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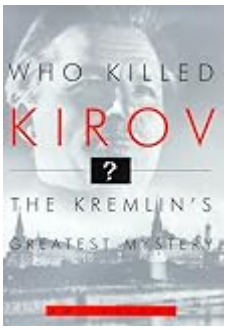

Amy Knight. *Who Killed Kirov? The Kremlin's Greatest Mystery.* New York: Hill & Wang, 1999. xiv + 331 pp. $26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-6404-5.

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The Greatest Mystery?

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Amy Knight, the author of a biography on Lavrenti Beria, head of the NKVD and MVD from the late 1930s through the early 1950s, has now written a major biography of Sergei Kirov, secretary of the Leningrad party organisation from the mid-1920s until 1934, when he was assassinated. The starting point of the whole story is Kirov's murder, one of the most interesting episodes of Soviet history before World War II. Some historians have interpreted the murder as a crime organised by Stalin, the *spiritus rector* of all evil deeds in the Soviet Union, and as the initial stage of the Great Terror, that climaxed in the years 1936-1938. Knight declares that in order to understand the 1934 murder one has to know the whole story of Kirov's life. Thus she tells it from alpha to omega.

As the author of a good crime novel would, Knight starts with the victim's funeral and the immediate events after the murder. Indeed, it was the case that the NKVD uncovered a conspiracy against Kirov. This conspiracy was made up of Leningrad party members or expelled ones. The former leading and repentant oppositionists Zinoviev and Kamenev were accused of being in charge of the conspiratorial organisation and afterwards put on trial. Nonetheless the cases were certainly fabricated and the trials had nothing to do with justice. They were political processes in order to prove the existence of a terrorist organisation designed to destabilise the socialist construction in the Soviet Union.

In 1886, Kirov started his life in the Russian provincial city of Urzhum, from where he left his family after the death of his alcoholic father. After leaving for Kazan, he never came back to his native city and would not see his sisters again. In Kazan he took up engineering studies, sponsored by a local charitable society, and later moved to Tomsk in Siberia. During his studies he came into contact with Social Democratic circles. At first he belonged to the Mensheviks, but then changed sides to the Bolsheviks in the course of the revolutionary events of 1905. As a consequence of his activities he was incarcerated and released in 1908. In order to avoid the police he went to Vladikavkaz, where he became active as a journalist in a regional liberal newspaper, but was arrested again in 1911 and imprisoned for nearly a year.

Kirov remained in the Northern Caucasus Region un-

til the Revolution, where returned to following his arrest. In the course of the Revolution he remained active in the region, and in 1918 he went to Moscow where he came into contact with Lenin and Stalin. Kirov was charged with preparing a military expedition to the Northern Caucasus. The expedition did not end successfully and Kirov had to retreat to Astrakhan. There he headed the suppression of an uprising against the new Soviet regime in the summer, 1919. At the end of that year he was reassigned to the Northern Caucasus.

In June 1920, Kirov was sent by Lenin to Tbilisi as an ambassador in order to negotiate a treaty for the recognition of an independent Georgia but was shortly afterwards ordered to go to the Baltic region for peace talks with Poland. After this mission he went back to the Caucasus as a member of the regional party leadership together with Grigorii Ordzhonikidze, with whom he had become friends in the meantime. In July 1921 he was named head of the Azeri party organisation. Here his main task was to overlook the development of the oil industry, so important for reconstructing the Soviet economy.

In the conflicts that followed Lenin's death Kirov sided with Stalin, and immediately after the Fourteenth Party Congress he was sent to Leningrad with Ordzhonikidze and Anastas Mikoyan in order to fight the opposition in its stronghold. Soon Kirov was selected as the new secretary of the Leningrad party organisation. He took over this function at the start of 1926 and would remain on his post until his death in late 1934. Kirov never felt at home in Leningrad and during the first years of this stay there he had to overcome the hostile attitude of the original Leningrad party elite. Life was also exacerbated by the fact that Kirov was now far away from his friend Ordzhonikidze who had gone to Moscow as head of the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection (Rabkrin). By July 1926, Kirov had become a candidate member of the Politburo, which finally brought him into the inner circles of Soviet power.

