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Hannah E. Johnson

*Illinois Wesleyan University*, [hjohnso1@iwu.edu](mailto:hjohnso1@iwu.edu)

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# Crime, Conspiracy and Cover-Up: Finding the Truth in the Soviet Union, the Kirov Assassination

## **Abstract**

On December 1, 1934, Sergei Mironovich Kirov, head of the Leningrad party organization of the Soviet Union, was shot dead outside his office in the former Smolny Institute. Kirov's murder would prove to be the catalyst that effectively launched General Secretary Joseph Stalin's Great Purge of the Communist Party from 1936 to 1938. In this two year period hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens were executed and millions more were sentenced to exile. Though an earthshaking start to an inexplicably dark period of Soviet history, the real intrigue in Kirov's assassination lies in the fact that, over 75 years later, the case remains inconclusive. This paper attempts to shed light on the various theories surrounding the possible culprits involved in the Kirov assassination as well as address the potential limitations involved in ultimately achieving the notion of historical truth.

## **Keywords**

Kirov, the Soviet Union, Russia, the Great Purge

## Crime, Conspiracy and Cover-Up: Finding the Truth in the Soviet Union, the Kirov Assassination

Hannah Johnson

At 11:00 p.m., December 1, 1934, unsuspecting Soviet citizens were gathered around their radios, unknowingly about to witness a historical event that would forever change the USSR as they knew it. An announcement interrupted a regular news program with word that Politburo member and Leningrad First Secretary Sergei Mironovich Kirov was dead. All further broadcasting ceased for the evening.<sup>1</sup> Earlier that day at 4:30 p.m., Kirov was shot outside his office in the former Smolny Institute by ex-party member Leonid Vasilievich Nikolaev.<sup>2</sup> Immediately after the shot was fired, Nikolaev dropped to the ground and was arrested by authorities. A laborious attempt to revive the 46-year-old Kirov was unsuccessful.<sup>3</sup> The trusted advisor of Stalin was dead, and his assassin was being held in custody awaiting trial. Case closed.

If only it were that simple. There was Nikolaev, lying on the ground, holding the gun that shot the bullet that struck Kirov. What question could there be of the culprit? Anyone standing in the corridor of the former Smolny Institute that winter afternoon could say from personal experience that Nikolaev was the man responsible for murdering one of the nation's favored political personalities. The question, then, lies not in *who* committed the act, but *why*, and with what support? The Kirov assassination is the event that historical scholars point to as the impetus of the Great Purge, a period of two years that would result in the execution of 700,000 Soviet citizens and the exile of millions more.<sup>4</sup> Though the exact details and motivations behind the event remain inconclusive, the onset of Stalin's paranoid expulsions, and executions, of unfaithful party members can reasonably be traced back to that one shot heard throughout the corridors of the Smolny Institute in December of 1934.

As history shows, Nikolaev would eventually pay for his crimes against the state on December 29, but not before hundreds of other individuals would be charged for complicity in the crime. In the eyes of General Secretary Joseph Stalin, neither Nikolaev's execution alone nor the execution of 116 others could sufficiently atone for this egregious crime against the state. Many more were in line to pay for Nikolaev's crime and for any other unrequited crimes, past and future, which could be connected to the Smolny incident.

On December 2, the day following the attack in the corridor, Nikolaev was publicly exposed as the assassin and *Izvestia*, the journalistic mouthpiece of the government, was in the process of flooding the press with reports of a connection between the assault on Kirov and a greater "White Guard" conspiracy.<sup>5</sup> Harold Denny, correspondent for the *New York Times*,

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Denny, "Kiroff, High Soviet Leader, Slain; Assassin in Leningrad is Arrested ... Death Laid to 'Enemies of Working Class,'" *The New York Times*, December 2, 1934. <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.iwu.edu> (accessed November 1, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 37.

<sup>3</sup> Harold Denny, "Soviet Arrests 71 in War on 'Terror'; Bars Mercy Pleas ... Neglect in Killing of Stalin Aid," *The New York Times*, December 4, 1934. <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.iwu.edu> (accessed November 1, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Matt Leno, "Did Stalin Kill Kirov and Does It Matter?" *The Journal of Modern History* 74, no. 2 (June 2002), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3079753> (accessed November 16, 2010), 354.

