



Beria: Stalin's First Lieutenant

By Amy Knight

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This is the first comprehensive biography of Lavrentii Beria, Stalin's notorious police chief and for many years his most powerful lieutenant. Beria has long symbolized all the evils of Stalinism, haunting the public imagination both in the West and in the former Soviet Union. Yet because his political opponents expunged his name from public memory after his dramatic arrest and execution in 1953, little has been previously published about his long and tumultuous career.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

As Stalin's police chief, right-hand man and commander of the Gulag slave-labor network, Lavrenty Beria (1899-1953) was a mass murderer whose weapons included torture, deportation and execution. Yet, after Stalin died in 1953, this devious, cold-blooded Bolshevik embarked on a short-lived liberalization program designed to curb the Communist Party apparatus and to give the non-Russian minorities more decision-making powers and limited recognition of their national and cultural identities. Arrested in a coup led by Khrushchev, Beria was executed. Critics view Beria's de-Stalinization proposals as mere tools in a succession struggle, but Knight, a Library of Congress scholar who did extensive research in the former Soviet Union, portrays the Georgian-born police chief as a would-be reformer who saw change as inevitable but was motivated above all by a desire to further his own power. A provocative biography of one of history's most evil men. Photos.

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From Library Journal

A strong entry in the wave of post-glasnost biographies, Knight's book is an accessible study of one of the most sinister members of Stalin's inner circle. Yet Knight, a senior research analyst in Soviet affairs at the Library of Congress, points out in her introduction that she is not attempting to "rehabilitate" Beria but to "challenge some basic assumptions, both about Beria and about the Stalinist system in general." Using recently released documents, Knight succeeds in describing the life of Lavrentii Beria, from his student days in Baku, to his role as Stalin's most powerful henchmen, chief of security, and head of the slave-labor network in the gulag, to his rapid fall after the death of Stalin in the power struggles that brought Khrushchev to power. This work is recommended for undergraduates and informed lay readers.

- John Sandstrom, *Houston P.L., Tex.*

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From Booklist

Like many of Stalin's executors, Lavrentii Beria was no neophyte at wreaking terror. He liquidated thousands in the Bolshevik takeover of Georgia in 1922-24, which service brought the ambitious man to the notice of the boss. More crafty than Stalin's other police chiefs, Beria survived until his own execution as an enemy of the people in 1953. Stalin's successors were anxious to deflect their own complicity in the regime's criminality, and so the archives were locked. No historically verifiable account of Beria's career as Stalin's "Himmler" has been possible--until now. Beria apparently had no life to speak of, aside from raping young girls outside his office, which, on occasion, doubled as a torture chamber. These sick details--and dramatic ones surrounding Khrushchev's coup--underwrite the deadly character of the author's main import: Kremlin politics following Beria's takeover of the NKVD in 1938. Knight has ably examined and coherently reassembled the slivers and shards of evidence, and future biographers (with strong stomachs) will surely build on her pioneering work. *Gilbert Taylor*

Users Review

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