

Primary Sources: Sergo Ordzhonikidze

(1) [Adam B. Ulam, *Stalin: The Man and his Era* \(2007\)](#)

He was shadowed by the police as he was leaving Baku. On April 7 he was in Moscow, conferring with Ordzhonikidze and Malinovsky. But the two Georgians obviously could not be arrested in Moscow, for this would have thrown suspicion on Malinovsky, so they were allowed to leave for St. Petersburg on April 9 in the discreet company of three police agents. In the next few weeks the Bolsheviks' entire Russian Bureau was "busted." Ordzhonikidze was arrested on April 14, Stalin on April 22, then Spandaryan and Yelena Stasova, the Central Committee's new agent for the Caucasus.

(2) [Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* \(2003\)](#)

Shortly before Nestor Lakoba's sinister death (28th December, 1936), Beria arrested Papulia Ordzhonikidze, Sergo's elder brother, a railway official. Beria knew that his former patron, Sergo, had warned Stalin that he was a "scoundrel". Sergo refused to shake hands with Beria and built a special fence between their dachas.

Beria's vengeance was just one of the ways in which Stalin began to turn the heat on to the emotional Sergo, the industrial magnifico who supported the regime's draconian policies but resisted the arrest of his own managers. The star of the next show trial was to be Sergo's Deputy Commissar, Yury Pyatakov, an ex-Trotskyite and skilled manager. The two men were fond of one another and enjoyed working together.

In July, Pyatakov's wife had been arrested for her links to Trotsky. Shortly before the Zinoviev trial, Yezhov summoned Pyatakov, read him all the affidavits implicating him in Trotskyite terrorism and informed him that he was relieved of his job as Deputy Commissar. Pyatakov offered to prove his innocence by asking to be "personally allowed to shoot all those sentenced to death at the trial, including his former wife and to publish this in the press". As a Bolshevik, he was willing even to execute his own wife.

"I pointed out to him the absurdity of his proposal," Yezhov reported drily to Stalin. On 12 September, Pyatakov was arrested. Sergo, recuperating in Kislovodsk, voted for his expulsion from the Central Committee but he must have been deeply worried. A shadow of his former self, grey and exhausted, he was so ill that the Politburo restricted him to a three-day week. Now the NKVD began to arrest his specialist non-Bolshevik advisers and he appealed to Blackberry: "Comrade Yezhov, please look into this." He was not alone. Kaganovich and Sergo, those "best friends", not only shared the same swaggering dynamism but both headed giant industrial commissariats. Kaganovich's railway experts were being arrested too. Meanwhile Stalin sent Sergo transcripts of Pyatakov's interrogations in which his deputy confessed to being a "saboteur". The destruction of "experts" was a perennial Bolshevik sport but the arrest of Sergo's brother revealed Stalin's hand: "This couldn't have been done without Stalin's consent. But Stalin's agreed to it without even calling me," Sergo told Mikoyan. "We were such close friends! And suddenly he lets them do such a thing!" He blamed Beria.

Sergo appealed to Stalin, doing all he could to save his brother. He did too much: the arrest of a man's clan was a test of loyalty. Stalin was not alone in taking a dim view of this bourgeois emotionalism: Molotov himself attacked Sergo for being "guided only by emotions... thinking only of himself."

On 9 November, Sergo suffered another heart attack. Meanwhile, the third Ordzhonikidze brother, Valiko, was sacked from his job in the Tiflis Soviet for claiming that Papulia was innocent. Sergo swallowed his pride and called Beria, who replied:

"Dear Comrade Sergo! After your call, I quickly summoned Valiko ... Today Valiko was restored to his job. Yours L. Beria." This bears the pawprints of Stalin's cat-and-mouse game, his meandering path to open destruction, perhaps his moments of nostalgic fondness, his supersensitive testing of limits. But Stalin now regarded Sergo as an enemy: his biography had just been published for his fiftieth birthday and Stalin studied it carefully, scribbling sarcastically next to the passages that acclaimed Sergo's heroism:

"What about the CC? The Party?" Stalin and Sergo returned separately to Moscow where fifty-six of the latter's officials were in the toils of the NKVD. Sergo however remained a living restraint on Stalin, making brave little gestures towards the beleaguered Rightists. "My dear kind warmly blessed Sergo," encouraged Bukharin: "Stand firm!" At the theatre, when Stalin and the Politburo filed into the front seats, Sergo spotted ex-Premier Rykov and his daughter Natalya (who tells the story), alone and ignored, twenty rows up the auditorium. Leaving Stalin, Sergo galloped up to kiss them. The Rykovs were moved to tears in gratitude.

