of conspiracy theorists and generations of historians and Soviet politicians, who believed that Stalin might have organised Kirov’s assassination. Lenoe undertakes what amounts to a detailed criminal investigation to determine whether Kirov’s assassination was the work of a disgruntled individual or a sinister Stalinist conspiracy.

What is shocking about the enquiry into Kirov’s assassination was how quickly Stalin transformed it from a murder investigation into a pretext to attack political adversaries, in this case members of the Leningrad Zinovievist opposition, the so-called ‘Leningrad Centre’. At first the victims were low ranking cadres, but Zinoviev and L. B. Kamenev, members of the former Left Opposition, were soon put in the dock. Fourteen Leningrad communists were thus identified, framed on fictitious charges, and summarily executed on Stalin’s orders. The sentence was determined first and a brief ‘trial’, a travesty, was organised to justify it. The last of the victims to be shot on 29 December 1934 was 29-year-old Ivan Ivanovich Kotolynov. A brave communist, his last words are worth citing: ‘This whole trial is garbage. People have been shot. Now I’m going to be shot. But none of us, with the exception of Nikolaev, are guilty of anything. That’s the absolute truth’ (p. 371).

Kotolynov’s epitaph seems fitting for all Stalin’s victims, amongst them committed revolutionaries who had survived the bloody civil war years, only to perish at the hands of their own Soviet government. According to official records, 2,096,683 people were arrested in 1934–1938, of which 686,095 were shot, mostly in 1937–1938 for no other reason than opposition to Stalin or plain bad luck (pp. 468, 603, 688). Anyone who offered a comment against Stalin, however casual, was in danger. Even cleaning ladies in the Kremlin, who gossiped about Bolshevik toffs living in luxury while everyone else ‘nearly starved’, were hauled up for punishment in the ‘Kremlin case’ in 1935. The offhand criticism of university students also merited punishment (pp. 456–57, 459–60). Arrests and executions declined in 1935 (p. 462), before resuming in the late summer of 1936 with the first show trial of Zinoviev, Kamenev and 14 others.

‘The thing is’, remembered Stalin’s right arm, V. M. Molotov, members of the so-called Leningrad Centre ‘… were not convicted for the attack itself [on Kirov], but because they participated in the Zinovievite organisation …’ (p. 266). Or any opposition organisation, real or imagined, Molotov might have added. Stalin put an end to the Russian Revolution by killing off the ‘old Bolsheviks’, the first generation ‘of fractious, critically inclined … revolutionaries’ (p. 470). Readers will appreciate the irony of Stalin, ‘captain’ of the Soviet state, destroying the revolution which had created it. In 1937 Trotsky said that the October Revolution had been ‘betrayed’ by Stalinist ‘gravediggers’. What remained of ‘October’ was an empty, cracked shell, to which Soviet victory in World War II gave new, but deceptive lustre.

How could this incomprehensible bloodletting have occurred? Lenoe speculates that Stalin ‘viewed ex-oppositionists as a real threat to him’ (p. 461). One understands why, for he and his associates had created a volcano of popular anger and opposition, especially peasant resistance to forced collectivisation causing ‘something like a second Civil War’. It resulted in ‘decimation of livestock herds, a sharp drop in grain production, and mass starvation’ (pp. 98, 107). Breakneck industrialisation also created hardships and popular anger. These events took place in a dangerous world where Soviet Russia was isolated and encircled by capitalist states seeking directly or indirectly to overthrow Soviet power.

Lenoe pursues his investigation of Kirov’s murder into the 1990s, and concludes that Nikolaev killed Kirov ‘very probably … on his own’ (p. 689), that Borisov really did die in an automobile accident, and that Stalin did not organise a conspiracy to kill Kirov. He organised the conspiracy
afterwards to annihilate all opposition to him (p. 689). Frightened by the implications of Kirov’s murder, sitting atop a shuddering volcano of popular discontents, Stalin unleashed a blood-drenched Thermidor. The Kirov murder was ‘the turning point in the chain of events that led to the Terror’ (p. 689), Lenin concludes in this fine study, essential to understanding the Stalinist purges.

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**IN THE LAST FEW YEARS WE HAVE WITNESSED A SIGNIFICANT RISE IN KAZAKHSTAN’S VISIBILITY ON THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE.** The country’s rapidly expanding economy, its significant oil wealth and the rampant foreign policy implemented by President Nursultan Nazarbaev greatly enhanced the international profile of the Kazakhstani state, whose prestige was further legitimised by holding the OSCE rotating Chairmanship in 2010. Kazakhstan’s sudden international relevance led Martha Brill Olcott to revise her seminal 2002 study. The new edition does not only come with an extra chapter and a very useful and up-to-date statistical appendix, but it also has a new title, with the author opting to add a question mark to the original one. This choice is not accidental and it reveals the author’s tentatively positive assessment of the developments which have occurred since the publication of the book’s first edition. As Brill Olcott remarks at the beginning of the new chapter written for this edition, there are many reasons to be ‘more sanguine about the future of Kazakhstan’ (p. 245).

This proposition represents the culmination of a carefully structured argument, which departs from the conclusions reached by the author in 2002, when she predicted a much bleaker outlook for twenty-first century Kazakhstan (pp. 214–44). The analysis advanced in the book spans across all different areas of policy-making: from the treatment of state- (pp. 24–50) and nation-building (pp. 51–86) to the account of the main economic initiatives advanced in the first decade of the post-Soviet era (pp. 128–71). A complete analysis of Kazakhstan’s independent political life is elegantly presented in the book. Brill Olcott’s preoccupation with the consolidation of authoritarian governance in Kazakhstan remains firmly in the background of her argument and it represents a critical factor in informing her assessment of Kazakhstan’s future beyond 2010.

It is the political background behind the successful economic story told by the Nazarbaev regime that underpins Brill Olcott’s worries as regards the future of Kazakhstan. The author unambiguously identifies Nazarbaev’s authoritarian persistence as the factor that will ultimately prevent Kazakhstan’s promise from being fulfilled (p. 247). This assessment is all the more revealing if we think that, when the book was published, the Kazakhstani economy was still grappling with the local effects of the financial crisis which had erupted in late 2008. Focusing on the regime’s failure to liberalise Kazakhstani politics indeed represents a very interesting point—one that appears in open contradiction to other analyses that portray Kazakhstan’s authoritarian stability in more positive terms. Rather than speculating on the post-Nazarbaev scenario—as the author did in the 2002 version—the substantial new chapter written for the second edition offers a detailed snapshot of the governance methods and the authoritarian outlook of the Nazarbaev regime.

Questioning the direction of Kazakhstan’s political transition (pp. 247–64) raises in turn a fundamental question on the international implications of domestic authoritarian politics: how do we explain Nazarbaev’s growing popularity in the West? The answer, according to Brill Olcott, has to be connected with a longer-term analysis of the geopolitical relevance held by the natural resources of the Caspian area. As Kazakhstani oil has become, in the last decade, more central to the energy security of Western actors, Nazarbaev is no longer an unrepresentable partner for most Western governments. This last proposition captures in full the greater strength of this new edition: its underpinning methodological plan. The book is based on a medium-term analytical approach that sets the scene for a