

regime's intention to implement more rigorously the "lessons" of the Slansky trial, which it had so diligently spelled out in a special document already the previous December, while Stalin was still alive.⁴⁹ The more rigorous implementation, as outlined by the central committee in its follow-up declaration on May 14, meant an expanded hunt for "saboteurs" and other miscreants who had supposedly wormed their way into the party. Mentioned by name was disgraced politburo member Franz Dahlen, thus earmarked as the sacrificial lamb in a prospective show trial.⁵⁰

What caused the Soviet Union to subsequently reverse the Stalinist course it had been abetting in East Berlin is as intriguing as it is crucial for explaining the larger question of why the leadership consensus in Moscow did not last. As late as May 20, the newspaper of the Soviet military administration, *Tägliche Rundschau*, still endorsed the old course, praising the recent party declaration and exhorting communists to be vigilant and smite all enemies.⁵¹ Yet the replacement on May 22 of Semenov as political adviser to the military administration inaugurated not only a precipitous dismantling of the most resented policies and institutions established by the Ulbricht regime during the past year, but also a possible incipient repudiation of the substance of communist rule, as suggested by the officially instigated revival of other political parties.⁵²

By then East Germany's mounting economic crisis had made a change of course imperative. The massive flight of its citizens to the West—100,000 people in March alone—thoroughly refuted Semenov's rosy estimate of the Ulbricht regime's stability.⁵³ Since Semenov was closer to Molotov than was his successor, Iudin, who was reputedly close to Beria, the reshuffle might be cited in support of the appealing theory that Beria, acting as "rational and purposeful . . . policeman turned liberal,"⁵⁴ was behind the change. Yet not only was Iudin a Stalinist to his core but so was Beria, as shown in his conduct in the erupting crisis, thus making the explanation of what happened not that simple.

Beria and the German Crisis

Ever since the beginning of May, if not before, trouble had been brewing for the security chief. For the first time ever, the Soviet prison empire was shaken by a rebellion of its inmates, thus putting his competence as its manager in doubt. Not suppressed swiftly enough at a time when the Soviet empire's new rulers were feeling, as Khrushchev put it, "terribly vulnerable," and to that extent unsure of themselves, the rebellion spread, accordingly, as soon as they felt better, they had no qualms crushing it with the customary brutality.⁵⁵ Beria was no exception in their trying to keep Stalinist practices as intact as they could get away with. For example, in trying to reform the out-

rageous practice of summary proceedings that gave the police the authority to interrogate, prosecute, sentence, as well as imprison anyone at will, he proposed no more than the reduction by ten years of the twenty-year maximum imprisonment allowable under the system.⁵⁶ As if nothing had changed since Stalin's times, he tried to keep the power of his apparatus, and thereby his own, unimpaired and as free as possible from both government and party interference.

Unrest was also spreading in the Soviet Union's ethnic republics, straining the quasi-colonial relationship between the Russian-dominated central government and the nominal republics of other nationalities, among which the Baltic ones were the most advanced and the Ukraine the largest. More sensitive than his colleagues to the explosive potential of pent-up nationalism, Beria acted to suppress the nationalist underground still operating in the restive provinces while aiming to defuse the pressure by putting more non-Russians into responsible positions there, as he had done in his Georgian fiefdom.⁵⁷ He was instrumental in having the central committee pass on May 26 resolutions providing for more employment of the native cadres in Lithuania and the western Ukraine.⁵⁸

The policy was reasonable enough, but its implementation was a disaster. Beria tried to replace not only the local security personnel, which he was entitled to do, but also the party bureaucracy, which he was not. He attempted to remove the mainly Russian officials long ensconced in their places while reinstating those, many of them Jewish, purged in Stalin's recent anti-Semitic drive. In the Ukraine the reshuffle threatened people appointed by Khrushchev while he was in charge promoting the drive there. One of them in Lvov, named Timofei Strokach, complained to him about having been shouted down by Beria and threatened to be "thrown out, locked up, made to rot in the camps, and ground into the camp dust."⁵⁹ In Beria's treatment of subordinates, such was the obverse of his servility to Stalin.