(3) Robert Service, *Stalin: A Biography* (2004)

In lighting the match, Stalin did not necessarily have a predetermined plan any more than he had had one for economic transformation at the beginning of 1928. Although the victim-categories overlapped each other, there was no inevitability in his deciding to move against all of them in this small space of time. But the tinderbox had been sitting around in an exposed position. It was there to be ignited and Stalin, attending to all the categories one after another, applied the flame. Trotsky's former ally Georgi Pyatakov had been arrested before Yezhov's promotion. Pyatakov had been working efficiently as Ordzhonikidze's deputy in the People's Commissariat of Heavy Industry. Ordzhonikidze, in discussions after the December 1936 Central Committee plenum, refused to believe the charges of terrorism and espionage laid against him. This was a battle Stalin had to win if he was to proceed with his campaign of repression. Pyatakov was placed under psychological pressure to confess to treasonous links with counter-revolutionary groups. He cracked. Brought out to an interview with Ordzhonikidze in Stalin's presence, he confirmed his testimony to the NKVD. In late January 1937 a second great show trial was held. Pyatakov, Sokolnikov, Radek and Serebryakov were accused of heading an Anti-Soviet Trotskyist Centre. The discrepancies in evidence were large but the court did not flinch from sentencing Pyatakov and Serebryakov to death while handing out long periods of confinement to Radek and Sokolnikov. Meanwhile Ordzhonikidze's brother had been shot on Stalin's instructions. Ordzhonikidze himself fell apart: he went off to his flat on 18 February 1937 after a searing altercation with Stalin and shot himself. There was no longer anyone in the Politburo willing to stand up to Stalin and halt the machinery of repression.

(4) John Archibald Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939* (2010)

From the fall of 1936 the NKVD began to arrest economic officials, mostly of low rank, ostensibly in connection with various incidents of industrial sabotage. By the beginning of 1937 nearly a thousand persons working in economic commissariats were under arrest. The real bombshell, however, came in mid-September when Deputy Commissar of Heavy Industry Piatakov was arrested. Piatakov, a well-known former Trotskyist, had been under a cloud at least since July, when an NKVD raid on the apartment of his ex-wife turned up compromising materials on his Trotskyist activities ten years earlier. In August, Yezhov interviewed him and told him that he was being transferred to a position as head of a construction project. Piatakov protested his innocence, claiming that his only sin was in not seeing the counterrevolutionary activities of his wife. He offered to testify against Zinoviev and Kamenev and even volunteered to execute them personally, along with his ex-wife. (Yezhov declined the offer as "absurd.") During August,

Piatakov wrote both to Stalin and Ordzhonikidze, protesting his innocence and referring to Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Trotsky as "rotten" and "base. None of this did him any good. He was expelled from the party on 11 September and arrested the next day....

There are no documents attesting to Ordzhonikidze's protest. Aside from the account of his attendance at Piatakov's confrontation, we have only a couple of oblique references by Stalin and Molotov at the next plenum (February-March 1937) that Ordzhonikidze had been slow to recognize the guilt of some enemies. But there is no evidence that his intervention took the form of protest against the use of terror against party enemies; he was by no means a "liberal" in such matters. Ordzhonikidze, as far as we know, never complained about the measures against Zinoviev, Kamenev, Trotsky, Bukharin, Rykov, Tomsy, or any other oppositionist per se. His defense of "enemies" was a bureaucrat's defense of "his people," with whom he worked and whom he needed to make his organization function. From his point of view, Yezhov's depredations were improper only when they intruded into Ordzhonikidze's bailiwick, when they threatened the smooth fulfillment of the economic plans his organization answered for, and when they infringed on his circle of clients. As a card-carrying member of the upper nomenklatura, Ordzhonikidze was not against using terror against the elite's enemies, but he did fight to protect the patronage rights that he enjoyed as a member of that stratum.

(5) [Adam B. Ulam, *Stalin: The Man and his Era* \(2007\)](#)

