

Screenplay for the film "1935 — Sergey Kirov. Historical Chronicles with Nikolai Svanidze"
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Screenplay Summary:

The text presents a broad historical portrait of Sergei Kirov and uses his assassination on 1 December 1934 as the real starting point of the year 1935 in the USSR. Kirov, first secretary of the Leningrad party organisation and a member of the Politburo, is shot in a corridor of the Smolny by Leonid Nikolaev, a minor official plagued by illness, failed careers, jealousy and wounded pride, who dreams of inscribing his name in history through an act of individual terror, in the tradition of nineteenth-century revolutionary assassins. The blow hits Stalin especially hard because Kirov is not an opponent but a loyal “Stalin man” – a faithful executor of collectivisation, social purges and the emerging cult of the leader.

The narrative dwells at length on Leningrad under Kirov: the end of the NEP, the expulsions of “non-working elements” and “former people” (nobles, bourgeois, professionals), the spread of communal apartments, and the misery of peasant refugees fleeing the famine of 1932–1933. Kirov enforces decrees that drive old Petersburg inhabitants from their homes, refuses to cross out any names from the OGPU lists, and publicly calls for harsh sentences – up to death or at least ten years in prison – for theft from collective farms. He supports massive industrial and penal projects such as the White Sea–Baltic Canal, built at the cost of over a hundred thousand lives of prisoners and dispossessed peasants, while living the typical comfortable life of a top party dignitary, with a spacious apartment, domestic staff, and a conspicuously active private life in the world of ballet and culture.

Nikolaev is presented as the flip side of this elite: chronically sick, socially insecure, obsessed with his wife Milda Draule, a party employee and, according to rumours, Kirov’s lover. His motives blend personal jealousy, social resentment and a grandiose fantasy of martyrdom. The actual killing, however, is depicted as almost accidental: an unexpected encounter in a corridor, a single shot to the back of Kirov’s head, and a failed suicide attempt thwarted when an electrician throws a hammer at Nikolaev. What in essence looks like a personal and somewhat chaotic act will be immediately seized upon and transformed by Stalin and the security apparatus.

From 2 December onwards, Stalin is personally on the scene in Leningrad. He interrogates Nikolaev himself and meets NKVD informant Maria Volkova, a psychologically disturbed woman who has been sending in wild reports about conspiracies and terrorist plots. Under Stalin’s guidance, the assassination is reinterpreted: no longer an isolated act but the work of an organisation. Investigators construct the notion of a “Leningrad Centre”, and within weeks the case is linked to the old Zinoviev opposition. More than a hundred people, including returnees from abroad whose only “crime” is to have come back to their families, are arrested and executed for alleged participation. Zinoviev and Kamenev are publicly branded as moral instigators of the murder. A special legal procedure is introduced for terrorists and counter-revolutionaries: ten-day investigations, trials without defence, no appeals, immediate execution – a direct prelude to the legal mechanics of the Great Terror.

Repression rapidly spreads beyond the alleged conspirators. In 1935, Leningrad is “cleaned up”: 11,702 “former people” are arrested and deported along with their families. Thousands of rooms

and apartments are freed and redistributed to party activists, NKVD officers and military personnel brought in to “stabilise” the city. In the surrounding region, Finn-Ingrian villagers living near the Finnish border are deported en masse to Central Asia; their national district is wiped out in a day and about a hundred villages destroyed. Despite isolated protests – notably from the physiologist Ivan Pavlov – the general mood is one of punitive hysteria: rallies and newspapers are filled with demands for executions and calls to “wipe out” the enemies.

Yet, the author underlines that, compared with earlier anti-peasant campaigns (1929–1933) and the massive terror of 1937, Stalin’s immediate reaction to Kirov’s murder is, in terms of numbers, “moderate” and even suspiciously restrained. This is interpreted as the effect of a deep psychological shock: Stalin, shaken by the killing of a trusted lieutenant and symbolically of “his own man”, temporarily loses confidence in the NKVD as both instrument and guarantor of his safety. A two-year “pause” follows, which Western observers will later call the “pink year”: less blood, some easing of repression, and a renewed effort to win over the peasantry.

