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MELNIKOV'S REMOVAL IN THE UKRAINE

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MELNIKOV'S REMOVAL IN THE UKRAINE

Ukrainian personnel shifts following the death of Stalin culminated in the purge of L. G. Melnikov from his position as First Secretary of the Ukrainian Party on 12 June. In view of his membership on the USSR Party Presidium and his close relations with other members of that body, he was the most important Soviet leader to have been removed since the death of Stalin.

There were few advance indications of Melnikov's ouster to be found in the Ukrainian governmental reorganization. On 10 April, the Ukrainian SSR began to reorganize its governmental structure in accordance with the USSR reorganization of 15 March; this process continued throughout the months of April and May. The 10 April reorganization included the consolidation of several ministries in line with the All-Union ministerial consolidation. Among others, the Ministries of Internal Affairs and State Security were merged into a single Ministry of Internal Affairs under the direction of P. Y. Meshyk, a reported MGB associate of L. P. Beria. On 23 April, the Ukrainian Minister of State Control, A. P. Pirogov, was replaced by K. S. Karavaev. An important personnel change on 30 May provided what is perhaps the first indication of an impending high level personnel reversal in the Ukraine. On that date, the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet appointed A. Y. Korneichuk First Deputy Chairman of the Republican Council of Ministers, and released Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers Yeremenke from his position "in connection with his appointment as Chairman of the Ukrainian Industrial Council Administration."

The new Deputy Premier, Korneichuk, was an official and a writer who had previously been quite prominent in Party and State affairs, but who had been criticized on several occasions for having allowed "bourgeois nationalist" tendencies to appear in his writings. Both he and his wife, the Polish-born writer V. Vasilevskaya, had been criticized on this account by Melnikov himself at the 17th Congress of the Ukrainian Communist Party in September, 1952. At that time, Melnikov had stated that Korneichuk and his wife were both guilty of "gross ideological defects and deviations from historical truth...in their libretto of the opera 'Bogdan Khmel'nitski'."

While generally adhering rather closely to the line laid down by the Moscow press, Ukrainian papers during this period reflected

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several interesting trends which help put Melnikov's removal in perspective. In one respect, the Ukrainian press did not follow the Moscow line; following the death of Stalin and until 13 March, the Soviet press generally, led by Pravda and Izvestia, began to give Malenkov a buildup similar to that used for Stalin. As mentioned above, the new Soviet Premier was liberally quoted in every issue, and quotations from his speeches were set in a boldface type previously reserved for similar quotations from Stalin. On 13 March, the central press, and particularly Pravda, abruptly stopped this practice in favor of the new, collective approach to the Soviet leadership. The Ukrainian press, however, continued to give exceptional treatment to Malenkov at least until the end of March. This may have been an indirect declaration of allegiance to him by the Ukrainian Party under Melnikov's leadership. The halting of this procedure by the Ukrainian press may have been due to pressure on the part of an anti-Malenkov faction in Moscow. On the other hand, it may have occurred at the personal request of Malenkov, assuming that he was in accord with the collective leadership line for the time being.

In early June, Ukrainian papers began to feature articles which foreshadowed the removal of Melnikov on the 12th of that month. On 5 June, the official Ukrainian newspaper apologized in a front page editorial for its own "smear" of the Ukrainian Ministry of Health on 20 February, during the height of the vigilance campaign. The February article had castigated the Health Ministry for tolerating unethical practices, employing professionally incompetent practitioners, and failing to eliminate nepotism, bureaucracy and corruption in certain hospitals. Most of the officials singled out in the article had Jewish names. The 5 June editorial stated that the previous article had "smeared a large group of honest health officials and reflected erroneous views incompatible with national policy, the Communist Party and Soviet ideology."

This was a clear repudiation of an anti-Jewish article; it was traceable to the reversal of the doctors' plot in early April. Additional criticism of "violators of the Soviet nationalities policy" arose in short order in connection with newspaper criticism of the training of Party propagandists. On 3 June, Party officials were scored for not having paid proper attention to the theoretical training of propagandists and for having delegated responsibility for the selection and training of propagandists to lower Party organization rather than maintaining centralized control in these matters.

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On 11 June, the official newspaper, in a more extensive criticism, charged that anti-Marxist viewpoints were creeping into propaganda material, and that propagandists were not speaking to the workers "in that language which is most comprehensible to them." This latter charge was to figure the next day as one of the chief reasons for the expulsion of Melnikov.

