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THE SUCCESSION OF POWER IN THE USSR

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THE SUCCESSION OF POWER IN THE USSR

SUMMARY

The selection of a successor to Stalin's present position in the Soviet hierarchy will be made with a view to its effect in insuring the stability of the present regime and the continuation of its policies. Because of the past experience of Soviet leaders, the psychology and traditions of the Russian people, and the nature of Soviet political machinery, a transfer of Stalin's power to a single individual would appear more suitable than the division of this power among several individuals. At present, the best qualified candidate for the succession is Molotov, whose close association with Stalin, devotion to present Soviet policies, and long experience in both Party and Government service give him a distinct advantage over other Politburo members. Elaborate precautions will be taken to insure that the transition of power to Molotov, upon Stalin's death or retirement does not seriously endanger the stability or policies of the regime. The immediate effects of such transition, therefore, probably will be insignificant. If, however, the USSR is confronted by a series of adversities, domestic and foreign, the absence of Stalin's prestige and personality might give rise to manifestations of personal rivalry among Politburo members which would result in the rapid disintegration of the Soviet regime.

Note: This paper has the concurrence of the intelligence organizations of the Departments of the Army, Navy, and of the Air Force. A statement of dissent by the Department of State is set forth in Enclosure "A."

THE SUCCESSION OF POWER IN THE USSR

Stalin's advancing years and intermittent reports of his failing health have several times within recent months given rise to considerable speculation as to the effects which his death might have on the Soviet regime. Such speculation has received renewed stimulus from the Soviet leader's failure to appear at the November 7th celebration in Moscow, commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution. While Stalin's absence on this occasion appears of small significance (he was likewise absent from the celebration for the previous two years), and while there is no reliable evidence of his present ill health, some interest attaches to the treatment accorded him by the Soviet propaganda machine during the recent festivities. In comparison with former years, his name was relatively inconspicuous on the myriad of officially prescribed posters and banners which blossom forth on the Moscow landscape each November. Although his political and military prowess were the object of several glowing tributes, the general tone of the propaganda tended to place him in a position of remoteness and reverence, similar to that previously accorded only to Lenin. It is possible, therefore, that a deliberate effort is being made gradually to condition the Soviet people for Stalin's retirement from active participation in Party and governmental affairs. The following discussion is concerned with the succession to power in the USSR upon Stalin's retirement, disability, or death, and with the effects of such succession on the policies and stability of the Soviet regime.

There is no positive evidence that this problem has been the subject of discussion between Stalin and his hierarchy, although conjecture and rumor have been almost limitless. The approach to the subject, therefore, is necessarily analytical, the conclusions being reached through attempting on the basis of background experience, to analyze the thought processes of Stalin and members of the Politburo.

It is inconceivable that the question of succession would be brought up originally by any member of the Politburo except Stalin himself. Anyone doing so would make himself vulnerable to charges of "lack of faith" and "plotting." That Stalin would throw the problem to the Politburo for discussion and decision is also unlikely, since acrimonious debate and encouragement of power struggle would result. That Stalin has considered the possibility of his sudden or eventual elimination from the Soviet scene and formulated some plans for meeting the various contingencies must be accepted; whether his plans have been made known, and to whom, is a matter of conjecture.

The dominant criterion which must be met in making the choice of succession to Stalin's position is "How well does it guarantee the safety of the present regime and the continuation of its present policies?" All other considerations, such as the popularity, merit or seniority of the individual candidate must be secondary. That the choice will be made from without the Politburo is remote beyond possibility. Since it will be made from within the ranks of the Politburo members, there are two alternatives: (a) Stalin's tangible power will be divided among several members of the Politburo

who now serve as his chief advisers and assistants, or, (b) the power will be transferred to a single individual.

