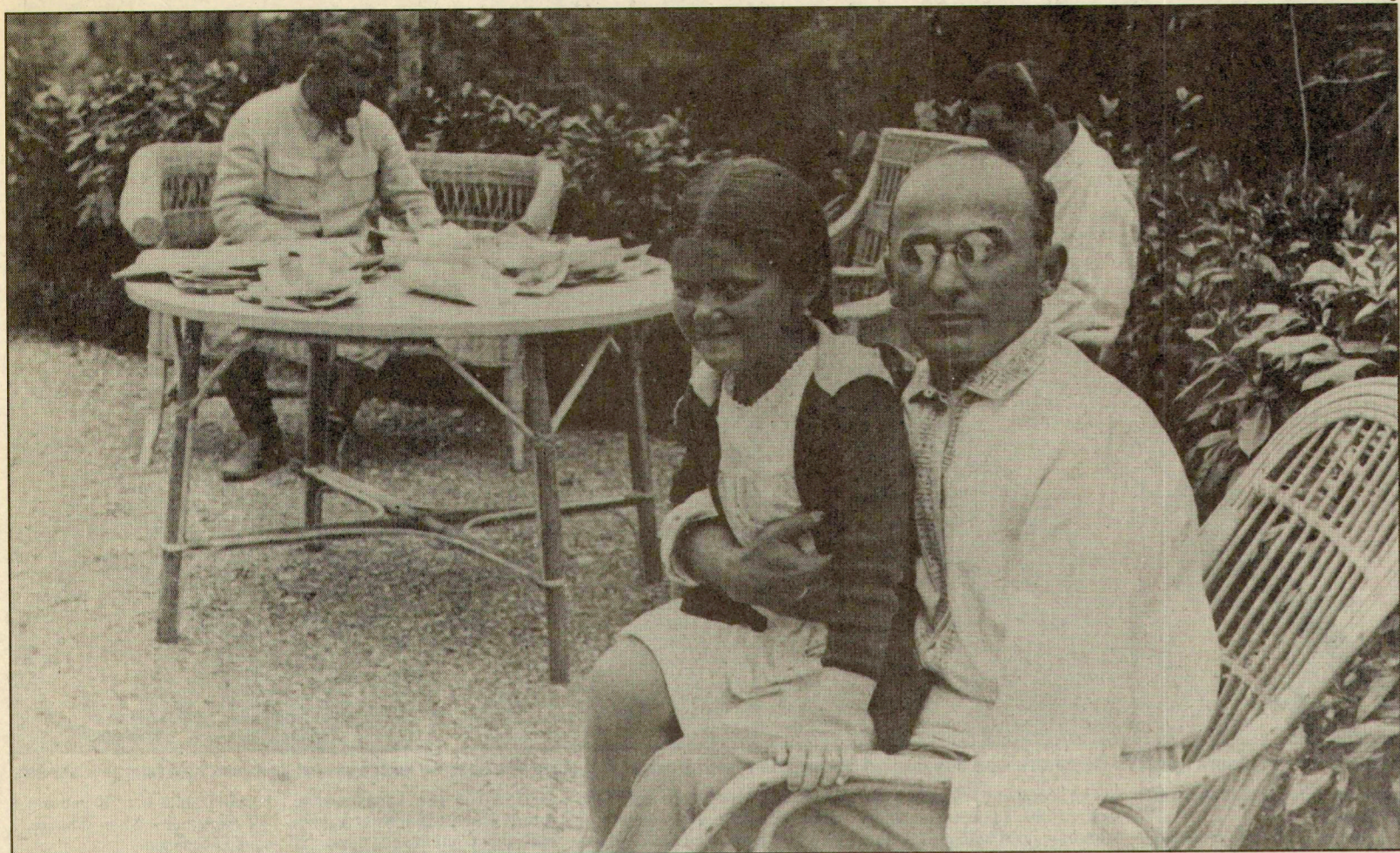


David King



A monster at ease: Beria relaxing with Stalin's daughter Svetlana. Thousands of Russians had cause to fear the secret police chief's attentions

Kremlin guard reveals how he shot hated Beria

FOR MORE than 40 years uncertainty and controversy have surrounded the fate of Lavrenti Beria, the chief of Stalin's secret police who presided over successive purges of the intelligentsia and a gulag that held 3m prisoners. Now one of Beria's executioners has ended an enduring mystery of the Soviet era with a vivid account of the man's imprisonment, trial and death by firing squad.

Hizhnyak Gurevich, 83, was present when Beria was arrested in the Kremlin after losing the power struggle that followed Stalin's death in 1953. He guarded Beria for six months in an underground bunker, tending to his every need.

Finally, after being ordered to join the firing squad, he took Beria's body to a crematorium. After the cremation he scattered the ashes by throwing them into a powerful fan.

"I have never recovered from the shock of having to shoot him," said Gurevich, speaking for the first time to a western journalist. "I loved Stalin and learnt to respect Beria as a man. I know nothing of his crimes. He was intelligent and always treated me with great respect."

A native like Stalin of the southern Soviet republic of Georgia, Beria was summoned to Moscow in 1938 to run the NKVD, the forerunner of the KGB. He turned it into his personal fiefdom and nurtured ambitions to succeed one of the most ruthless dictators of the 20th century.

At the height of his power, Beria not only ran the gulag but was also put in charge of the Soviet Union's programme to develop atomic bombs.