According to one of his cronies, the deputy chief administrator of those camps Amalakh Z. Kobulov, Beria wanted to "decisively break the old order not only in our country but also in the [people's] democracies."⁶⁰ True enough, as long he was in charge, the purge trials in Eastern Europe, which threatened his agents there, ceased. Yet there is no evidence of his having a concept, much less a policy, of reform beyond trying with his colleagues to limit it to the necessary minimum. He was anything but a closet liberal. A spoiled product of a rotten system, Beria was manifestly unfit to be a champion of its radical transformation. Having spent a lifetime as a despot's administrator of terror, he lacked the prerequisites of a politician, much less of a statesman. He was one of history's more unsuitable persons ever given an opportunity to shape it.

As the manager of the Soviet intelligence and counterintelligence networks, Beria was strategically placed to utilize them for better or

worse. He chose to do the latter—with singular incompetence. Having confided to Malenkov his view that the Soviet Union's recent normalization of governmental relations with Yugoslavia should be extended to collaboration between their security services, he received no encouraging response. He nevertheless proceeded to prepare on his own a message to his Belgrade counterpart Ranković, proposing a secret rendezvous with Tito, while trying to keep the rest of the leadership in the dark about his intended escapade.⁶¹ His other meddling with foreign affairs betrayed the same spy-master's notion of politics as little more than backstage intrigue.

Beria showed a particular interest in the German question.⁶² He requested from his intelligence analysts an assessment of the foreign policy views of West Germany's opposition social democrats and was dismayed to receive the safe, if inaccurate, reply that the views did not substantially differ from those of the government.⁶³ If, as Sudoplatov maintains, Beria was interested in exploring the feasibility of a united neutral Germany,⁶⁴ he was doing so most clumsily. Summoning most of his foreign operatives to Moscow for consultations, he reduced drastically the number left in the country precisely when they were needed there the most to monitor the deteriorating East German situation.⁶⁵

The Soviet estimate of that situation was accurate enough to warrant the convocation of an emergency session of the ruling group on May 27. During this important meeting, Beria shocked his colleagues by suggesting not only that "the course of building socialism in the GDR be abandoned at the present time" but also that a neutralized Germany would be preferable to a socialist one. Although this was nothing other than Stalin's original idea, it had by then been superseded by Soviet commitment to the build-up of the communist German state, most recently reiterated in the proposal Molotov had prepared in his ministry. Both he and Khrushchev fiercely opposed Beria's suggestion, insisting upon a mere slowdown rather than the abandonment in East Germany of the "construction of socialism"—a change to be epitomized by dropping the word "accelerated" from its official description.⁶⁶

The disagreement was not as serious as it looked. Having found himself in the minority of one, Beria withdrew his proposal and submitted to the majority.⁶⁷ He still fretted to Bulganin the next day about the danger Germany might pose if it were not neutralized, grumbling that some of the presidium members should be removed from the government to make this possible—a broad allusion to Molotov.⁶⁸ Yet Beria took no action beyond his dangerously loose talk, thus substantiating Molotov's retrospective assessment of him as an arrogant man but a poor politician, "lacking deeper interest in fundamental policy questions."⁶⁹

Having regained consensus, the Soviet leadership proceeded to unilaterally implement in East Germany the measures aimed to lead to the solution of the German question as outlined in the foreign ministry

proposal, which had originally been intended to be dispatched by then to the Western capitals but was shelved instead.⁷⁰ Stabilization of the shaky Ulbricht regime had meanwhile become more topical than the destabilization of the overall German situation that was the gist of the proposal. On May 28 Semenov received his promotion by being appointed to the newly created post of high commissioner, while Iudin kept his new job, too, thus adding to the evidence that any dispute with Beria had been laid to rest. Further following the blueprint, three days later a top-level East German delegation arrived in Moscow.