Stalin must have considered the advisability and practicability of the first alternative, since the complexities of the Party-State mechanism would make a triumvirate more practicable than any available single individual. In such event the power would be divided among the three members of the Politburo who are best fitted to constitute the basic authority of the Soviet State through control, respectively, of government apparatus, Party policy, and internal security. Under such an arrangement, the logical candidate to inherit the direction of the government apparatus would be Molotov, long a devoted disciple of Stalin and a skilled administrator. His extensive experience in foreign affairs, combined with previous experience in government and Party administration, qualifies him for government leadership during a period in which foreign relations will be a prime factor in Soviet tactical policy. Andrei Zhdanov would logically be selected for full control of the Party policy; he is second only to Stalin as spokesman for the Party on ideological matters, and, as a member of the powerful Orgburo since 1934, has accumulated a wealth of experience and influence in organizational problems of the Party. Total control of the internal security of the USSR would be assumed by Lavrenti Beria. In the late thirties Beria was appointed Commissar of Internal Affairs, a position which gave him control of the complex Soviet security system, including the secret police, penal institutions, and forced labor camps. While his present official status is not entirely clear (he was relieved as Commissar of Internal Affairs in January 1946), he is believed to retain a large measure of control over the two security agencies (MVD and MGB), in addition to being primarily responsible for Soviet atomic development.

Stalin must have applied the criterion of safety to such a disposition of his power as that outlined above, a disposition which has both logic and practicability, and found that there are stronger considerations favoring a single heir. These considerations are:

- a. Soviet experience has shown that the structure of the USSR can best be administered by a single head—an infallible arbiter whose decisions on all questions are final.
- b. The fact that the present Soviet dictatorship has successfully withstood such strains as those created by the collectivization of agriculture, the purges, and World War II is a convincing argument for one-man control.
- c. The history of the Russian people, under both the Tsarist and Soviet regimes, preconditions them to accept the idea of a single, all-powerful ruler. There is a deep-seated concept in the Russian mind of a paternalistic ruler—a concept assiduously cultivated by the present regime.
- d. One successor, with full authority, would be more capable of dealing with personal jealousies, disagreements, and desires for personal power among leading members of the Politburo. A division of power among several leading contenders would probably satisfy none and would lead to an eventual struggle for power.

As the best available method of assuring the perpetuation and expansion of the Soviet system with a minimum risk to the stability of the regime, Stalin would choose the second of the two alternatives and bequeath his power to a single individual.

The relative position of possible successors has in the past been subject to sudden change, and their present standings must be considered as ephemeral. Under present conditions the individual who now appears most capable of carrying on the Stalinist version of the Party doctrine with the least risk to the State is Vyacheslav Molotov. He has been associated with Stalin longer and more closely than any other member of the Politburo, and his personal loyalty has never been questioned. Molotov's position as the number-two figure in the official hierarchy seems to be clearly established in the popular Soviet mind as well as in international circles; he is referred to in the press as Stalin's closest adviser and most trusted assistant. In official photographs and at official functions he occupies a position of prominence second only to Stalin. His long and varied experience makes him the most logical single candidate, for, in addition to having occupied various key positions in both Party and government, he became an alternate member of the Politburo in 1921 and a full member in 1926. It is believed that he would be most acceptable to the powerful Police Ministries, because of his demonstrated antagonistic and accusing attitude in foreign relations which enables those Ministries to justify their actions as being necessary to insure the safety of the USSR.

Stalin realizes that Molotov has neither the personal characteristics nor the personal prestige to occupy the peculiar niche now filled by Stalin himself. Further, Stalin's appreciation of Molotov's capabilities probably includes the latter's shortcomings and therefore does not envisage Molotov as a new Stalin. Stalin would rather, for glorification of his own memory and for the safety of the Soviet regime, consolidate Molotov's position in relation to himself as Stalin is to Lenin—in other words, Molotov will be presented as the prophet of the demigod Stalin. Propaganda will include pictures showing the heads of Lenin, Stalin, and Molotov in such close proximity that to throw mud at the last would also splatter the two immortals. In all probability, Stalin will prepare both Molotov and the Politburo for the eventual transfer of power by gradually delegating increased control of State and Party to Molotov; an initial indication would be the appointment of Molotov to the position of a secretary of the Communist Party. This procedure would reduce the difficulties inherent in an abrupt transition and, at the same time, give Molotov the advantage of Stalin's guidance, prestige, and influence. Stalin would also be afforded an additional opportunity to estimate the chances of Molotov's success. The full transfer of power cannot, however, be accomplished before Stalin's death. No matter how much authority Molotov might enjoy, the very existence of Stalin, to whom the members of the Politburo owe their political success, would discourage any effective opposition to the master's will, even though the latter may be nominally retired to the position of elder statesman. Thus, Stalin will never be able to assess accurately the ability of Molotov to stand alone, while the latter will never, while Stalin lives, be certain that he, rather than the shadow of Stalin, controls the Soviet system.