In 1935, Stalin announces amnesties for collective farmers and kolkhoz chairmen convicted of economic offences, including those sentenced under the draconian “three ears of corn” law; children of dekulakised families formally regain access to higher education; he proposes maternity leave for peasant women and larger private plots for kolkhoz members. At the same time, the Stakhanovite movement is launched, named after miner Alexei Stakhanov. “Labour heroes” are glorified and rewarded with money, sewing machines, even cars and furniture. Bread ration cards are abolished, commercial shops open with enticing window displays, ice cream and sausages appear on the streets, and consumer goods re-emerge – mainly in Moscow and Leningrad and primarily for the nomenklatura and favoured workers.

These changes, though socially limited, create a powerful illusion of improvement. People begin to dress in city suits rather than the standardised “stalinka” jacket; party women are even instructed to look “like women” at official receptions; and at the turn of 1935–1936, the New Year tree, once banned as a religious relic, is rehabilitated and sold in festive markets. This combination of selective terror, carefully staged material betterment and the “soft” image of Stalin – smiling, approachable, playing the role of “father of the people” at Stakhanovite gatherings – stabilises the regime and helps Stalin recover his self-confidence after the Kirov shock.

The text closes by juxtaposing Stalin’s famous phrases of this period – “Life has become better, comrades; life has become more joyful” and “A son is not responsible for his father” – with what is to come. In 1935, no one yet knows that within two years, children will be systematically taken from arrested parents, sent to state homes and stripped even of their surnames. Their fate, the author suggests, will be part of the long, delayed price of Stalin’s fear and trauma following the assassination of Sergei Kirov.

Screenplay:

1935 – Sergei Kirov

The year 1935 in the USSR began on 1 December 1934 at 4:37 p.m. At that hour in Leningrad, Sergei Kirov was killed – member of the Politburo and Orgburo of the Central Committee of the VKP(b), secretary of the Central Committee, head of the Leningrad regional and city party committees. The individual terrorist act committed by Leonid Nikolaev against this high-ranking party official would make an enormous impression on Stalin. Stalin would suffer a profound shock. The consequences of this shock would be delayed in time.

On 1 December at 9:30 in the morning, as usual, two security officers go on duty at house no. 26/28 on Krasnykh Zor Street, where Kirov lives. Krasnykh Zor Street – formerly Kamenny Island Prospect (Kamennoostrovsky), later Kirov Prospect, and now again Kamennoostrovsky – is where, that day, Kirov is getting ready for a report he is to give to the Leningrad party activists in the Tauride Palace.

On 29 November he returned from Moscow, from the plenum of the Central Committee of the VKP(b). He plans to deliver a speech reporting the results of the plenum. At 3:55 p.m. Kirov phones the garage, which is in the same building where he lives, and asks for the car to be brought around. At 4:00 p.m. Kirov leaves the house. He says he will walk a few blocks. At Trinity Bridge – then called the Equality Bridge – he gets into the car and drives to the Smolny. He enters the Smolny through the main entrance and heads for his office on the third floor.

When Kirov walks along the large corridor on the third floor, there are lots of people. He stops with someone for a minute, exchanges a few words. The director of the circus is pacing up and down the corridor, waiting for an appointment. Ahead of Kirov, walking in the same direction, is the courier Fyodorova. She does not know that Kirov is coming behind her. From the testimony of courier Fyodorova:

“I saw Nikolaev standing by the wall. I was surprised that he was swaying terribly, and that one of his hands was tucked under his coat. I wanted to go up to him, but I didn’t have time, which I later greatly regretted, because if I had gone over, I would have distracted his attention. I thought Nikolaev was feeling ill.”

