**Kirov’s Murder**

On the 1\(^{st}\) December, 1934, Leningrad Party Boss Kirov was murdered in the corridor outside his office. This murder was apparently the work of a crazed, bitter ex-party member, Nikolayev. However some suggest that those responsible are far higher up. Look at the evidence and make up your own mind.

**FACT**

Kirov arrived back at the Communist Party Headquarters in Leningrad at 4pm on the 1\(^{st}\) December, 1934. He went into the building and up to his office. Shortly afterwards, he was found dead outside his office with a bullet wound in his back. Next to him Leonid Nikolayev was found unconscious on the floor with a gun matching the bullet in Kirov’s back.

**FACT**

The 9 NKVD guards in the building, who were usually on each floor of the Smolny building, were absent, having been given last minute orders to patrol elsewhere. This was unprecedented in that the Smolny building was the centre of local government, and therefore a high security location.

**FACT**

Kirov’s devoted bodyguard, Commissar Borisov, a friend as well as protector, did not accompany Kirov upstairs to his office like he usually did. He was about 40 yards behind him in the corridor. Later NKVD reports stated that Kirov had ordered him to go and make his lunch.
The day after the assassination, Kirov’s bodyguard, Commissar Borisov, was taken to the NKVD headquarters for questioning. On the way the vehicle collided with a lorry; the bodyguard was killed, although the three NKVD men accompanying him were not harmed. The explanation was that he had fallen out of the vehicle upon impact. Not long afterwards, the three NKVD men were arrested on various unrelated charges and executed.

After the murder, the leadership of the NKVD were tried for negligence and sent to gulags. However, they were treated generously and given better conditions than the usual prisoners, until they were unexpectedly executed in 1937.

At the 1936 Show Trial, famous Bolsheviks Kamenev and Zinoviev confessed to the murder of Kirov and admitted having intended to kill Stalin next. They had both denied it for a long time before their confessions. Kamenev was executed after the trial, but Zinoviev apparently became very agitated under police interrogation and had to be shot.
FACT

Nikolayev was aged 30, and was a sickly, nervous man. He had joined the Communist Party in 1920 aged 16. He had been expelled in 1934 for a breach of discipline, but afterwards he had been reinstated. He had no links to Trotsky, Zinoviev or other opponents of Stalin, but did resent the Party leadership which, he felt, had not recognised his worth.

FACT

A diary was found in Nikolayev’s briefcase by NKVD officials claiming that he believed his wife was having an affair with Kirov. In the diary, Nikolayev had planned out the murder, claiming that it was a response to protect himself from mistreatment by Party officials.

FACT

Nikolayev was interrogated alone and by the senior official in the justice system. Stalin personally supervised the investigation and cross-referencing. He kept to himself much of what was said. It is claimed that he interviewed Nikolayev, who, upon being asked “why did you do it?” responded by nodding to the NKVD guards in the room and said “ask them.” Nikolayev was shot by firing squad later in the same night.
FACT
In the February of 1934, at the XVIIth Party Congress, the Party had unanimously voted to take the title of General Secretary off Stalin and make him an equal secretary with Kirov, in other words having two Party leaders with equal power. Stalin had the vote rigged so that he won the vote and retained his sole leadership, but he was worried about Kirov’s threat to him.

FACT
Kirov had been criticising Stalin’s policies of Collectivisation, claiming that they were causing problems. He wanted to end Collectivisation and allow the peasants longer to adapt to a Communist society. This had been popular with many party members.

FACT
Shortly after the murder, a wave of arrests spread across Leningrad. First of all, 104 prisoners already in jail, none with any connection to Nikolayev, were summarily executed on the charge of conspiring to kill Kirov. Later others in the party were arrested and imprisoned or executed. Most of the arrested were supporters of Trotsky, Zinoviev or another or Stalin’s enemies. They were accused of being part of a “Leningrad Centre” that wanted to damage Russia and kill Stalin.
According to the wife of a party official who was in the office down the corridor, upon his arrest Nikolayev kept repeating:

“But they promised me. They promised me.”

Photo from Kirov’s funeral, Stalin shown at the front with tears on his cheeks

After the murder, on the 1st December (the same day) an Emergency Decree was passed with more NKVD powers.

1. Investigations to be completed in 10 days
2. Military, not civil, tribunals to try all suspects
3. No defence or prosecution lawyers allowed at trial
4. No appeals against decisions
5. Executions are to be carried out immediately
A letter from Svetlana Alliluyeva, Stalin’s daughter to a friend.
Written 1936, published 1963.

Kirov used to live in our house. He was one of us, an old colleague and friend. He spent the summer of 1934 with us. He was closer to us than any of his colleagues, and my father needed him. I will never believe that my father was involved in his death. Wouldn’t it be more logical to link his killing with the name of Beria (a later leader of NKVD)?

Stalin’s nephew, quoted by historians in an interview, 1990.

Stalin had nothing to do with that murder… My mother was with Stalin when they phoned him and informed him that Kirov had been murdered. And my mother said to me, neither before nor after it had she ever seen Stalin in the state he was after receiving that call. And Stalin knew full well that this murder would be linked with his name, after the XVIIth Congress – that was clear and understandable to him.

