

Who Killed Kirov?

a review of historians' theories

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Abstract

Who killed Kirov? This question has interested many historians since soon after the assassination until today. This is an analysis of their theories.

Kirov was one of Stalin's closest friends, and closely involved in Stalin's fight for control during the 1930's. He was murdered on December 1st, 1934. Initially the blame was placed by the NKVD, Stalin's secret police, on a Trotskyist conspiracy. This has long been discounted by historians. Three theories have remained, each claiming the responsibility of different people. Either it was a lone gunman called Leonid Nikolaev who both planned the assassination and carried it out. Or the NKVD planned it and used Nikolaev to carry it out. The third theory states that Stalin used both the NKVD (Soviet Security police) and Nikolaev to carry out a deed which would serve as a pretext for the wave of terror that peaked during 1937 and 1938.

This essay looks at the time before the murder, the conflicting theories and their background and Kirov's role in the Soviet Union. Different theories have flourished at different times – but the one where Nikolaev acted alone is now preferred by historians. 1990 marks a change of opinion when Soviet archives, previously closed to the public, were opened. Before this Stalin was regarded as the mind behind the murder although there were no documents to support this. However a major debate between historians has concerned the reliability of the documents associated with the case. While there are no documents pointing to Stalin, there is no reason to expect any. He would have discussed a murder of a prominent party member verbally and not on paper. Similarly, as all the original documents were either obtained or processed by the NKVD, their involvement would be covered up wherever possible. This might be why they have taken a minor role in the discussion between historians, relative to Stalin's involvement. After showing how historians' views still conflict it is concluded that the question remains open.

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Who Killed Kirov?

Introduction

Many historians have tried to answer the question of who killed Kirov. There were several unresolved murders during Stalin's reign, but this one has been given a large amount of attention because it was used as a tool to discredit opponents -for Stalin the Trotskyists and for Khrushchev Stalin. Also it marked the beginning of the Great Terror unleashed by Stalin. It has even been compared to the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand 1914.¹

Kirov was killed on December 1st, 1934, and ever since that time there has been doubt concerning who was responsible. Kirov was 3rd Secretary in the Communist Party, a popular person and one of Stalin's closest friends. The murder was conducted during a time of tension within society and the Communist party. Stalin was working towards complete control but there were still elements of defiance. To add to the tension, Kirov seemed to be claimed by both the opposition and Stalin. Three credible theories of the murder have remained. The first describes how an unstable person, named Leonard Nikolaev, both planned and executed the assassination. The two other theories agree that he performed the murder but deny that he acted on his own initiative. Instead the second theory claims that the NKVD used him and they paved the way for him. The third theory takes it a step further and states that both Nikolaev and the NKVD were used by Stalin. Stalin took advantage of the murder and launched a terror campaign that would reach its peak during 1937-38. Due to his Decree of Emergency the right to appeal after conviction was removed, which in turn led the arrest of 1108 delegates from the most recent Party Congress, most of whom died later in labour camps.

Who lay behind the assassination in the eyes of historians?

Background

In the 1930's the economic and social strains were becoming intolerable, despite the near-completion of the Five-Year Plan. Service describes how in 1932 the famine intensified around the rural areas and strikes and demonstrations against the regime appeared in towns. Stalin tackled this from two different ends. First, he announced a lowering of the industrial growth target in 1933 to reduce the workers' workload. Second, he increased the

¹ De Jonge p. 315

punishments. From August, peasants who stole even a handful of grain could be sentenced to death or at least ten years imprisonment.²

Stalin strived for complete control and was beginning to succeed within the party. According to Rayfield, all power in the USSR flowed from Stalin's Kremlin office in the 1930's. He had ensured that only loyal members remained in key positions.³ This can be seen in the later half of 1932 when no member of the Politburo dared to challenge any of Stalin's decisions.⁴ Despite Stalin's measures to achieve ultimate control, two events demonstrate that he had not completely succeeded.