<sup>5</sup> Harold Denny, "Ex-Soviet Employe (*sic*) is Kiroff Assassin: But Russians Insist Enemies of Regime Hired Killer ... Growing Liberalism of Police Methods Doubtful," *The New York Times*, December 3, 1934. <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.iwu.edu> (accessed November 1, 2010).

reported that “[w]hether Nikolaev had accomplices, whether his action was political or inspired simply by a personal grievance, real or fancied, was still undisclosed,” but *Izvestia* editor-in-chief Nikolay Bukharin seemed to have already determined who was to be held responsible.<sup>6</sup> Without including details as to exactly where and when the assassination of Kirov occurred, the press was positioning the public to take immediate action against any group or affiliate that would be willing to carry out a blatant attack on the Soviet state. After all, the connection between Nikolaev and the White Guard was seemingly intended to provoke certain feelings of hatred for the imperial past from those openly committed to the Socialist ideal.

On December 3, the official details of the assassination were finally released to the public. The record shows that Kirov was shot down outside his office in the former Smolny Institute. Kirov was without his body guard, Borisov, at the moment of the shooting.<sup>7</sup> According to the report released by the Commissariat of Internal Affairs, Kirov was about to enter his office when Nikolaev, who had been “lying in wait for him in a corridor, ... fired one bullet into the back of his neck, fracturing his skull. The wound was almost instantly fatal. ... Nikolaev was arrested on the spot ....”<sup>8</sup>

Later that evening and continuing into the early morning of December 4, Kirov’s body made its way from the Uritsky Palace in Leningrad to its final resting place in Moscow, escorted by leading Soviet officials, including Stalin, Commissar of Defense Klementi Voroshiloff, and Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars, V. M. Molotov.<sup>9</sup> By the time the procession reached Moscow, 71 people had been arrested: 32 in the Moscow region and 39 in the region of Leningrad, including the head of the Leningrad NKVD, Filip Medved. All seventy-one were labeled as White Guards and charged as “plotters of terroristic attacks against Soviet officials.”<sup>10</sup> This was the first attempt to take action against those responsible for the crime, other than Nikolaev who was still being held in custody. All would be sentenced according to the Politburo resolution passed that day stipulating that:

The Central Executive Committee of the USSR decrees:

To introduce the following changes in the existing criminal-procedural codes of the Union Republics dealing with the investigation and trial of cases of terrorist organizations and terrorist acts against workers of the Soviet power:

1. Investigation of such cases to be completed in a period not exceeding 10 days.
2. The indictment to be handed down to the accused one day before trial.
3. Cases to be heard without participation of prosecution and defense.
4. To allow no appeal against sentence or for pardon.
5. Death sentence to be carried out as soon as it is pronounced.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 37, 42. At the time of the press release, Borisov had already been killed in an automobile accident while he was being transported for interrogation. The vehicle was said to have hit a pole in transit, killing Borisov, though no one else in the car was injured. This would remain the official story until 1956, when it was alleged that Borisov did not die as a result of the accident but was intentionally killed by one of his escorts. Borisov’s death certificate was revised at that point to include “death by bludgeoning” as the true fate of the deceased. Milton Loventhal and Jennifer McDowell, “The Kirov Crisis: Breaking the Covenant,” *Canadian American Studies* 42, no. 2 (Winter 2008), 388.

<sup>8</sup> Denny, “Soviet Arrests,” 71.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Loventhal and McDowell, “The Kirov Crisis,” 397.

Of the 71 people arrested, 66 were shot dead before Kirov's body was cremated on the fifth of December.<sup>12</sup> Numerous mass arrests and subsequent executions, such as those of the original 71, would follow long after Kirov was buried and his assassin was executed. Therefore, by using the assassination as the fulcrum of his rationalization for a cleansing of the party, Stalin was able to move smoothly from initially placing blame on remnants of the czarist regime to later accusing ex-party members, and so-called "Left Deviators," of direct responsibility for Nikolaev's actions.<sup>13</sup> Former Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Comintern Grigory Zinoviev, his close ally Lev Kamenev, and former commander of the Red Army Leon Trotsky, were among those targeted.<sup>14</sup>

Zinoviev and Kamenev's alleged involvement in the Kirov assassination simply added to their turbulent history of membership in the Communist party. Once conspirators of Vladimir Lenin while he was in exile, Zinoviev and Kamenev also served as members of Stalin's governing *troika* (triumvirate) in 1923-1925.<sup>15</sup> During that time, the party turned against Trotsky and his Left Opposition, an act which eventually resulted in Trotsky's banishment from the Soviet Union in 1927. Zinoviev and Kamenev's expulsion from the party occurred in the same year, after a brief period in which the two men were united with Trotsky against Stalin's position on the possibility of establishing socialism successfully in one nation.<sup>16</sup> Unlike Trotsky, however, Zinoviev and Kamenev were later reinstated as party members after capitulating to the authorities.<sup>17</sup> The official announcement of the arrest of Zinoviev and Kamenev was released by the press on December 23, although rumors of their arrests had surfaced four days earlier.<sup>18</sup>