Knight tries to show that Kirov did not completely follow the Stalin line during the conflict between the Secretary-General and Nikolai Bukharin, leader of the Right opposition. This also involved a critical view of the collectivisation drive of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Kirov's unclear position led to open criticism and he had to act accordingly in order to maintain his job, that is he had to subject himself to the ritual of self-criticism, which at that time still granted survival.

At the beginning of the 1930s, Kirov is described as a clear Stalinist. In spite of squabbles inside the leading group about economic resources, Kirov received the honour of becoming one of the main speakers at the Seventeenth Party Congress of early 1934, which elected him as a Central Committee secretary in addition to his party duties in Leningrad. In the summer of that year Kirov was invited by Stalin to join him during his holidays on the Black Sea, and immediately afterwards was sent to Kazakhstan to supervise the harvest in this Autonomous Republic. At the beginning of October, two months before his death, he returned to Leningrad.

On December 1, 1934 Kirov was shot inside the Leningrad party headquarters, shortly after having entered the building, by Leonid Nikolaev, a mentally deranged former party employee fired several months before. Kirov's bodyguard could not prevent the murder but Nikolaev was hindered from then killing himself. To this day, some circumstances of the murder remain unclear. How could Nikolaev enter the party building without a pass? Where did a second shot –found afterwards – come from? Where was Kirov's bodyguard at the moment the shot fell and why was he not at Kirov's side to prevent Nikolaev's crime? Was the bodyguard really victim of a car accident the next day on his way to be interrogated by Stalin?

Immediately after Kirov's death Stalin arrived in Leningrad to lead the investigation himself, since he assumed that Kirov was the victim of a terrorist plot. As a result of this and further investigations several dozens of people were arrested, some tried and shot, as was Nikolaev. Zinoviev and Kamenev were charged with heading the terrorist organisation responsible for Kirov's death and planning further attempts on the lives of Soviet leaders. The Leningrad NKVD was purged afterwards and several thousand Leningrad inhabitants were forced to leave the city. In spite of several official investigations from the Stalin ear to the perestroika period, the murder has never been completely clarified. Nikita Khrushchev insinuated that Stalin was responsible for the Kirov murder, but these rumours have never been actually substantiated.

Knight assumes it possible that Nikolaev was not the murderer, but that someone else, still unknown, was the guilty one. She does not take into account that Nikolaev could have entered the building, in spite of entry controls to Soviet official buildings. Nikolaev perhaps knew somebody, or convinced the guard that he needed to enter the building for some reason. Controls were still not so strict at that time, and although beyond being author-

itarian, the Soviet state was mainly disorganised. Secondly Knight does not give a reasonable answer to the question why no one was seen and nobody ever mentioned a further person in all the reports and investigations. She also finds it suspicious that the bodyguard lagged behind in the building and was not near Kirov. But why should the bodyguard expect an attack in the party headquarters, being so safely guarded from her point of view? She even tries to explain that Nikolaev possibly was instructed by the NKVD on the spot, a suspicion which has never substantiated.

This again leads her to reintroduce the old idea of Stalin being responsible, because, such is her line of reasoning, the NKVD would not act in such a way without the Secretary-General's order. She as well puts forth the idea of rivalry and political differences between Stalin and Kirov driving the former to act as she tries to construct a bad personal relationship between the two protagonists. Knight's explanation leaves a lot of questions open. She is not really able to explain the idea of a rivalry between the two politicians. There is no hard evidence for this. Kirov perhaps just selected the more soft approach without leaving the Stalinist line.

Amy Knight has the merit of having written a detailed biography on Kirov with a lot of new material, showing up the life of one of the leading Soviet politicians. The murder nonetheless is only a small section of forty pages. Thus the book should rather be named *Who was Kirov?*, since the question on Kirov's murderer is not clearer now than before. In general, this account of Kirovs life is interesting and well-researched, but the part on the murder is actually the weakest one, since she takes refuge to a lot of rumours, guesses and testimonies of persons rather far from the actual events.[1]

Notes:

[1]. Concerning the murder itself and new material it would be more helpful to make use of a new article in German by Yurii Zhukov, "Der Mord an Kirov. Aus den Ermittlungsakten," *Forum fur osteuropaische Ideen- und Zeitgeschichte*, 2/1999, pp. 119-151.