Rather than to prepare for any subsequent negotiations with the West about Germany as a whole, however, the purpose of the visit now was merely to prevent the impending collapse of the regime in its eastern part. Summoned rather than invited, its representatives arrived under a cloud, further darkened by the riots erupting in both neighboring Czechoslovakia and distant Bulgaria, Moscow's staunchest allies. Making matters even worse, it was workers who had gone rioting—both in the Bulgarian tobacco factories and at the huge Škoda armament plant in Plzeň.⁷¹

Provoked by the draconian currency reform of May 30, the unrest in Czechoslovakia spread throughout the usually quiescent country until as many as 129 strikes were reported. On the day the East German delegation reached the Soviet capital, twenty thousand demonstrators marched through Plzeň, raising American flags in memory of its liberation by the U.S. Army in 1945. Having lost control of the situation, the authorities had to bring in special police in order to restore it.⁷² All this looked as if the collapse from within that the Western secret services had for so long been hoping for and trying to precipitate might finally be coming.

Compensating in his way for the recent blows to his prestige as the chief guarantor of public order, Beria treated the visiting East Germans so despicably "that it was embarrassing to listen."⁷³ He rubbed it in that theirs was "not even a real state. It's only kept in being by Soviet troops, even if we do call it the 'German Democratic Republic.'⁷⁴ Dressed down, as used to be Stalin's habit, for having only done what Moscow had wanted them to do, they were asked to put down in writing how they proposed to deal with the shambles. No sooner did they finish than the impossible Beria exploded again, dismissing the product of their labors as nothing but a "bad replica of our own document."⁷⁵ More politely, Kaganovich explained that "our document favors a turn, yours a reform."⁷⁶

The difference was not that between keeping and not keeping communist East Germany, which had been at issue in Beria's clash with his colleagues at their meeting the week before; after he had realigned himself with them, what mattered rather was the distinction between real and cosmetic change. In preparing the final document⁷⁷ as the basis for a resolution to be adopted in Berlin by the

party central committee and subsequently published, the Soviet leaders wanted the text to set unequivocal guidelines for the recovery of the sick state, without being mistaken for wanting something else. Hence they resisted their guests' desperate attempts to camouflage the turn-about as a tactical concession to impress the West,⁷⁸ lest it backfire by being misread as an invitation for negotiations on German reunification. This was not a topical subject until the expected recovery would put Moscow into a position to negotiate from strength rather than from weakness.

The foreign ministry proposal had been shelved after Churchill, responding to what he misinterpreted as Moscow's encouraging reaction to the Eisenhower speech, had on May 11 preempted the pending Soviet initiative by himself calling for a conference of the great powers.⁷⁹ Insisting that their security needs were compatible, he outlined a possible settlement modeled after the 1925 treaty of Locarno, meaning international guarantees of Germany's frontiers, to prevent any future aggression on its part. The Lukewarm Soviet response disappointed the British.⁸⁰ Never keen on Locarno—which had failed to discourage German aggression before—Moscow welcomed the idea of compatible security but otherwise merely repeated its routine call for a speedy German settlement without adding anything new about how to achieve it. In view of East Germany's dire condition, nothing more could be expected.

The "New Course," inaugurated less dramatically also in other countries of the Soviet realm in anticipation of a coming crisis, sought, as did the limited reform course in the Soviet Union proper, to overcome the crisis by revitalizing the regimes in power. A week after the East Germans, the Hungarians were called to Moscow and told to start reforming, giving Beria another occasion to show off his antics. Mocking the Budapest party boss Rákosi as a "Jewish king of Hungary,"⁸¹ he wisecracked that the country may have had "Turkish sultans, Hapsburg emperors, Tatar kings, and Polish princes but . . . never . . . a Jewish king," and vowed that "we won't allow it." In the end, he and his colleagues did allow the disreputable Rákosi to keep his job of party secretary but made him turn over the responsibility for reform to the less ambitious and more attractive Imre Nagy as the head of the government.