Zinoviev and Kamenev, as well as the seventeen others arrested with them, faced trial on January 15. On January 17, Zinoviev and Kamenev were found by the court to be "morally responsible" for Nikolaev's attack on Kirov, and were subsequently sentenced to varying degrees of imprisonment.<sup>19</sup> Neither Zinoviev, nor Kamenev, was allowed to finish his original sentence, however, before they were each brought to trial for a second time in August of 1936. At this point, the authorities had deduced that Zinoviev and Kamenev were heading a group known as the "Moscow Centre."<sup>20</sup> The members of this group were alleged to have been aware of the plan to assassinate Kirov, carried out by Nikolaev and the "Leningrad Center," and were in turn sentenced to death on August 24 for not only their participation in the death of Kirov, but for their involvement in a greater conspiracy to eliminate other Soviet leaders, including the General

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<sup>12</sup> Denny, "66 Are Executed by Soviet, Accused of 'Terrorist' Plots ... Kiroff Burial Today," *The New York Times*, December 6, 1934. <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.iwu.edu> (accessed November 1, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Denny, "28 More are Shot in Soviet Round-up ... Zinovieff Linked to Crime by Party Resolutions," *The New York Times*, December 18, 1934. <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.iwu.edu> (accessed November 1, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Trotsky, "On the Kirov Assassination," trans. John G. Wright, TIA version based on a 1956 version published without copyright by Pioneer Publishers, New York as an installment of the Pioneer Pocket Library. Website updated March 3, 2007. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1934/12/kirov.htm> (accessed November 1, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Denny, "28 More are Shot in Soviet Round-up."

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Harold Denny, "More Leaders Held as Foes of Soviet ... Head of Leningrad Soviet, Is One of the Prisoners," *The New York Times*, December 23, 1934. <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.iwu.edu> (accessed November 1, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 48.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

Secretary himself. The trial of Zinoviev, Kamenev and the fourteen others would come to be known as the “Trial of the Sixteen,” the first of Stalin’s infamous Moscow Trials.

The political shock wave that radiated from Kirov’s assassination reached far into the 1950s and beyond. The events of 1934 led directly into the show trials of 1936 and subsequently into the massive purge of the Communist party that encompassed the years 1936-1938. Though all of the individuals initially charged with direct involvement in the assassination were executed by the end of 1936, the discourse concerning the details of Nikolaev’s crime was revisited by “several secret commissions” between 1956 and 1967. Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet Premier from 1958 to 1964, also referred to the assassination in his Secret Speech, delivered February 1956 at the Twentieth Party Congress, and addressed the issue as a point of contention again at the Twenty-second Party Conference in 1961.<sup>21</sup>

In the early years of the Cold War, various Soviet refugees were interviewed by representatives from the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System (HPSSS). Though the assassination of Kirov does not seem to be a topic that was of specific interest to the interviewers, the refugees who did provide accounts of the incident provided a number of divergent explanations for Kirov’s death which more or less fail to clarify the already convoluted chain of events. Many of the individuals interviewed acknowledged the official version of the facts concerning the direct involvement of the Zinovievite-Trotskyist bloc, but remained reticent as to their own personal opinions of the situation. In sharp contrast to what the press had reported, in the refugee accounts, Stalin was often accused of being directly responsible for the murder. Kirov was seen merely as an excuse to launch the purge of the party that Stalin had long wanted to set in motion. With that in mind, what better first victim than a man who was suspected of maintaining allegiances to the Leninist era and whose growing popularity with the public, and various government agencies, was threatening to undermine Stalin as ruler of the party? One account, given by a “literary critic and newspaper correspondent,” described a period in which Kirov and Stalin were in disagreement over the extension of slave labor and forced agricultural production in the Soviet Union.<sup>22</sup> This discrepancy temporarily brought Kirov closer to Bukharin and the right opposition: “an alliance ... most dangerous ... for Stalin.”<sup>23</sup> Though Kirov was one of Stalin’s men, the interviewee specified that, “...in the party which Stalin was building an oppositionist [was] an enemy.”<sup>24</sup>

Still, there were others who refused to believe that the assassination was an assassination at all. One interviewee maintained that there was absolutely no political motive involved in the murder. Though the Soviet press does not appear to have presented an explanation of the crime that involved Nikolaev acting solely on personal motive, this individual assured his interviewer that “[t]here was no political implication in the death of Kirov.”<sup>25</sup> The man went on to say that he (Kirov) was “killed by the husband of an actress with whom Kirov was having an affair.”<sup>26</sup> This is not the only mention of Nikolaev having acted independently. More than one interview perpetuates the notion that Kirov was merely eliminated by a jealous husband. The issue of

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<sup>21</sup> Lenoë, “Did Stalin Kill Kirov and Does It Matter?” 363-365.