The Ryutin affair in 1932 shows both the existence of an opposition and Kirov's influence over Stalin. Dmitri Volkogonov describes how M. N. Ryutin, the previous Commander of Irkutsk, party secretary from the same area and candidate member of the Central Committee had begun to get carried away by his feelings. He circulated a document entitled "To All Members of the [Party]" aimed at Stalin. Stalin found out and demanded that the Politburo should sentence Ryutin to death without trial. This was the first time the Politburo had been asked to do such a thing. Kirov spoke up, claiming that this could not be done, and convinced Stalin to give him ten years imprisonment instead.⁵

The Seventeenth Party Congress during January and February 1932 also demonstrated Stalin's unpopularity and lack of control. Montefiore writes how some regional bosses met in secret before the congress to discuss Stalin's removal. They had their private motives, for example being scorned or insulted by Stalin. Kirov was asked if he would be an alternative candidate. Kirov refused, but promised to forward their complaints. Indeed he told Stalin, who is said to have been grateful to Kirov.⁶ Stalin was now aware of disloyalty within the party and his lack of control. The congress itself was called the Congress of Victors and the power struggle could not be sensed in the joyous air. However something out of the ordinary happened in the election for the Central Committee. Members crossed out the names they rejected, voting for those remaining. Kirov received one or two negatives, while the Politburo members Kaganovich and Molotov received over a hundred each. Stalin himself polled between 123 and 292 negatives. The results are supported by Service's comment that there were grumbles about Stalin's methods and ambitions. Members thought a time of consolidation was necessary.⁷ When Kaganovich saw the results he asked Stalin how to handle it. According to Montefiore he was almost certainly told to destroy most of Stalin's negative votes, leaving 166 votes unaccounted for. This was a blow to

² Service p. 311

³ Rayfield p.195

⁴ Service p. 311

⁵ Volkogonov p. 206 f.

⁶ Montefiore p. 131 f.

⁷ Service p. 313

Stalin's self-esteem and confirmed that "he rode along two-faced double-dealers"⁸. Montefiore points out that the circumstances are still mysterious and that Kaganovich denied having any part in it⁹. Service writes that if Montefiore's description is correct, the concern of the arrested Ryutin was being answered and Stalin stood in danger of political oblivion.¹⁰

The murder

Most descriptions of the murder of Kirov are consistent in the main details. It occurred at 16.30 on December 1st, 1934, in the Smolny Institute in Leningrad. Kirov's bodyguard, Borisov, had accompanied Kirov into the building, but was behind him when he reached his office. Montefiore writes that this was either due to unfitness or because he was strangely delayed by some Chekists from Moscow who appeared at the door.¹¹ However Knight writes that both Kirov and Borisov were met by four NKVD guards who followed them up the stairs¹² after which Kirov walked ahead to his office. The usual guards on each floor were absent. Leonid Nikolaev, the convicted murderer, shot Kirov in the neck while he was traversing the narrow passage leading towards his office. He shot either once or twice, the second being explained as a failed suicide attempt. Conquest describes how Nikolaev fainted beside Kirov;¹³ Montefiore explains that this was because a nearby electrician knocked him down¹⁴, while Volkogonov states he was writhing hysterically on the floor.¹⁵ Borisov arrived shortly after Kirov fell dead to the ground. Was the gun found on the floor or in Nikolaev's hand? Conflicts in this testimony lead Knight to consider that Nikolaev might have been framed.¹⁶

Stalin and some of his closest associates travelled to Leningrad a few hours later to take control of the investigation.¹⁷ He carried out some interrogations himself, including the first with Nikolaev. On the way to interrogation, Borisov, travelling in a NKVD vehicle, died in a crash where no one else was harmed. He could therefore not be questioned.

The initial official version of the murder was that Nikolaev shot Kirov, while Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev planned it and ordered Nikolaev to perform it.¹⁸ As a result Nikolaev was executed, Zinoviev and Kamenev were moved to labour camps and later shot, and Trotsky

⁸Montefiore p. 132

⁹ Montefiore p. 132

¹⁰ Service p. 313

¹¹ Montefiore p. 146

¹² Knight p.189

¹³ Conquest p.19

¹⁴ Montefiore p. 147

¹⁵ Volkogonov p. 207

¹⁶ Knight p. 192

¹⁷ Volkogonov p. 207

¹⁸ Volkogonov p. 208

was deported from the Soviet Union to be killed years later in Mexico. This version was quickly identified as a way for Stalin to remove his dangerous opponents.¹⁹ Rayfield writes that not only was Nikolaev forced to confess links to Trotsky, but also to admit that his wife was part of a Latvian espionage ring.²⁰

The theories

The dispute has not been about how the murder was carried out but rather who plotted it. Was it Nikolaev acting alone, the NKVD or Stalin?