Symbolically the first major victim following the trial was a man from Stalin's closest circle. Gregory "Sergo" Ordzhonikidze was his oldest friend, a member of the Politburo, Commissar of Heavy Industry. In Party circles Ordzhonikidze enjoyed genuine popularity. Unlike Molotov or Kaganovich, he was reputed on occasion to stand up to Stalin and to try to soften his cruel disposition. It is quite possible that the very fact of their early intimacy, the memory of the pre-Revolution days when Ordzhonikidze ranked him in the Party, now grated on Stalin. Later on it was alleged that the tyrant's new favorite, then head of the Transcaucasian Party, Lavrenti Beria, had for a long time intrigued against Ordzhonikidze and worked systematically to arouse Stalin's suspicions against him. But it is over simple to see Beria as Stalin's evil spirit and a major cause of the Great Purge. Still, with his ever deepening suspicions and a growing apprehension of what might happen when war came, Stalin was not unwilling to listen to tales about people closest to him and came to resent those who had known him as Koba. Beria's rise was enhanced by the very fact that those who knew him, like Ordzhonikidze, considered him a scoundrel and advised Stalin accordingly: a man like that had to be personally loyal; perhaps the very hostility against him was prompted by fear that he would unmask their intrigues, tell Stalin what they were saying behind his back. In his new phase Stalin subjected some of his leading collaborators (Kaganovich, Kalinin, Molotov, Mikoyan) to an inhuman test: close relatives would be arrested and held on fictitious charges while they were supposed to go on serving him without interceding for their dear ones. Now Ordzhonikidze, to the public one of the first men in the state and a "close comrade-at-arms of great Stalin," was expected to be working at his desk, appear smiling in photographs at the side of the Leader, while somewhere in an NKVD jail his older brother Papulia was being tortured. Ordzhonikidze was not a healthy man: he had undergone operations and suffered from high blood pressure and a heart ailment. And now on February 19 the Central Committee was to assemble to consider the "lessons" of the Pyatakov-Radek trial and to order new measures of repression against wreckers and saboteurs. Ordzhonikidze's part was a key one: his deputy Pyatakov had been shot, several of his most important subordinates and industrial directors had been arrested. He was to make a report on "wrecking" in industry and on further measures of repression to deal with spies and saboteurs.

But the meeting had to be adjourned. On the very day it was slated to open, newspapers carried the news of Ordzhonikidze's sudden death on the preceding day from a heart attack.

That Ordzhonikidze in fact committed suicide was well known in top Party circles, and it is incredible - as Khrushchev, in 1937 head of the Moscow Party organization, was to allege in 1956 - that Khrushchev learned the true facts of the death only many years later. We know that on the morning of February 17 Ordzhonikidze had a tempestuous interview with Stalin. He wanted to know why his office had been searched by the NKVD. Nothing unusual about it, replied Stalin; why, the NKVD might very well be ordered to search his own office Ordzhonikidze worked for the balance of the day in his Commissariat, attending to various items of business, issuing dispositions for the future. He returned to his Kremlin apartment at two A.M. The next morning he refused to get out of bed, and at five-thirty in the afternoon the shot rang out. Zinaida Gavrilovna Ordzhonikidze phoned Stalin, but he refused to see the widow of his lifelong friend alone, and arrived only after a while, accompanied by other members of the Politburo and Yezhov. According to Roy Medvedev, who collected evidence from eyewitnesses, Zinaida Gavrilovna shouted at the dictator, "You did not protect Sergo for me or for the Party" - certainly in the circumstances a masterpiece of understatement. Stalin's unsentimental reply was, "Shut up, you fool." His reaction on the death of the man whose recommendation had been instrumental in Lenin's appointing him to the Central Committee in 1912, and whose help had been essential at several other crucial points of his career, was one of wonder: "What an odd disease. Man lies down to rest, has a heart attack, and there." This, it is hardly necessary to add, was the official verdict of the medical certificate signed by four distinguished doctors, three of whom were subsequently liquidated.

"Why did Ordzhonikidze shoot himself and not Stalin?" asks a Soviet author. We have already tried to answer this question. Knowing him well, it is unlikely that Ordzhonikidze could have thought that his act of desperation would bring any remorse in Stalin or make him abandon or temper his bloody designs. The tyrant must have viewed his friend's suicide as an attack upon himself, a stab in the back: Ordzhonikidze deserted his post, tried to bring confusion and doubt into the highest Party ranks, discredit that essential work being done by the NKVD. It was undoubtedly great generosity on his part, Stalin believed, to cover his dead comrade with honors, to give him a hero's funeral, and to leave that chatterbox, Ordzhonikidze's wife, free. But Stalin's suspicions pursued a person even after his death. As after his wife's death, Stalin now brooded over the meaning of Sergo's suicide: What had he really meant by this act? Would his relatives talk, spread the true story, breed defeatism through gossip? One by one Ordzhonikidze's closest relatives and co-workers who knew the facts were arrested. In 1942, the year of supreme danger, when the Germans approached the Caucasus, Stalin remembered his fellow Caucasian, and orders went out to change the names of several cities and towns called after Ordzhonikidze. There was no point in commemorating the man who had betrayed him.

(6) [Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* \(2003\)](#)

Stalin carefully prepared for the Plenum that would formally open the Terror against the Party itself. On 31 January, the Politburo appointed the two industrial kingpins to speak about wrecking in their departments. Stalin reviewed their speeches. Sergo accepted that wreckers had to be stopped but wanted to say that now they had been arrested, it was time to return to normality. Stalin angrily scribbled on Sergo's speech: "State with facts which branches are affected by sabotage and exactly how they are affected." When they met, Sergo seemed to agree but he quietly dispatched trusted managers to the regions to investigate whether the NKVD was fabricating the cases: a direct challenge to Stalin.