Defering to Soviet wishes, the draft of the resolution submitted for approval to the East German politburo meeting on June 5 envisaged slowing down forced collectivization of agriculture but not dismantling the farms already collectivized. Taking its cue from Lenin's New Economic Policy of the 1920s, it was calculated to encourage private enterprise but reserve the "commanding heights" to the state. It promised to end the Stalinist terror and rehabilitate its victims but not punish any of its principal carriers, including particularly Ulbricht.⁸² It still

amounted to "the most far-reaching change of policy that ever took place in a communist country" until that date, as well as the riskiest.⁸³ The politburo, convened under the watchful eye of the ubiquitous Semenov, was acutely aware of the risks, and so was he. Its members, notably Rudolf Herrnstadt, the editor-in-chief of the party daily *Neues Deutschland*, lambasted Ulbricht for his famous arrogance but stopped short of stripping him of power. Semenov soft-pedaled the criticism of Ulbricht, which applied just as well to him. Herrnstadt, having drafted the final text of the resolution finally adopted on June 9, worried lest its immediate publication shake the state to its foundation. He therefore urged that it be kept confidential for at least another fourteen days, to give party propagandists enough time to condition the population for the coming shock. But Semenov, warning that "in fourteen days you may not have a stare any more," would have no delay.⁸⁴

Semenov was right. The publication of the document on the next day set off shock waves culminating a week later in the revolt of the Berlin workers that indeed threatened the rickety state with extinction. At the same time, the uprising prepared the acid test of both the viability of the policy of controlled reform on which Stalin's successors had staked the survival of the Soviet system and the credibility of the proclaimed American readiness to challenge that system by exploiting its vulnerabilities. The outcome was determined by Soviet action and Western inaction.

Once masses of demonstrators swept through East Berlin on June 17, CIA officials in the western part of the city pondered supplying them with rifles and sten guns, but were quickly vetoed by subordinate officials in Washington while the head of the agency, Allen Dulles, was out of town.⁸⁵ Leaving aside its merit, and there was certainly enough merit in not trying to precipitate unnecessary violence, the decision—or the lack of it—proved how little both he and his brother John Foster, the Secretary of State, believed in the possible crumbling of Soviet power that their declaratory policy of rollback and liberation was supposedly designed to encourage. The British, not to speak of the French, at least made no pretensions. More than that, Churchill stated bluntly, if privately, that if "the Soviet Government, as the occupying Power, were faced . . . with widespread movements of violent disorders they surely have the right to declare Martial Law in order to prevent anarchy."⁸⁶

Belatedly, the U.S. National Security Council, convened in a hurry, directed the Psychological Strategy Board to prepare for exploiting the situation, and the president was prompted to approve the formation of the half-forgotten Volunteer Freedom Corps of Eastern European émigrés, authorized by the Kersten amendment nearly two years earlier.⁸⁷ Yet before anything worth doing could be done, the uprising was crushed, after which Secretary Dulles publicly went on record to deny not only any U.S. responsibility but, awkwardly, also any intent

to instigate unrest that might lead to violence (as if one could tell in advance), thus exposing his policy as a sham.⁸⁸

In retrospect, it is easy to see that the outcome was predetermined, at the time, however, neither the American inaction could be reliably predicted, nor could the forceful Soviet action after Beria had floated the idea that the East German regime was not worth propping up. Now the danger of its being toppled made him a good soldier again, ready to support its rescue without reservations and—if Semenov's self-cleaning memoirs, full of tall stories, could be used as a source—even scold this down-to-bone opportunist for waiting too long in "saving the bullets."⁸⁹

