

reviews

Pavel Vodička

Roman Kodet

Kolářek L. Y., *Berija - druhý muž Stalinovy diktatury*, Praha 2010, 267 pp.

PAVEL VODIČKA

The book *Berija - druhý muž Stalinovy diktatury* should interest the readers primarily for the inside view it gives of Stalin's regime – specially its responses to the events in the Soviet Union and Europe. Her author confesses in the prologue: “*I have attempted to give the most objective evidence, that should not be a priori defense of crimes, they undeniably committed Berija.*” But in spite of this conception, he embarks upon a relentless defense of Lavrentij Berija.

The man often depicted by his enemies as “*evil genius*” was born in March 1899 in Merkheuli, near Sukhumi in modern Abkhazia. Young Lavrentij was talented and intelligent child. Although his parents were poor peasants, he attended technical college at Baku in Azerbaijan, where he got involved in trade union activities. In March 1917 joined the Bolsheviks while an engineering student in Baku. He was politically active in Georgia and Azerbaijan. While in a Georgian prison, he met his future wife, who was visiting her uncle who was also in prison at the time. His wife-to-be emerged as an important reliance in his life, though it was her uncle, who had tremendous influence on Berija.

In 1920 Berija joined the Cheka and engaged in the conflict, which resulted in the defeat Mensheviks and the formation of the Georgian SSR. Few years later he became head of Georgian OGPU, successor of Cheka, and was introduced to Stalin. Thenceforth began his rise to power. After the purges of the 1930s, Stalin summoned him to Moscow. Berija was appointed head of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). After Soviet occupation of Poland and the Baltic states Berija supervised deportations from these regions. He played an important role in the liquidation of 15 000 Polish officers known as Katyn Massacre. Following the attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 Berija became Deputy Chairman of the Council of People's Com-

missars and member of State Defense Committee (GKO). He took control of production of armaments, and aircraft and aircraft engines. Berija's organization of wartime production significantly contributed to the Soviet Union's victory in World War II. After the war Stalin entrusted him with supervision of the nuclear bomb project.

As Stalin aged he became more and more suspicious. His paranoia culminated at the beginning of 50th years in the preparation of further purges. Stalin decided to get rid of Berija. But his plans were thwarted by the death (in March 1953). Berija got an opportunity to a revision of Soviet policies at home and abroad. He was in a position to become the single successor. However Berija had powerful enemies among members of the Politburo and the General Staff of the Army. His downfall was swift. In June 1953 he was arrested at the command his colleagues Nikita Chruščov and Georgij Malenkov, who believed, that their opponent planned a coup d'état. Berija was tried by a special session of the Supreme Court of the Soviet Union with no defense counsel and no right of appeal. He was found guilty and sentenced to death, shortly afterwards was shot.

Kolářek's book is a compulsive reading. It gives details about the Berija family and the private lives of Stalin's elite. In his point of view Berija appears to be a strong supporter of many positive reforms. There is a fact, that during the short period of three months which separates the death of Stalin from the fall of Berija (from March 5 to June 26, 1953), the Gulag left almost half of prisoners, the great construction works of socialism were stopped, the collective farm system came under criticism in the Soviet republics, the Party apparatus was sidelined, and Berija began to seek normalization of relations among USSR and Western powers.

What was Berija pursuing? Did he aim to achieve absolute power through the process of de-Stalinization as his enemies claimed? Was it an attempt to get rid of conservative power in the Politburo and establish communism with a human face? Did he want to improve his own reputation as cold-blooded torturer and a sexual maniac, as has often been said?

When Stalin died, Berija allegedly sought to change the system that was unsustainable in the long term. He wanted to use the crimes of the past to neutralize his rivals. It is likely that Chruščev and his allies eliminated Berija because his proposals threatened the stability of the state order. But did he really intend to go back and expose publicly the defects of Bolshevism? No document has proved that so far. It is true that accounts of Berija have been heavily influenced by the version put out by Chruščev, who won the struggle for the succession. Nevertheless Kolářek claims that Berija under-

stood the inadequacies of Bolshevik tyranny and always strove to hinder the worst excesses of the Stalinists, but could do nothing until Stalin had died. In the absence of archival records, nothing can be proved or disproved and in this context Kolářek rarely permits an objective view into these issues.