The first theory depicts Nikolaev as entirely responsible for the assassination. A map showing Kirov's route to work and a revolver were confiscated. According to Rayfield, Nikolaev's diary included notes of times, addresses, distances and shot angles for the assassination.²¹ Moreover Conquest writes that he spoke openly to friends about his plans to kill Kirov.²² He had a motive, after his dismissal from his post within the communist party in March, 1934, which left him unemployed. Another motive frequently brought up by historians, and usually discarded, is that Nikolaev's wife had an affair with Kirov.²³ According to Montefiore, Nikolaev wrote to both Stalin and Kirov complaining of his plight during this time.²⁴ Adding to this he was psychologically strained and had begun seeing himself as a murderer of historical dimensions, which he turned out to be in the end.²⁵

There is little doubt that Nikolaev committed the assassination. The questions are rather; was he sufficiently motivated to go through with it by himself or did others encourage and assist him? This question is raised by some oddities surrounding the murder. How did Nikolaev get access to a corridor without the necessary pass-card? Why was Kirov's bodyguard not in place? Where were the guards who were supposed to supervise the different floors? Why was the bullet not matched with the revolver in Nikolaev's hand until 32 years after the murder? Why were there two cartridges lying on the floor linked to the NKVD?²⁶

These questions lead to the second theory in which NKVD planned the assassination, and used Nikolaev to perform it. In 1938, this became the official story after Yagoda confessed planning the murder at a show trial. Later in the 1950's this became the opinion in the Soviet press. Although he only confessed at a show trial, this theory has survived but under more developed arguments. Early on, Medved, the head of NKVD in Leningrad, was charged with the murder, but in this theory he is innocent. According to Rybakov, Zaporozhets, the

¹⁹ Persson

²⁰ Rayfield p.243

²¹ Rayfield p. 241

²² Conquest p. 25

²³ Volkogonov p.211

²⁴ Montefiore p. 153

²⁵ Conquest p.22

²⁶ Persson

second-in-command, had started to take orders from Yagoda rather than from Medved. He failed to arrest Nikolaev twice despite suspicious behaviour and is alleged to have had secret dealings with him. Therefore he is more likely to have been part of the plot against Kirov. Further, Conquest points out that the secret service were likely to be aware of Nikolaev's secret plans and chose to ignore them.²⁷ The most prominent support for this theory is that Nikolaev himself stated that NKVD had forced him to kill Kirov.²⁸

On the other hand NKVD's motive is obscure. It is not clear what they would gain from it, and if they went against the will of Stalin the punishment would be severe²⁹, especially since Kirov was one of Stalin's closest friends, at least outwardly.

The third theory claims Stalin was ultimately responsible for Kirov's murder. He supposedly planned it, and used NKVD and Nikolaev to perform the assassination. Trotsky stated in 1935 that Yagoda would never have performed such a risky business without direct approval from Stalin.³⁰ It has been thought that he and Kirov were the closest of friends but some argue that tension had developed between them. In letters to his wife, Kirov wrote how he disliked spending holidays together with Stalin.³¹ On Stalin's birthday 1929, Kirov's speech to him included several disparaging remarks³². Moreover the 17th Congress and the Ryutin affair show the immense popularity of Kirov, which Stalin would have seen as a threat. Another important argument is that Stalin used Kirov's death to launch the terror campaign, starting with his Decree of Emergency initiated the same day as the murder.³³ Using the murder as a pretext, he arrested 1108 out of the 1225 delegates from the Seventeenth Congress as well as more than a million other people.³⁴

Kirov

Who was Kirov and why was he worth assassinating? He was born 1886 as Sergej Kostrikov in the village Urzhum. The 1905 revolution interrupted his plans for university education. Instead he joined the Social Democrat Party and became involved in underground politics. In 1926 he arrived in Leningrad to clear up the mess left by the previous party chief, Grigorij Zinoviev. He is described as the Communist Party's favourite; a diligent worker for the party,

²⁷ Detained in the party building two months earlier carrying a gun and he was discussing his plans openly and practiced shooting. Donald Rayfield p. 241 and Robert Conquest p. 25

²⁸ Conquest p.161

²⁹ De Jonge p.316

³⁰ Conquest p. 142, refers to *Bjuletten oppositsii nt. 42, 1935*

³¹ Knight p.180

³² Knight p. 138

³³ Rayfield p. 240:

1. The investigation of such cases must be completed in no more than ten days;
2. The charges will be handed to the accused twenty-four hours before the court examines the case;
3. The case will be heard with no participation by other parties;
4. No appeals for quashing the verdict or for mercy will be allowed;
5. The death sentence is to be carried out as soon as it has been pronounced.