He was a rapist and a torturer, commanding his bodyguards to abduct young women from the streets of Moscow and bring them to him. Human bones thought to be from some of his victims were unearthed five years ago during construction work near his home in Moscow.

Although some details of Beria's final days have been disclosed since the collapse of communism, much of the truth has been obscured by the refusal of President Boris Yeltsin's government to allow public access to the KGB's most sensitive archives. Beria's only son, Sergio, a former missile scientist who is now a pensioner in Kiev, claimed his father was killed on the day of his arrest. "I dream of the day

by Mark Franchetti
Moscow

when the archives will be opened," he said. "Only then will the world see that he was not the main culprit."

Others have maintained that Beria was rescued by loyal supporters and taken to Argentina, where he lived into old age. A faded picture of a man who resembled Beria strolling the streets of Buenos Aires is occasionally published in support of the claim.

Gurevich, who was decorated for keeping the secrets of Beria's demise throughout the Soviet years, dismisses such stories as legends.

"I know. I shot Beria myself," he said in his dingy one-bedroom flat, crowded with communist memorabilia. "I have written several times to Beria's son to tell him of his father's last days and to prove that he did stand trial. But he has refused to meet me."

It was in June 1953 that Gurevich, already a highly decorated major in the Red Army and a veteran of the battle of Stalingrad and the fall of Berlin, first confronted Beria. On the evening of June 26 he was handed a list naming 50 trusted men and ordered to arm them heavily. They were to wait outside the Borovitskie gates of the Kremlin, the entrance now used by Yeltsin's motorcade.

Beria's time had come. Nikita Khrushchev, manoeuvring to assert himself as supreme leader of the Soviet Union, had established sufficient support to ensure the downfall of his most dangerous rival.

At a meeting inside the Kremlin, Beria was denounced as a traitor and arrested. When he was searched, guards found a crumpled piece of paper on which the word "alarm" had been written in red. He is thought to have scribbled it in a panic during the session in the hope of alerting his personal guards.

"I was told only at the last minute that Beria was being arrested and that we were to escort the convoy carrying him," recalled Gurevich.

"I was shocked. This was the most powerful man after Stalin. But I was told that he was an enemy of the people. Orders are orders."

At midnight a black government car with flashing lights left the Kremlin. Beria was



Silence broken: Hizhnyak Gurevich got rid of Beria's body

“He was not a coward and he knew how to behave with dignity. He went pale and his left cheek trembled — his only sign of emotion”

forced to kneel on the floor of the vehicle, surrounded by his captors. Gurevich and his men took command, transporting Beria to a bunker beneath Osipenko Street in central Moscow.

"He had not slept all night and his arrest had obviously taken him by surprise," said Gurevich. "I offered him some soup and put it on his table. He was furious. He grabbed the plate and threw it at me."

"His cell was 20 metres square, had no windows and was completely bare except for a wooden bed, two chairs and a table. The light was kept on at all times."

"That night I was commanded to guard and serve Beria and to make sure nothing happened to him before the trial. In the event of the bunker coming under attack, I was under strict orders to execute him."

During the next six months Gurevich became a virtual pris-

soner, living and sleeping in a cell adjacent to Beria's. The two cells were connected by a bell which Beria rang whenever he needed anything.

"I did everything for him," said Gurevich. "I shaved him, ran his bath, cut his hair, bought food for him with money given to me from his bank account. I cooked all his meals and tasted all his food first to ensure that nobody had tampered with it. During those six months I spent more time with him than anyone else."

"At first I was scared, but with time we began to respect and like each other. He used to call me Misha. He often said he was innocent and must have thought he would soon be released because he used to tell me that I was a good man and that he would take care of me once he was out."

As the days passed, however, Beria became frightened. On one occasion he scrawled on the walls of his cell: "They want to kill me! They want to kill me!"

Gurevich escorted him daily to his trial which, he said, began under heavy guard in November 1953. When the death sentence was passed, Gurevich brought him a black suit which he was made to wear. He tied Beria's hands to a steel ring and led him to another cell where five officers were waiting.

"He knew he was going to die but he did not panic," Gurevich said. "He let me understand that he wanted me to seek out his son to tell him what had happened. He was a clever man. He was not a coward and he knew how to behave with dignity. At one point he went pale and his left cheek began to tremble. That was his last and only sign of emotion."

Minutes later Major-General Pavel Batitskii, chief of staff of the air force, shot Beria at close range. Gurevich and his fellow officers were then instructed to follow suit.

"I drew out my pistol and shot once, hitting him from a distance of two yards," said Gurevich. "Then everybody else pulled the trigger."

Left alone to wrap Beria's body in tarpaulin, Gurevich collapsed. He was later ordered to take the body to the Donskoy crematorium, where he pushed it through a hatch into the flames.

Almost immediately after Beria's death, many of those who had served under him were executed. The editor of the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia wrote to subscribers instructing them to cut out the flattering entry on Beria "with a small knife or razor blade". He sent an article about the Bering Sea to be pasted in its place. Until Mikhail Gorbachev began the process of perestroika in the mid-1980s, Beria was mentioned in official textbooks only as a criminal.

Although many communists still revere Stalin today, Beria is regarded both in Russia and abroad as a fundamentally wicked man who was personally responsible for the deaths of thousands of people.

"It is not for me to judge Beria," Gurevich said. "But I still feel a lot of pity for him as a man. I think about what I had to do every day and those memories keep haunting me. They are difficult to live with. I felt sorry for him."

*If you want
to cut out
smoking, help
is at hand.*

Additional reporting: Dmitry Beliakov