An ailing Sergo realized that the gap between them was widening. He faced a rupture with the Party to which he had devoted his life....

"Stalin's started a bad business," said Sergo. "I was always such a close friend of Stalin's. I trusted him and he trusted me. And now I can't work with him, I'll commit suicide." Mikoyan told him suicide never solved anything but there were now frequent suicides. On 17 February, Sergo and Stalin argued for several hours. Sergo then went to his office before returning at 3 p.m. for a Politburo meeting.

Stalin approved Yezhov's report but criticized Sergo and Kaganovich who retired to Poskrebyshv's study, like schoolboys to rewrite their essays. At seven, they too walked, talking, around the Kremlin: 'he was ill, his nerves broken,' said Kaganovich.

Stalin deliberately turned the screw: the NKVD searched Sergo's apartment. Only Stalin could have ordered such an outrage. Besides, the Ordzhonikidzes spent weekends with the Yezhovs, but friendship was dust compared to the orders of the Party. Sergo, as angry and humiliated as intended, telephoned Stalin:

"Sergo, why are you upset?" said Stalin. "This Organ can search my place at any moment too." Stalin summoned Sergo who rushed out so fast, he forgot his coat. His wife Zina hurried after him with the coat and fur hat but he was already in Stalin's apartment. Zina waited outside for an hour and a half. Stalin's provocations only confirmed Sergo's impotence, for he "sprang out of Stalin's place in a very agitated state, did not put on his coat or hat, and ran home". He started retyping his speech, then, according to his wife, rushed back to Stalin who taunted him more with his sneering marginalia: "Ha-ha!"

Sergo told Zina that he could not cope with Koba whom he loved. The next morning, he remained in bed, refusing breakfast. "I feel bad," he said. He simply asked that no one should disturb him and worked in his room. At 5.30 p.m. Zinaida heard a dull sound and rushed into the bedroom.

Sergo lay bare-chested and dead on the bed. He had shot himself in the heart, his chest powder-burned. Zina kissed his hands, chest, lips fervently and called the doctor who certified he was dead. She then telephoned Stalin who was at Kuntsevo. The guards said he was taking a walk but she shouted:

"Tell Stalin it's Zina. Tell him to come to the phone right away. I'll wait on the line."

"Why the big hurry?" Stalin asked. Zina ordered him to come urgently:

"Sergo's done the same as Nadya!" Stalin banged down the phone at this grievous insult.

It happened that Konstantin Ordzhonikidze, one of Sergo's brothers, arrived at the apartment at this moment. At the entrance, Sergo's chauffeur told him to hurry. When he reached the front door, one of Sergo's officials said simply:

"Our Sergo's no more." Within half an hour, Stalin, Molotov and Zhdanov (for some reason wearing a black bandage on his forehead) arrived from the countryside to join Voroshilov, Kaganovich and Yezhov. When Mikoyan heard, he exclaimed, "I don't believe it" and rushed over. Again the Kremlin family mourned its own but suicide left as much anger as grief.

Zinaida sat on the edge of the bed beside Sergo's body. The leaders entered the room, looked at the corpse and sat down. Voroshilov, so soft-hearted in personal matters, consoled Zina:

"Why console me," she snapped, "when you couldn't save him for the Party?" Stalin caught Zina's eye and nodded at her to follow him into the study. They stood facing each other. Stalin seemed crushed and pitiful, betrayed again.

"What shall we say to people now?" she asked.

"This must be reported in the press," Stalin replied. "We'll say he died of a heart attack."

"No one will believe that," snapped the widow. "Sergo loved the truth. The truth must be printed."

"Why won't they believe it? Everyone knew he had a bad heart and everyone will believe it," concluded Stalin. The door to the death-room was closed but Konstantin Ordzhonikidze peeped inside and observed Kaganovich and Yezhov in consultation, sitting at the foot of the body of their mutual friend. Suddenly Beria, in Moscow for the Plenum, appeared in the dining room.

Zinaida charged at him, trying to slap him, and shrieked: "Rat!" Beria "disappeared right afterwards".

They carried Sergo's bulky body from the bedroom and laid him on the table. Molotov's brother, a photographer, arrived with his camera. Stalin and the magnates posed with the body.

(7) Sergo Ordzhonikidze's youngest brother Konstantin arrived at the Kremlin soon after his body had been found.

When my wife and I reached the second floor, we went to the dining room, but were stopped at the door by the NKVD agent. Then we were let into Sergo's office, where I saw Gvakhariia. "Our Sergo is no more," he said. I ran to the bedroom but my way was barred, and I was not allowed to see the body.

Then Stalin, Molotov, and Zhdanov arrived. Sergo's secretary, Makhover, uttered words that stick in my memory: "They killed him, the rats".