³⁴ Volkogonov p.212

first-class speaker and a loyal Bolshevik. Yet he was not a lapdog in the way Volkogonov describes Molotov and Kaganovich.³⁵ His utter dedication to the cause was displayed through his actions for the party. Like many others, he believed that ruthlessness would bring good in the end. An example can be given from the civil war in 1919, where Kirov gave orders to repress an uprising in Astrachan. Around 4000 people were shot without trial during one month.

Kirov and Stalin were close friends who shared holidays together and Kirov often visited Stalin's family where he became popular with the children. Volkogonov reflects that there was probably no other party figure for whom Stalin showed such care and even affection.³⁶ However it was a one-sided relationship.³⁷ Kirov preferred other friends but felt required to spend time with Stalin. Stalin's friendships were "like teenage infatuations, meandered between love, admiration and venomous jealousy."³⁸ This is most likely true for Stalin's relationship with Kirov. There are two conflicting theories regarding their relationship. Knight argues that tension had begun to build up between Kirov and Stalin. In a birthday speech to Stalin the 29th of December 1929 Kirov discredited Stalin's revolutionary work and pointed out that Stalin came from Georgia and not Russia. Also, he mentioned Lenin's testament in which Lenin harshly criticised Stalin. Few within the party knew of this document at the time³⁹. Kirov's displeasure in spending holidays with Stalin and the outcome of the 17th Congress added to the tension. On the other hand, Lenoe argues that there is little evidence for conflict between them. No disagreements can be found in the protocols from the Politburo.⁴⁰ In fact Kirov seldom opposed Stalin, though Stalin listened when he did. This is seen in the Ryutin affair where Stalin listened and followed his opinion. Nevertheless he made sure not to come close to the opposition.

Kirov was a popular person. Volkogonov explains that wherever he went a crowd would gather.⁴¹ The best example of his popularity is the Seventeenth Party Congress. Ignoring the doubts regarding the number of votes Stalin received compared to Kirov, he was undoubtedly popular. When he entered the floor the Congress exploded into an ovation⁴². This is often seen to make him a threat to Stalin's position as a leader, but Lenoe points out that in reality he did not have the capacity to aspire to threaten Stalin, whether he wanted to or not.⁴³ He was educated as a mechanic, so had no theoretic education. He was not well

³⁵ Volkogonov p. 204

³⁶ Volkogonov p. 205

³⁷ Montefiore p. 155

³⁸ Montefiore P.155

³⁹ Knight p. 138 f.

⁴⁰ Samuelson

⁴¹ Volkogonov p.205

⁴² Montefiore p. 132

⁴³ Samuelson

read in Marxism either. In Lenoë's eyes Kirov was simply a popular local leader, not an alternative national leader to Stalin.⁴⁴

Analysis

Nikolaev

The most recent theory, from Lenoë's analysis amongst others, is the one in which Nikolaev acted alone. Lenoë has critically examined works claiming Stalin's involvement looking for solid evidence. As Samuelson points out, most previous analysis is based on published official documents and second-hand information from previous Soviet officers, none of which are trustworthy.⁴⁵ Lenoë examines an investigation by Nikita Khrushchev into the 1934 interrogations of Nikolaev from which Stalin's guilt could not be concluded.⁴⁶ Lenoë mentions Khlevniuk's conclusion that Nikolaev must have acted alone since the new archival evidence is consistent with this theory.⁴⁷ The new archival evidence was opened to the public in 1990-1991 and Lenoë makes use of it.⁴⁸ Yet Lenoë himself uses material from NKVD officers, and goes to great lengths to defend these sources as trustworthy. Commissar Liushkov was one of the interrogators of the Kirov murder. In an article published in Japan he asserts that Nikolaev was psychologically unbalanced lone assassin and that Borisov's death really had been an accident. What makes this statement valuable is that the article presents an anti-Stalin view but Liushkov still reaches this conclusion.⁴⁹

The NKVD

In the NKVD there are two people who should be considered. The first is Zaporozhets and the other Yagoda. Zaporozhets twice released Nikolaev when he had been acting suspiciously before the murder.⁵⁰ Later, when Yagoda was on trial, he confessed ordering Zaporozhets not to place any obstacles in the way of an attack against Kirov. However, as his confession was made at a show trial during Stalin's massive purges, the confession can be questioned.

