MIKOYAN MIGHT HAVE KILLED STALIN HENCHMAN LAVRENTI BERIA

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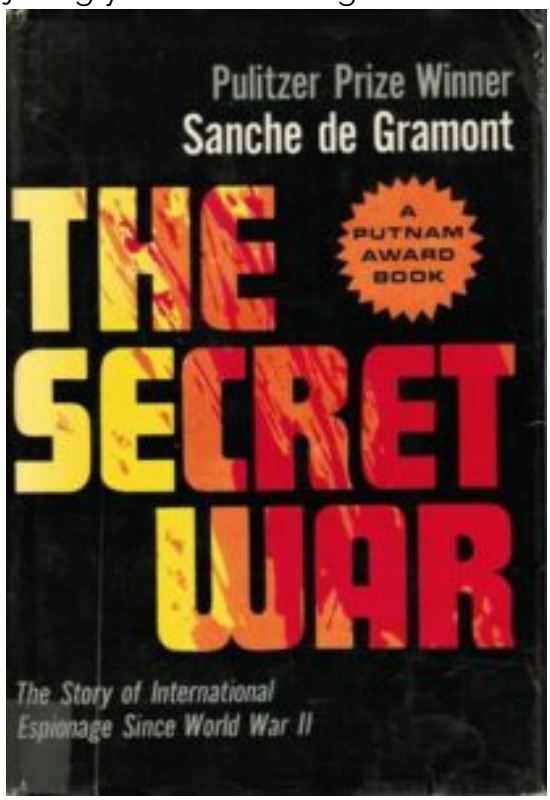
This excerpt from "The Secret War" by Sancho de Gramont offers several versions of the death of Lavrenti Beria in 1953. Although a great many secrets of the Soviet Union were revealed when that country disintegrated, the de Gramont version hasn't been challenged after more than fifty-five years.

Several versions of Beria's death have circulated in the West and continue to circulate eight years after the event. The official version released by the Soviet Government was that Beria was ousted from the Presidium in June after trying to seize power. His Arrest and those of five other high-ranking State Security officers were announced July 10. He was tried in a six-day closed trial and his death sentence was announced Christmas Eve 1953 and carried out immediately. The official account left many questions unanswered and rumors soon began to spread. The most tenacious rumor was that Beria had been shot and killed after a stormy Presidium session with the help of high-ranking Army officers.

In 1956, Khrushchev lent credence to another version during the visit to Moscow of a delegation of French Socialist Party leaders. Pointing to Trade Minister Mikoyan, he told the delegates half-jokingly: "You are sitting next to the man who killed Beria." He then explained that Beria had admitted his anti-State plot at a tense four-hour meeting of the Presidium. As Beria left the meeting hall and walked down an adjoining circular corridor, Mikoyan came up from behind and shot him in the back.



This was not to be Khrushchev's last word on the subject. At the 22nd Party Congress in October,

1961, he gave what was apparently intended to be a definitive version of Beria's death in a secret speech to the 1,000 Soviet and foreign delegates The substance of the speech, which was leaked to Western journalists in Warsaw in mid-November, sounds like a showdown between two rival gangs. Dramatic high points feature Beria and Khrushchev grappling over an automatic pistol and Beria being gunned down (or arrested at gunpoint: the Warsaw informants here seem to have been of two minds) by a Soviet general.

Accounts of the speech quote Khrushchev as saying that Beria had used the NKVD (espionage department) troops under his command to surround the Kremlin and have the Presidium member hostile to his bid for power constantly watched. They were searched each time they entered the Kremlin. At the same time, Beria was placing his men in key Party and Government posts. The plot to liquidate Beria was initiated by Khrushchev with the support of Molotov, Malenkov, and Bulganin. The scene for the showdown was a special meeting of the eleven Presidium members called to discuss military matters. The reason for the meeting justified the presence in the Kremlin of three Army generals loyal to the anti-Beria group: George Zhukov, World War II hero who had been forced into obscurity by Stalin; Rodion Malinovsky, who was later to become Minister of Defense; and Kirill Moskalenko, the "hatchet man" of the plot, who was reward for his decisive role with the rank of Marshal in 1956 and with the post of Deputy Defense Ministers in charge of Soviet rocket forces in 1960.

Zhukov and Malinovsky were admitted to the conference room when the evening meeting started. Moskalenko, who had smuggled a submachine gun past Beria guards, was in an adjoining room with about six men. He was to act when summoned by a buzzer under Malenkov's foot. When Beria arrived at the meeting, Khrushchev questioned his right to be there. He charged that Beria had never been admitted as a Communist Party member.

This charge was patently false, as Beria had been named secretary of the Caucasian Communist Party.in 1939 and had been a Politburo member since 1946. As Beria protested, Khrushchev assailed him with another extravagant charge—that in 1934 he had been accused of having been a British agent in 1918. Beria replied that he had been vindicated of this charge by Stalin himself. Realizing that the Presidium meeting had been called to trap him, Beria reached into his attaché case and pulled out an automatic. Khrushchev said he lunged at Beria and wrestled with him for the weapon. Malenkov pushed the buzzer. Moskalenko burst into the romm and (here is where accounts differ) either cut down Beria with a submachine-gun burst or arrested him at gunpoint for subsequent execution.

Perhaps the account could be discounted as too fantastic to be true where it not for the fact that a month after the Warsaw leak, a prominent Polish journalist committed suicide two days after his arrest in connection with the leak. The journalist, Henryk Holland, was a former editor of the Polish Press Agency and was well known for his liberal views and his opposition to the Gomulka regime. Soviet demands that the leak be investigated were an indirect admission that the secret speech was

genuine. The investigation led to Holland's arrest. On December 21, the forty-one-year-old journalist accompanied Polish security police as they searched his fifth-floor apartment. As the security police busied themselves opening closets and drawers, Holland jumped out a window to his death.

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