On 12 June it was announced that Melnikov had been discharged from his post as First Secretary of the Ukrainian Party by the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Party. Melnikov was accused inter alia of having allowed "distortions" of the Soviet nationalities policy in the western areas of the Ukraine. Among these distortions was the virtual replacement of the local by the Russian language in several schools, and the appointment of officials who were not drawn from the local population. The plenum of the Central Committee appointed A. I. Kirichenko to replace Melnikov as First Secretary, the first Ukrainian to occupy this position since 1938 with the exception of Kaganovich, who had been born in Kiev and who had held the post for a brief period in 1947. The Central Committee also appointed A. E. Korneichuk to the thirteen-man Bureau of the Ukrainian Central Committee.

Criticism was levelled at the Ukrainian Council of Ministers, headed by Premier D. S. Korotchenko, and on 13 June Ambassador Bohlen reported from Moscow that, "according to a reliable newspaper source," Korotchenko had been removed from office. Korotchenko's ouster has not been confirmed but there were other indications that the Ukrainian Council of Ministers was being reorganized. It was announced that V. G. Bondarchuk, Deputy Chairman of the Ukrainian Council of Ministers, was released from his post "in connection with his transfer to a scientific post," and on 18 June another Deputy Chairman, Baranovsky, was released from his duties "in connection with his passing fully for work in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Ukrainian SSR." Other changes in the Ukraine included the dismissal of officials in both the Kiev and Lvov Soviets.

The removal of Melnikov was of importance from several points of view. First of all, it seemed to reflect on the position of the USSR Presidium faction headed by G. M. Malenkov and N. S. Khrushchev. Melnikov had been Second Secretary of the Ukrainian Party directly responsible to Khrushchev when the latter served as First Secretary of the Ukrainian Party from 1947 to 1949. He had also taken a prominent part at the 19th Party Congress, which was generally believed to have been a Malenkov affair, and he had

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been elected to the top USSR Party Presidium following the Congress. He had also been a member of the Caucus of Representatives of Delegations, which proposed the composition of the governing bodies of the 19th Congress, and had been elected a member of the Congress Secretariat. This was interesting because many of the prominent members of the Caucus, and particularly of the Congress Secretariat, have either been purged or demoted or have disappeared from public prominence since the death of Stalin. Melnikov also had taken a rather prominent part in the Soviet vigilance campaign, which derived much of its ideological inspiration from Malenkov's speech at the Party Congress, and he had faithfully reflected Malenkov's views on party discipline, policy and procedures.

It was speculated at the time that Melnikov's ouster was instigated by L. P. Beria, since his removal was the third instance of a Party purge on charges of promoting excessive Russification directly related to changes in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The first such instance revolved around the Interior Ministry's reversal of the doctors' plot, which included the dismissal from the Party Secretariat of Former MGB Minister S. D. Ignatiev. The mid-April purge in the Georgian SSR included the installation of a new Interior Minister believed close to Beria, and included charges that the previous MGB Minister had framed loyal Georgians on charges of non-existent nationalism.^{1/} Finally, the governmental changes in the Ukraine had brought to the Interior Ministry of that Republic an official believed to be loyal to Beria. Subsequent Party criticism in the Soviet Republics of Latvia and Lithuania, which had been accompanied by transfers into the Interior Ministry of MGB officials believed to be loyal to Beria, also included charges that previous administrations in those republics had violated the correct nationalities policy.

There were suggestions that the removal of Melnikov might be followed by further difficulties within the Soviet Party hierarchy. M. D. A. Bagirov, Premier of Azerbaijan, was another proponent of a strict Russification policy. He had received unusual prominence in the 6 March reorganization, when he had by-passed twenty-two

^{1/} An indication that these two reversals were instigated by the same source was found in an 8 May editorial in the official Georgian newspaper which linked Ryumin, the MGB official charged with primary responsibility for the doctors' plot, and Rukhadze, the Georgian Security Minister, on a common charge of attempting to foment racial hatred among the Soviet peoples.

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members of the October Party Presidium and was made one of the four alternate members of the new group. Following his installation as Premier of Azerbaijan, he had paid fulsome personal tribute to Malenkov. This was in contrast to the Georgian reorganization when Bakradze, the new Georgian Premier, had singled out Beria for praise. It was also in contrast to the current line on "collegial" leadership then in vogue.

In addition to the above, it was also believed that Melnikov would be relieved of his membership in the Party Presidium. In order for this to be accomplished legally, another meeting of the USSR Party Central Committee would be required, as in the case of the dismissal of Ignatiev from the Party Secretariat. It is not known whether this has taken place, although on 27 June Melnikov, along with Beria and M. D. A. Bagirov, failed to attend the opera with the Party Presidium at the Bolshoi theater. The fact that V. A. Malyshev, the new Minister of Transport and Heavy Machine Building appeared with the group suggested that he had replaced Melnikov.

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