<sup>22</sup> Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System. Schedule B, Vol. 3, Case 49 [i.e. 31], interview by A.P. Widener Library, Harvard University. 49. <http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/5465179?n=2> (accessed November 1, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System. Schedule B, Vol. 7, Case 24, interview by M.L. Widener Library, Harvard University. 23. <http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/5434472?n=23> (accessed November 1, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

whether the woman Kirov was supposedly sleeping with was an actress or his secretary differs slightly between accounts, but the principle is the same.

However, why would a rumor surface, and become widely accepted by the public, that Kirov was having an affair with Nikolaev's wife if a theory of this nature was never mentioned in the official presses? If this was truly the reasoning behind the attack, why would the government have gone to the trouble to fabricate another politically charged explanation? It is possible that the government would have done so if Stalin needed an excuse to begin his purge, but how then would these believers in the affair between Kirov and Nikolaev's wife explain the events following the crime? That is, how could they explain the hundreds of people arrested and executed for complicity in the crime before Nikolaev himself was executed? Would the responsibility of these arrests not then be directly attributed to Stalin without a *justified* reason such as the need to restore, and maintain, national security? Upon closer inspection, this perspective on the assassination thus does not seem satisfactory.

Scholars including British historian Robert Conquest and biographer of Kirov, Amy Knight argue that there is little doubt that Stalin was the orchestrator of the entire Kirov assassination. According to their research Nikolaev was merely a puppet in the General Secretary's larger scheme of instigating a purge of the party that would in turn expel all proven, and potential, enemies from the inner circles of the Soviet state. Stalin, therefore, can be said to have used the death of one man to effectively imprison, exile, and/or execute millions of people throughout the Soviet Union and abroad. Despite how outlandish this last statement may sound, it is fundamentally true, whether Stalin explicitly planned the assassination or not.

No matter who was responsible for the initial attack on Kirov, it is fair to say that Stalin can be blamed for what was to follow, though even in this he did not act alone.<sup>27</sup> One must remember it was still necessary for Stalin to work within the standards that had been established by government policy following the Bolshevik revolution. Stalin was, to a certain extent, confined by a political structure that had prevailed for the last seventeen years. Even with the resolution passed on December 4, 1934, that granted Stalin permission to act as he saw fit and absolved him of the need to seek the approval of the Politburo,<sup>28</sup> there were still specific methods and courses of action which the Soviet government was expected to employ.

The difficulty in attempting to address the subject of the Kirov murder is that ultimately Nikolaev's attack on the Leningrad committee leader was not an isolated incident. This one act, whether political or personal, began long before December 1, and the ramifications of it reach far past the days of the Soviet bloc. Presently a decade into the twenty-first century, no one is able to definitively explain who, or what, was behind the killing. Owing to brief periods of relaxation in the Soviet and post-Soviet past, more documentation of the episode has been made public. However, even portions of the information that were released in the 1980s under General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies have already been shuffled away into the party archives, possibly never again to see the light of day. Under these conditions, it is difficult to find the truth. Arguably no one directly involved in the crime itself may have ever had all of the facts. If Stalin was the mastermind behind the whole ordeal, he could not have been certain that the assassination of one Politburo member would be enough to initiate a purge of the entire party. What if Nikolaev failed to follow through with the plan? What if Kirov suspected an attack?

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<sup>27</sup> Leno, "Did Stalin Kill Kirov?" 380.

<sup>28</sup> Loventhal and McDowell, "The Kirov Crisis," 390.

Historians could speculate on the events of December 1934 for the next fifty years and likely still fall far short of the truth. Surely new details would surface, never before seen documents would shed new light on the role of Nikolaev's bodyguard or on Trotsky's interaction with the "Moscow Centre," but to what avail? Soviet NKVD defector Walter Krivitsky, who in 1939 made an explicit claim in the *Saturday Evening Post* concerning Stalin's direct responsibility for the hit on Kirov, remarked that "[b]esides Stalin, there are probably no more than three or four people alive who could solve the Kirov mystery."<sup>29</sup> If these three or four people who, in 1939, could have *probably* cracked the case, are unnamed and are most certainly unavailable for comment, what hope is there to ever discover exactly what occurred that December day over seventy-five years ago? Nevertheless, despite the ambiguity that surrounds many of the details, it does appear certain that Stalin used the murder as a way to launch the infamous purges of the late 1930s.

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<sup>29</sup> Lenoë, "Did Stalin Kill Kirov?" 358.