

WHO KILLED KIROV?

"...I came out of the Smolny building and strolled about an hour on the Tver and Ochakovskii Streets and came back to Smolny. I climbed up to the 3rd floor, entered the washroom, came out and turned left. Having taken two-three steps I saw that Sergei Mironovich Kirov was walking towards me from the right side of the corridor. He was 15-20 steps away from me. When I caught sight of Sergei Mironovich Kirov I immediately halted and turned my back to him so that when he walked past me I followed behind him. While walking behind Kirov at a distance of 10-15 paces I noted that there was nobody in the corridor for quite a distance. Then I went after him, gradually caught up with him. When Kirov turned left towards his room, the situation of which was well-known to me, the whole corridor was empty. I ran five steps up to him, took out my revolver and shot him in the back of the head. Instantaneously Kirov fell on his face" – Nikolaev, the assassin.

Introduction

Till the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU the general understanding of the international communist movement on the death of S.M. Kirov in 1934 was as indicated in the 'History of the CPSU(b), Short Course' that the assassin was a member of a secret counter-revolutionary group made up of members of an anti-Soviet group of Zinovievites in Leningrad:

On December 1, 1934, S. M. Kirov was foully murdered in the Smolny, in Leningrad, by a shot from a revolver. The assassin was caught red-handed and turned out to be a member of a secret counter-revolutionary group made up of members of an anti-Soviet group of Zinovievites in Leningrad. S. M. Kirov was loved by the Party and the working class, and his murder stirred the people profoundly, sending a wave of wrath and deep sorrow through the country. The investigation established that in 1933 and 1934 an underground counter-revolutionary terrorist group had been formed in Leningrad consisting of former members of the Zinoviev opposition and headed by a so-called "Leningrad Centre." The purpose of this group was to murder leaders of the Communist Party. S. M. Kirov was chosen as the first victim. The testimony of the members of this counter-revolutionary group showed that they were connected with representatives of foreign capitalist states and were receiving funds from them...

The Zinovievites simulated remorse in court; but they persisted in their duplicity even in the dock. They concealed their connection with Trotsky. They concealed the fact that together with the Trotskyites they had sold themselves to fascist espionage services. They concealed their spying and wrecking activities. They concealed from the court their connections with the Bukharinites, and the existence of a united Trotsky-Bukharin gang of fascist hirelings. As it later transpired, the murder of Comrade Kirov was the work of this united Trotsky-Bukharin gang....The chief instigator and ringleader of this gang of assassins and spies was Judas Trotsky.

However, that view is now discredited. The question now is whether Nikolaev was a "Lone Gunman" or was working on Stalin's orders.

1. Lone Gunman?

Nikolaev's wife, M. Draule, in her declaration of 11th December, 1934, confirms the deep-rooted anti-Soviet feelings of her husband: 'Nikolaev accused the Central Committee of pursuing the politics of militarisation, spending huge amounts on the defence of the country. To justify all the defence expenditure (building of factories etc.) they are raising the false alarm that the foreign forces are planning to attack the Soviet Union though there is no such threat. According to Nikolaev this false alarm is also being raised to divert the attention of the toiling masses of the Soviet Union away from the persisting hardships in the country. These hardships are also the result of the wrong policies of the CC... After his exclusion from the Party, Nikolaev remained unemployed. In fact, he was not even willing to take up any work, as he was completely engrossed with the preparations of his future act of terrorism".

According to the oral tradition, Leningrad NKVD Deputy Chief **Zaporozhets** had approached assassin Nikolaev, put him up to the crime, and provided the weapon and bullets. It now seems that Zaporozhets had not been in Leningrad for months before the killing and that he never met Nikolaev. Nikolaev had owned the revolver in question since 1918 and had registered it legally in 1924 and again in 1930. He had purchased the bullets used in the crime legally,

with his registration, back in 1930. Contrary to the popular version, Nikolaev was not detained three times while carrying a gun and following Kirov, and then mysteriously released by the Leningrad NKVD. Actually, he had been stopped only once, on October 15, 1934, and the circumstances at that time were not suspicious. A frustrated apparatchik with delusions of grandeur and lifelong chronic medical problems, Nikolaev wrote in his diary that he wanted to be a great revolutionary terrorist.

