Telegram from the Commonwealth Relations Office to U.K. High Commissioners in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India, Pakistan and Ceylon, dated 18 July 1953

CYPHER

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DOWNFALL OF BERIA[[1]](#footnote-1)

The background to Beria’s fall is obscure and the factual evidence fragmentary and conflicting. At present therefore we can formulate only generalised speculations and conclusions must await factual confirmation.

2. The important question is whether Beria’s fall signifies any change in home or foreign policy. It is reasonable to suppose that the trend of policy since Stalin’s death has been determined collectively and is not likely to change except with current Soviet assessment of Western intentions and of objective necessities. Beria, of course, may be made the scapegoat for various failures and his fall may have partly resulted through his lack of sympathy with the agreed policy; but it is hardly likely that he could by himself have put through policies markedly at variance with the general opinion of those who remain. Moreover trends of foreign and satellite policy at least have continued well after his arrest (events in Hungary and Korea). Any policy disagreements were probably of degree rather than kind and none of the three theories tentatively suggested below concerning Beria’s fall is inconsistent with the conclusion that no major reversal of policy need be expected.

3. This is the first crack since the death of Stalin in the façade of the “collective Government”. Factors of ambition and personal rivalry are clearly involved but we have no adequate knowledge of them. Nor do we know how far Beria’s elimination may have upset the balance which Stalin was able to hold between the Party, the Army and the Secret Police (M.V.D.[[2]](#footnote-2)). For the present the Party seem well in control. There is evidence that almost immediately after Stalin’s death a series of steps were taken to reduce the scope and power of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and State Security, and gestures were simultaneously made to the army. These facts support the theory that a struggle for power between Beria and his opponents, in their respective spheres, began almost immediately after Stalin’s death. If so, the M.V.D. has clearly received a significant setback. Beria’s successor, Kruglov[[3]](#footnote-3), has the reputation of being a boorish and not particularly intelligent policeman. Subsequent dismissals of Beria’s protégés, e.g. Dekanozov[[4]](#footnote-4) and Meshik[[5]](#footnote-5), whom he appears to have recently installed as Head of the Georgian and Ukranian M.V.D. respectively, suggest a general scrutiny of his appointments. The declaration of support for the Central Committee of the Party by the Party Organisation of the Ministry of Defence, issued on 15th July[[6]](#footnote-6), suggests that those army leaders who were present wished to demonstrate their fidelity to the Party for the time being as least. We cannot tell how things may develop but if the struggle continues, e.g. for possession of the M.V.D. or if the Party and army were to fall out, it could have far reaching consequences. Bulganin, the Defence Minister, has always been a dark horse.

4. Two theories have been advanced as regards possible differences over policies. The first is that Beria was out of sympathy with the “new look”, and resisted the domestic and foreign policy concessions; the second, that he wished to push them too far and too fast. As regards the former, it might be argued that when Stalin complained of the security services being inefficient before the “Doctor’s plot” this complaint was already a reflection on Beria, who was, however, perhaps as a fellow Georgian and protégé of Stalin, given a chance to right himself in the purges which followed. These measures, however, were disowned and condemned after Stalin’s death and the cloud may therefore have continued to hang over Beria. However, no immediate steps were possible against him in view of the need to preserve a façade of unity during the change-over of power. Further support for this theory, of course, is the general probability that Beria had been the chief instrument of Stalin’s repressive policies, to which may be added the strong general presumptions against the theory that Beria was pushing the policy of concessions too far and too fast.

5. It seems incredible to think that the police chief of all people managed to survive for 15 years in violent private disagreement with Stalin, or, for example that it was he who advocated the amnesty which deprived the secret police of a great part of its free labour. It is true that Beria’s utterances immediately after Stalin’s death were somewhat less respectful to him than those of the others but this may be explained by a sense of the danger of his position. The factual evidence is unfortunately confusing and contradictory and most of the charges publicly brought against Beria are either totally unreal or could be twisted either way. The exception is that he “used M.V.D. organs…against the Party and its leadership and against the Government”[[7]](#footnote-7). This may well be taken at its face value and relate to the struggle for power.

6. Which of these two possibilities is correct should before long be demonstrated by the continuance, cessation or reversal of the policy of concessions. For the moment all that can be said is that there is a fair presumption in favour of a struggle for power, that in so elimination was mainly the result of a struggle for power, that in so far as there were policy differences he was the reactionary, and that his removal is not of itself likely to alter the present trend. But if the victims themselves now fall out there is no telling where the repercussions of his fall might lead.

7. The above may be used freely in discussion with Commonwealth authorities but you should emphasise that it is only our very tentative views at official level and assure them that we shall try to send them a more substantial and reliable assessment in due course.

[TNA, FO 371/106518]

Keywords: post-war order, Beria’s downfall, Post-Stalin leadership

1. L.P. Beria had been arrested on 26 June 1953, tried in secret and executed in December 1953. . [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As it appears in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kruglov, Sergei Nikiforovich (1907–1977) - official in the Soviet state security apparatus, Minister of Internal Affairs of the USSR (1946–1956). After the death of Stalin on 5 March 1953, he relinquished this post to L.P. Beria until the latter was arrested on 26 June 1953. He was People’s Commissar for Internal Affairs of the USSR (1945–1946). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dekanozov (Dekanozishvili), Vladimir Georgievich (1898–1953) – Soviet political figure. Minister of Internal Affairs of the Georgian SSR (from April to July 1953), USSR Ambassador to Germany (1940–1941). Arrested on 30 June during the campaign against “Beria’s band”; he was shot on 23 December 1953. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Meshik, Pavel Iakovlevich (1910–1953) – Soviet military and political figure. Minister of Internal Affairs of the Ukrainian SSR (from April through to July 1953). Arrested on 30 June during the campaign against “Beria’s band”, he was shot on 23 December 1953. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In fact, on 15 July, plenum meetings of Party committees were held in all the largest organisations in the USSR. See: *Pravda*. No. 196. 15 July 1953. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This phrase is taken from the decree of the plenum meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union of 7 July 1953 *On the Criminal Anti-Party and Anti-State Activities of Beria*. See: Lavrentii Beriia. 1953. Stenogramma iulskogo plenuma TsK KPSS i drugie dokumenty. М., 1999 S. 365-373. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)