The NKVD's involvement is a crucial question, because it is required by two of the three theories. However, the evidence is conflicting even where it should not be controversial. Did Nikolaev enter the Smolny Institute with a gun? Rayfield says yes. Knight says he approached Kirov in the street, and at the railway station. Did security guards prevent Borisov from following Kirov up to his room? Montefiore says yes. Knight says no - the guards accompanied both Kirov and Borisov up to the 3rd floor, after which Kirov walked faster than Borisov to his office. Was Borisov murdered? Liushkov says no. Knight says perhaps,

⁴⁴ Samuelson

⁴⁵ Samuelson

⁴⁶ Samuelson

⁴⁷ Lenoë, *Key to the Kirov Murder on the Shelves of Hokkaido University Library* p. 3

⁴⁸ Samuelson

⁴⁹ Lenoë, *Key to the Kirov Murder on the Shelves of Hokkaido University Library* p.3 f.f.

⁵⁰ Rayfield p. 241

pointing out suspicious circumstances surrounding his death. The only point on which there seems to be agreement is that there were no security guards on the floors as usual.

What remains unclear is the NKVD's motive. De Jonge questions whether they could be the brains behind the murder since they would not be thanked, Kirov being one of Stalin's closest colleagues.⁵¹ At the same time Montefiore states that if the NKVD planned the murder, Stalin would not want to know whether they was responsible, which explains why the investigation was brief and the perpetrators quickly executed.⁵² However neither argument addresses motive. Possibly the NKVD thought they were carrying out Stalin's intentions without being given specific orders. Though plausible, no historian can be found expressing this viewpoint apart from de Jonge who poses this as one of the theories.

Stalin

Gudrun Persson describes how an official commission formed in 1960 to investigate the murder of Kirov concluded that Stalin and the NKVD were together responsible for the murder of Kirov, and that NKVD were responsible for Borisov's death.⁵³ According to one of the commissioners, many key documents disappeared after that investigation. Lenoe argues that the commission's investigation was steered by current politics.⁵⁴ In the 1960's Khrushchev led the Soviet Union and was responsible for de-Stalinization.⁵⁵

A major argument for the third theory is the threat Kirov posed, considering his popularity at the 17th party congress. It is probable that Stalin would have felt threatened by Kirov and done something about it. However there is a lack of evidence. All that is known is that 166 votes went missing, which Kaganovich denied destroying them on Stalin's orders.⁵⁶ We have the view presented by Knight of a discord between them, both personal and political.⁵⁷ On the other hand the protocols from the Politburo's meetings reveal no deep political difference. Evidently the relationship between Kirov and Stalin has been intensively scrutinised to establish a possible motive for Stalin, both sides presenting relevant documents.

Discussion

When looking at responsibility, both motive and execution has to be considered. The possible gain for the NKVD has to be compared to the danger of assassinating Kirov. Since few conclude that the NKVD's were guilty the danger seems to have been too vast. In

⁵¹ de Jonge p.316.

⁵² Not only Nikolaev was sentenced to death, around ten others were also on the basis of conspiracy.

⁵³ Persson p. 2

⁵⁴ Lenoe, *Khrushchev Era Politics and the Investigation of the Kirov Murder, 1956-1957* p.48