As a result, Stalin's heirs weathered their most severe crisis since his death united rather than divided. This did not make them any more, but if anything less, accommodating. Hence also the indefinite postponement of Churchill's plan for a summit because of his incapacitation by the stroke he suffered on June 26 was no opportunity lost. If previously the Soviet leaders had not been sufficiently secure to dare to negotiate, now they were not sufficiently insecure to feel compelled to. This time the U.S. intelligence estimate got it right in grasping that Moscow would "offer no real concessions to effect a settlement" with the West.⁹⁰

The basic continuity of Soviet policy on East Germany before and after the suppressed uprising conveyed enduring consensus at the highest level. Instead of discarding there the new course that had failed to prevent the disturbances, Moscow abetted preparations for trying harder to implement it. The special commission formed in East Berlin to carry out the reform program outlined in the June 9 resolution entrusted to Ulbricht's critic Herrstadt the elaboration of a plan of action.

The resulting document rightly attributed the party's recent debacle to its policies under Ulbricht, setting as the goal East Germany's transformation into "a model democratic state"⁹¹—more precisely, a state governed with the consent of the people that Ulbricht had so disastrously forfeited. The critical question was whether the cynical men in the Kremlin would share Herrstadt's naive optimism about the party's aptitude to accomplish such a feat and be willing to reject Ulbricht's alternative interpretation of the June 17 uprising as nothing but a Western plot. That even some Soviet officials on the spot who could see with their eyes what was happening were prepared to believe this fairy tale was not encouraging.

Without mentioning Ulbricht by name, the Herrstadt commission recommended his demotion by abolishing his party job. Independently, the head of the military administration Sokolovskii, Semenov, and Iudin proposed to their Moscow superiors merely his dismissal from his government post of deputy prime minister while allowing him to run the party. The special subcommittee in the Soviet foreign ministry that was to decide took no action on either proposal.⁹² As a result, Ulbricht

kept his power despite his failure to prevent the debacle of his policy; the one who lost power despite Moscow's success in overcoming it was Beria.⁹³ His ouster on June 26 came as a bolt out of the blue.

The Saving of the Soviet System

The ejection of so senior a leadership figure as Beria by his peers was unprecedented in Soviet history since Stalin had engineered the downfall of Trotsky, which, however, had come gradually and could be predicted. It would be easier to explain why Beria could not possibly be ousted than it is why he actually was. The risky removal of the man who held the levers of the formidable Soviet security apparatus by a group at pains to demonstrate its solidarity could only have been undertaken for the weightiest of reasons. Yet these have never been satisfactorily explained and can only be reconstructed from fragmentary and distorted evidence unlikely to be ever supplemented with anything more substantive.

The arrest of Beria at a secret session of the party presidium on June 26 was organized by Khrushchev on a very short notice—perhaps no more than a week or two—with the help of trusted military officers after he had obtained more or less willing consent by key members of that body.⁹⁴ Rather than being immediately disposed of, however, the dangerous captive was kept alive in jail for six months while time was wasted on interrogating him for the dubious purpose of preparing against him the same kind of phony charges that he and his henchmen had been so proficient in concocting against others in Stalin's times. It looked as if those who deposed him had subsequently found the reasons for their having done so not sufficiently substantiated.

The few people who have been allowed to peek into the forty-odd volumes of the interrogations and other documents collected to incriminate Beria have found there little of interest.⁹⁵ Eventually, the material was not needed anyway. At the end of December 1953, he was tried in camera by a kangaroo court under the Stalinist procedure that did not even require the presence of the defendant, much less any serious examination of evidence. What it did provide for was the prompt execution of the death sentence prepared in advance by the court.⁹⁶ The case against Beria, if any, thus seems to have been built on the flimsiest of foundations, thus making the reasons for his misfortune even more puzzling.

A week after Beria's arrest, its organizers went to great lengths trying to explain themselves to the secret meeting of the central committee they had convened for this purpose. A much shorter version—much too short—appeared on July 10 in the official notice of his demise, intended for the public. Yet another explanation was subsequently offered in special briefings for the understandably distraught representatives of foreign communist parties, summoned to Moscow to be reassured.⁹⁷