

DOCUMENT No. 23: Letter from Lavrentii Beria to Georgii Malenkov Reflecting on the Events of Spring 1953, 1 July 1953

As part of the post-Stalin succession struggle in Moscow, Malenkov, Khrushchev and Molotov conspired to oust Beria from the leadership in mid-1953. The secret police chief was formally arrested by Marshal Zhukov at a 26 June CPSU Presidium meeting and charged with various transgressions at an extraordinary CPSU CC Plenum on 4–7 July.

Capitalizing on the coincidental failure of the New Course in East Germany, Beria's rivals also charged him with having advocated the abandonment of socialism in the GDR in favor of German unification. Whether true or not, the decision to blame Beria resulted in the discrediting of any more flexible options for Soviet Deutschlandpolitik. From his prison cell, Beria wrote several letters to his former colleagues admitting fault on some issues but largely defending his own behavior. Covering his political activities back to the 1930s, the letters, one of which is excerpted here, shed light on the policy-making process inside the Kremlin in the spring of 1953 and the early-to-mid-June talks between Soviet party leaders and their German and Hungarian counterparts.

To the CPSU CC
Comrade Malenkov

Dear Georgii!

During the past four days and nights that have been difficult for me, I have given considerable thought to everything that took place from my point of view during the last months following the CPSU CC Plenum,²²⁷ both at work and concerning you personally—and some comrades of the CC Presidium—and I subjected myself to the most severe criticism, strongly condemning myself. Particularly grave and inexcusable was my behavior towards you, where I am the guilty party, one hundred percent. Along with other comrades, I also strongly and energetically got down to work with the *sole* idea to do everything possible and not to let all of us flop without Comrade Stalin and to maintain the new leadership of the CC and the government by action. According to the existing instructions of the CC and the government, building up the leadership of the MVD and its local organs, the MVD proposed to the CC and the government on your advice, and on some issues on the advice of Cde. N.S. Khrushchev, a number of worthwhile political and practical initiatives, such as: on the rehabilitation of the doctors, rehabilitation of the arrested of the so called Mingrelian Nationalist Center in Georgia and the return of falsely exiled from Georgia. On [sic] the Amnesty, on liquidation of the passport regime, on correction of the deviation of the party line in national policy and in the repressive measures in Lithuanian SSR, Western Ukraine [sic] and western Belorussia [sic], but the criticism is completely justified, the criticism by Cde. N.S. Khrushchev and the criticism by the other comrades at [the session of] the CC Presidium; with my last participation, to my erroneous wish to send along with the decisions of the CC also the information memoranda of the MVD. Of course, one reduced to a certain degree the significance of these very resolutions of the CC and, that an inadmissible situation emerged, that the MVD, as if it corrects Central Committees of Communist [sic] parties of Ukraine, Lithuania and Belorussia, while the role of the MVD was limited to implementation of the resolutions of the CC CPSU and the government. I would frankly admit that my

²²⁷ This is a reference to the 19th Plenum of CC CPSU, of October 1952.

insisting on the dispatch of the memoranda was stupidity and political short-sightedness, particularly since you advised me not to do it. My behavior at the session of the Presidium of the CC, and the Presidium of the Council of Ministers, very often incorrect and inadmissible [behavior] that introduced nervousness and excessive harshness, I would say, as I have thought well about it and realized, [this behavior] went so far as to [constitute] inadmissible rudeness and insolence on my part toward Comrades N.S. Khrushchev and N.A. Bulganin during the discussion on the German question [sic], of course, here I am guilty without question and have to be denounced thoroughly. At the same time, along with all of you, I tried to introduce initiatives at the Presidium [sic] aimed at the correct solution of issues, such as the Korean, the German, the responses to Eisenhower and Churchill, the Turkish, the Iranian, etc.

My behavior during the reception of the Hungarian comrades [was] untactful, nothing could justify it. The proposals about Imre Nagy should not have been introduced by me, but you should have done it, but at that moment I sprung up idiotically, and besides, along with correct remarks I made some loose remarks and was overly familiar, for which, of course, I should be given a good rap [vzgrer]. But I must say in all sincerity that I thoroughly prepared myself and made all my assistants prepare themselves for the sessions of the CC and the government, so that within the limits of my strength and abilities [I tried] to assist in [finding a] correct solution to the issues under discussion. If and when I introduced initiatives, I revised them several times, together with the comrades collaborating with me, so as not to make a mistake and not to let the CC and the government down.

[. . .]

I would like to say a few words concerning [other] comrades.

[. . .]

Nikita Sergeevich [Khrushchev]! With exception of the last affair at the CC Presidium when you swore at me strongly and furiously, which I wholeheartedly accept, we had always been good friends, and I was always proud that you are such an excellent Bolshevik and marvelous friend, and I told you this many times, [and] when we managed to talk about it, I told it to Cde. Stalin. I always cherished your friendship.

Nikolai Alexandrovich [Bulganin]!

I never did you any harm, in no place. I helped you honestly as much as I could. Cde. Malenkov G.M. and I often spoke with Cde. Stalin about you as an excellent comrade and Bolshevik. When Cde. Stalin suggested to us to set up again a rotating chairmanship [in the Council of Ministers], then I and Cde. Malenkov G.M. kept persuading him that it should not be done, that you are keeping up with your job and we can help you in any situation.

[. . .]

Perhaps I should not write all this in my situation, but I would ask for your pardon. Dear Georgii, I am seeking for your understanding, since you know me better than others. I only lived to think, together with you, how to improve our country, powerful and glorious, of course, within the limits of my abilities. For me to think otherwise is simply beyond my mind. Of course, after what has happened, I should be called strongly to order, directed to my place, and dressed down so that I would remember it to the end of my life. But dear comrades, you should understand that I am a faithful soldier of our Motherland, a loyal son of the party of Lenin and Stalin and your loyal friend and comrade. Send me wherever you wish, to any kind of work, [even] a most insignificant one. See me out, I will be able to work ten more years and I will work with all my soul and with complete energy. I am saying this from the bottom of my heart, it is not true that since I have held a big post I would not be able to

perform in a small position. This can be easily proven in any region or area, in a Soviet farm, in a collective farm, on a construction site of our glorious Motherland. And you will see that in 2 to 3 years I will improve my behavior strongly and will be still of some use for you. I am to my last breath faithful to our beloved party and our Soviet government.

Lavrentii Beria

Cdes., please excuse me that I write somewhat disjointedly and badly as a result of my indisposition and also because of the lack of light and the absence of my pince-nez [glasses].

1 July 1953

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