⁵⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikita_Khrushchev

⁵⁶ Montefiore p. 132

⁵⁷ Persson and Knight p. 138, p. 180

comparison, Nikolaev and Stalin both had clear motives for killing Kirov, Nikolaev was unhappy with his own situation and Kirov's popularity began to threaten Stalin's power. Addressing the execution of the murder, the first theory where Nikolaev is the only assassin seems more plausible than the third. Stalin's usual method of eliminating possible opponents was to deem them traitors, arrest them and have them shot. In other cases their deaths were made to look like accidents.⁵⁸ Why the sudden change of method? Persson considers the possibility but concludes that Kirov was so popular that a trial against him could be dangerous.⁵⁹ Still this does not exclude the possibility of a fake fatal accident. Nikolaev's method was consistent with his motive. He was twice caught acting suspiciously, revealing his plans to revenge his suspension from the party. Samuelson points out that after studying his diary, letters and appeals to different men in power during 1934, the murder seems to be initiated by Nikolaev.⁶⁰ Rayfield writes "party commissions between 1956 and 1990, witnesses' testimonies and archival searches have not proved Stalin's complicity, and the simplest explanation seems the best: that Leonid Nikolaev was a demented, aggrieved killer acting on his own, aided only by luck in encountering Kirov when he was unguarded."⁶¹ Though evidently Nikolaev was helped by a lot of luck, was it random or created?

Many agree that little solid evidence is found against Stalin. According to Service, all evidence is circumstantial, but Montefiore writes that it is naïve to expect written evidence for such a crime. Montefiore continues to say that with other murders Stalin gave verbal orders.⁶² These orders would obviously not be found in an archive, forged or not. Although more recent works have access to previously closed archives; documents could still be destroyed or corrupted. Nikolaev's diary and early witness statements were processed by the security police and could be forgeries to hide Stalin's guilt. Yet, as Lenoe points out, if they were forged in the Stalin era, Zinoviev, Kamenev and their associates would be portrayed as plotting the murder and if they were forged during Khrushchev's time as leader of the Soviet Union, Stalin would turn out to be the perpetrator. They do not; instead Nikolaev is displayed as the only assassin.⁶³ However since they were processed by the NKVD, clear evidence of their involvement would be removed in any case.

It is difficult to see historians agreeing on a theory in the near future. Though all agree on one point, namely that the Kirov murder marked the beginning of the era of terror that reached its culmination between 1937 and 1938. Montefiore writes: "Whether or not he killed Kirov, Stalin certainly exploited the murder to destroy not only his opponents but the less radical among his own allies."⁶⁴ Volkogonov: "Kirov's murder marked the approach of a

⁵⁸ Donald Rayfield, *Stalin and His Hangmen*, p.242

⁵⁹ Persson p.2

⁶⁰ Samuelsson

⁶¹ Rayfield p. 240

⁶² Montefiore p. 155

⁶³ Lenoe article p. 3

⁶⁴ Montefiore P. 156

sinister era.”⁶⁵ Rayfield: “His murder was the trigger to exterminate every Bolshevik who opposed Stalin, or who might conceivably take his place.”⁶⁶ His Decree on Emergency issued the same day as the murder enabled trials and death penalties to be implemented immediately without appeal. This can be compared to the Enabling Act in Germany passed on March 23rd, 1933. This too was passed after an incident labelled as a terrorist attack; the Reichstag fire. Thus both Stalin and Hitler used an attack on state and security to defend their law undermining public freedom.

Conclusion

The murder of Kirov is an unusual historical enquiry. There are many documents, but few of them have not been questioned. Confessions have been given at show trials and investigators have had their own agendas. Even the archives released by the Soviet Union could be forged. Hence more attention must be given to which of the different explanations seem most reasonable.

According to Rayfield another event would have served as pretext to the terror if Kirov had not been assassinated.⁶⁷ Therefore it seems unreasonable that Stalin would have gone to these great lengths to murder Kirov even if it was an act of rage as Montefiore reflects.⁶⁸ The Emergency Decree that followed was a reaction to the assassination of his best friend and a practical way to get rid of his opponents.

Yet it is difficult to conclude that Nikolaev was only aided by luck. Although few historians believe the NKVD acted on their own initiative, they are the centre of too many unresolved questions. It is possible that they passively let Nikolaev go through with the assassination believing this was Stalin’s wish.

Despite the opening of the archives, historians are unlikely to agree how Kirov came to be killed. What historians do agree upon is how Stalin used the death to initiate the terror campaign in the Soviet Union. As Volkogonov writes: “Perhaps, in defiance to the historical calendar, 1937 began on 1 December 1934?”

⁶⁵ Volkogonov p.209

⁶⁶ Rayfield p.245

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⁶⁸ Montefiore p. 155 f.

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