The last attempt in the Soviet Union to review the Kirov murder case was the Politburo Commission headed by A. **Yakovlev** which was established in the Gorbachev period in 1989. The investigating team included personnel from the USSR Procurator's Office, the Military Procuracy, the KGB and various archival administrations. After two years of investigations the working team of the Yakovlev commission concluded that: 'in this affair no materials objectively support Stalin's participation or NKVD participation in the organisation and carrying out of Kirov's murder.'

Stalin?

This view was contested by western writers and in the CPSU by **Khrushchev's** 'Secret Speech' at the Twentieth Congress. This is what Khrushchev had to say:

"It must be asserted that to this day the circumstances surrounding Kirov's murder hide many things which are inexplicable and mysterious and demand a most careful examination. There are reasons for the suspicion that the killer of Kirov, Nikolaev, was assisted by someone from among the people whose duty it was to protect the person of Kirov. A month and a half before the killing, Nikolaev was arrested on the grounds of suspicious behaviour, but he was released and not even searched. It is an unusually suspicious circumstance that when the Chekist assigned to protect Kirov was being brought for an interrogation, on December 2, 1934, he was killed in a car 'accident' in which no other occupants of the car were harmed. After the murder of Kirov, top functionaries of the Leningrad NKVD were relieved of their duties and were given very light sentences, but in 1937 they were shot. We can assume that they were shot in order to cover the traces of the organizers of Kirov's killing'.

However, **Molotov** states: "Khrushchev hinted that Stalin had Kirov killed. There are some who still believe that story. The seeds of suspicion were planted. A commission was set up in 1956. Some twelve persons, from various backgrounds, looked through a welter of documents but found nothing incriminating Stalin. But these results have never been published. The commission concluded that Stalin was not implicated in Kirov's assassination. Khrushchev refused to have the findings published since they didn't serve his purpose"

Conquest and Cohen projected the view that Kirov had been the victim not of an anti-Soviet terrorist but of Stalinist repression. These books had a wide circulation internationally. Both of these books argued, in a nutshell, that Kirov headed a group of moderate Bolshevik leaders who sought to rein in the Stalinist 'autocracy' and initiate a policy of relaxation and reconciliation. Stalin, in order to free himself from the restrictions imposed by this group, so the story goes, arranged through his police agents for the assassination of Kirov thereby ridding himself of a rival and providing a pretext for the repression of the 1930s.

However, the sources for this line of argument were a number of emigre accounts particularly the anonymous booklet '**Letter of an Old Bolshevik**' published in 1937. This letter was revealed in 1959 to be the handiwork of the Menshevik writer, Boris Nicolaevsky. The booklet purported to be based on an account of events in the Bolshevik leadership in the 1930s given to Nicolaevsky by Bukharin in Paris in 1936 where he had gone on an official visit for the purchase of the Marx Archives of the SPD. This cosy consensus of western historians ended with

the publication by Bukharin's widow in 1988 of a book wherein she denied that any such discussions had taken place between Bukharin and Nicolaevsky and at length proceeded to knock holes in the Nicolaevsky account.

Main Task

Complete this table to assess the strengths and weaknesses of each piece of evidence:

	Who do they suggest was responsible and why?	Strengths of this evidence?	Weaknesses?
Nikolaev's Wife			
The Zaporozhets Connection			
Yakovlev Commission			
Khrushchev			
Conquest and Cohen			

Here are two interpretations of what happened:

- (a) Kirov was killed by a lone gunman and Stalin capitalised fully on the situation
- (b) Stalin ordered Kirov's murder to allow him to launch the Purges of the party

Which of these interpretations do you find most convincing? Explain your answer.