There are three additional contingencies which Stalin must have considered and provided for:

- a. That he might disappear suddenly from the Soviet scene, in which case he probably has prepared a will addressed to the Soviet peoples and the Communist Party, enjoining them to accept Molotov as their new leader.

b. That Molotov might predecease him, in which case he has probably chosen to prepare the succession for Zhdanov who, for the present at least, is the next most suitable candidate.

c. That the deaths of several members of the Politburo might occur simultaneously with his own; this contingency is probably taken care of in the will by naming the order of succession.

The effect of the transition of power on the Soviet regime and its policy also must be considered. While it is not anticipated that the basic aims of the Soviet system will undergo any change, there will probably be a change of tactical policy towards increased isolation from the Western powers—a tendency already apparent in Molotov's recent attitude. The effect on the Soviet regime will not be immediate since, if Molotov is installed prior to Stalin's death, the Politburo will presumably be conditioned to him as Stalin's heir. This factor, combined with the ideological unity of the Politburo, its loyalty to Stalin, and a probable realization that continuation in power depends on its unity, will militate against any immediate expression of disaffection. The ability of the Politburo to retain its unanimity for an extended period of time following Stalin's death is, however, open to question. Under Stalin, originality and initiative have been subordinated to obedience; the cohesive strength of Stalin's memory is bound to diminish, and Molotov's ability to subordinate personal jealousies and rivalries will be severely taxed. The temptation of the disappointed aspirants for power to reach down for support into those lower levels of the Party hierarchy which come under their individual control will be increased by what will be more violent dissension over tactical policy in meeting current problems. If this occurs, the resulting disunity in the Party would emasculate it as the political instrument heretofore capable of controlling the inherent weaknesses of the Soviet system. The extent and the speed of deterioration will depend on developments in the global situation and the extent of the failures of the USSR to deal with the attendant problems. But if the Politburo is confronted with a series of unfavorably resolved crises after the influence of Stalin has faded, a rapid disintegration of the Soviet system will result.

ENCLOSURE "A"

DISSENT OF THE INTELLIGENCE ORGANIZATION
DEPARTMENT OF STATE

While recognizing that the absence of reliable information renders highly speculative any conclusions as to Stalin's successor, the Intelligence Organization of the Department of State concurs in the assumption that in the event of Stalin's death or retirement in the near future, Molotov will probably be chosen to head the nominal government shortly thereafter. It doubts, however, that Molotov will at that time succeed to Stalin's present leading positions in the Soviet State and in the Party. It also doubts that Stalin will voluntarily relinquish his power, although he may divest himself of one or another of his positions.

Although it may be argued that supreme power in the Soviet Union will tend eventually to be concentrated in the hands of one man after Stalin's withdrawal from the scene, such a concentration of power will probably not occur at once. Up to the time of Stalin's 68th birthday, no one man possessed the necessary power to succeed him nor were any indications of preparations visible for such a transfer. It appears psychologically improbable that Stalin would himself designate one individual as successor to the series of positions that symbolize his power. Furthermore, Molotov lacks some of the qualifications that such an individual might be expected to have.

It now appears probable that immediately after Stalin's early death or retirement, the present distribution of power among the top leaders will remain in force: Molotov will fill Stalin's position as Chairman of the Council of Ministers while Zhdanov will succeed Stalin as General Secretary of the Communist Party. The two other repositories of power—police and armed forces—will remain in the hands of Beria and Bulganin. This distribution of power is not fixed and may change abruptly. In the long run, after Stalin's demise, some one individual, possibly Zhdanov, might be able to concentrate supreme power in his own hands, but there may be several "palace revolutions" before the real successor to Stalin can consolidate his position.

It should be added that the relative strength of the top Soviet leaders is so fluid that any present prediction will probably require considerable future modification if Stalin remains alive and able to direct the policies of the Soviet Union for some years to come.

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