One woman, on the commission which considered Kirov’s murder, gave her opinion in 1990:

The NKVD latched onto this, that he [Nikolayev] was dissatisfied, and he wrote them a letter saying: “I am ready for anything now. I hate Kirov.”

And they organised it… Of course when Stalin found out that some Party senior members had asked Kirov to become leader, he decided to remove him.
### SOURCE

Recollections of Nikita Khrushchev, Party member and successor to Stalin (1989).

*This murder was organised from above. I consider it was organised by Yagoda [head of the NKVD] who could act only on the secret instructions of Stalin, received as they say, eye to eye.*

### FACT

The interrogators of the NKVD were allowed to use torture and brutality in order to make people confess. As well as outright pain, they used emotional and mental torture. For example, they told men that their families were ashamed of them, and even sent them letters from “their family” announcing that they never wanted to see them again. They even had women and children scream on the other side of the cell wall and told them it was their wives and children.
Although several factors contributed to bringing men to the point of making these confessions, they made them at the last in the sincere conviction that this was their sole remaining service to the Party and the Revolution. They sacrificed honour as well as life in order to defend the hated regime of Stalin, because it contained the last faint gleam of hope for that better world to which they had consecrated themselves in early youth.

"During the Civil War, Kirov was one of the swashbuckling commissars in the North Caucasus beside Sergo and Mikoyan. In Astrakhan he enforced Bolshevik power in March 1919 with liberal blood-letting: over four thousand were killed. When a bourgeois was caught hiding his own furniture, Kirov ordered him shot."

In 1933, Kirov had successfully opposed Stalin. Stalin wanted the death penalty for Ryutin, a party member who had written a 200 page book which had called for the end to Collectivisation, a reduction of investment in the Five Year Plans and the removal of Stalin, “the grave digger of the Revolution and Russia.” Kirov managed to prevent Stalin giving the death penalty.
FACT
In 1934, Stalin attempted to replace the head of the NKVD with the more brutal Yagoda. Kirov attempted to prevent this, though he was unsuccessful.

Yagoda knew that Kirov had tried to prevent his appointment. He was a brutal man – he had overseen the construction of the Volga canal which had cost hundreds of thousands of deaths, and he may have assassinated his former superior officer to receive the promotion to replace him. He was very corrupt as well – his 3 luxury dachas (apartments) had been decorated at a cost of over 4 million roubles of public money.

FACT
The pistol carried by Nikolayev, a 7.62mm Nagant M1895 revolver, was a secret service issue pistol provided by a friend of his called Orlov. Little is known about Orlov and there seem to be know extant official records of him. It was claimed by popular opinion that he had been a NKVD officer undercover.

FACT
Shortly after Kirov’s trial, Orlov, the mysterious friend who had provided Nikolayev with the pistol, was executed on personal orders from Stalin.

FACT
Nikolayev was known to have expressed his resentment of the leadership and particularly Kirov. It was commonly known, and the local NKVD had this in Nikolayev’s records.
### FACT
Nikolayev had been caught trying to assassinate Kirov on an earlier occasion. He had gone into the building where Kirov was working with his pistol in his briefcase. A security guard had searched his case, found the pistol and arrested him. Nikolayev was handed over to the NKVD. He was released shortly after and given his pistol back, still loaded.

### SOURCE
Official Party statement the day after the assassination and Nikolayev’s execution

"Comrade Stalin personally directed the investigation of Kirov's assassination. He questioned Nikolayev at length. The leaders of the Opposition placed the gun in Nikolaev's hand."

### FACT
Kirov was shot in the spine, between the shoulder blades. This precise shot was the execution technique of the NKVD, given that it effectively and quickly kills the victim with little chance of their survival.
Conclusions

Based upon the above evidence, three possible explanations are possible:

1) Nikolayev acted alone. He may have used contacts within the NKVD to obtain a weapon but the action was a result of his own bitter feelings toward Kirov and the party.

2) Nikolayev was put up to the murder by Yagoda in the NKVD. The motive for Nikolayev was his anti-government feeling, but the NKVD acted to protect their leader, Yagoda, to whom Kirov was a political threat since Kirov had opposed Yagoda’s appointment. Possibly even the NKVD wanted to impress Stalin, but he was not involved in the decision.

3) The NKVD put Nikolayev up to the murder at the orders of Stalin. Nikolayev was a threat to Stalin as he had almost replaced him at the XVIth Party congress; Stalin had been voted against 292 times, and Kirov only 3 times. Though the vote was rigged and Stalin’s place saved, such a popular leader could not be allowed to remain.

Whichever of the above is true, one thing is important.

IT DOES NOT MATTER OVERLY MUCH WHETHER OR NOT STALIN WAS ACTUALLY INVOLVED IN THE DECISION TO KILL KIROV.

What matters is what Stalin learned. He learned that it is possible to remove a political opponent, even a successful and popular celebrity of an opponent.

Therefore, regardless of the true events of the murder, Kirov’s murder should be seen as the trigger which started the Purges and Show Trials.