That day, Leonid Nikolaev came to the Smolny for the second time. There is no special pass system for party members at the Smolny: entrance is by party card. It is shown to the guards between the second and third floors. The first time that day Nikolaev arrived at the Smolny at about half past one and for about an hour went around visiting acquaintances, trying to get an invitation to the party activists’ meeting scheduled for that day. Many people at the Smolny know Nikolaev by sight. He had worked for some time in the apparatus of the regional party committee, then at the Institute of the History of the VKP(b) attached to that same regional committee, from which he was dismissed in the spring of 1934. When he was fired from the Institute of Party History, he was offered a job in the transport system. He refused. He was expelled from the party. Later he was reinstated.

Nikolaev had always had trouble holding down a job: in fifteen years he changed workplaces thirteen times. He never hid the fact that he wanted a clean job with a supplementary ration. In this sense, the early 1930s were an extremely lucky time for him. The peak of his material well-being – that is, his time within the walls of the regional party committee – fell in the years of greatest hunger for the country as a whole. This minor employee of the regional committee, Nikolaev, moves from a communal flat into a separate three-room apartment in the newly built Bateninsky housing complex. For the time, this is fantastic.

Leningrad is packed to the limit. On 1 August 1927 the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR issued a decree "On self-densification". According to this decree, every owner or tenant of an apartment was entitled to settle in his living space any person he wished, even a non-relative. However, people could only exercise this right within three weeks after the decree was issued. After that three-week period, the question of resettlement passed into the hands of the building management. The management settles whomever it wants, wherever it wants.

From that moment on, the communal flat becomes the main form of housing in Leningrad. By the time the "self-densification" decree of the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars is implemented, Kirov has already been in power for two years. He has been transferred to Leningrad from Baku, where he was first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan. He is Stalin's protégé. He finds himself at the head of Leningrad after the removal of Zinoviev. In other words, Kirov is sent to one of the key fronts in Stalin's struggle with the legacy of the Zinoviev opposition. On 4 January 1926 he writes to his wife from Moscow: "They are transferring me to Leningrad, where there is now an unbelievable squabble." Kirov does not want to go to Leningrad; by this time he is already an experienced and cautious apparatchik.

On 13 February 1926, at a plenum of the provincial party committee, he is elected first secretary. On 3 March, *Leningradskaya Pravda* publishes a decree of the Central Committee of the VKP(b) confirming Kirov in this post. On 12 April, Stalin arrives in Leningrad, thus publicly expressing his support for the new head of the city. Already in July 1926, at a plenum of the Central Committee, Kirov is elected a candidate member of the Politburo. He will become a full member of the Politburo in 1930.

House no. 26/28 on Krasnykh Zor Street, into which Kirov and his wife moved in April 1926, was built at the very beginning of the twentieth century according to a family design by the Benois brothers. From the first post-revolutionary years, the house is occupied by the party nomenklatura. The new Soviet officialdom settles into other people's apartments. On 8 January 1922, the Petrograd Executive Committee, by special decree, legalised the right of new occupants to the furniture of others. In this house, in apartment 118, lived the first Soviet master of Petrograd-Leningrad, Grigory Zinoviev. Kirov lives in apartment 20.

The Kirov family is childless. The household is run by a cook, a maid, and a person specially assigned by the regional committee to look after the state of the apartment. Plus security. This is the standard set-up of the Stalinist nomenklatura.

Kirov arrives in Leningrad at the end of the NEP and finally winds up the NEP in the city. After a relatively calm six-year period, the city undergoes a second post-revolutionary blow that changes its social composition. Kirov implements the decree of the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR "On limiting the residence of non-working elements in nationalised houses." This decree is aimed at those native inhabitants, the Petersburgers, who, under no circumstances and in spite of everything, did not want to leave their native city – those who still lend this city its unique expression.

In the summer of 1929, officials from the building management come to the citizens subject to expulsion and hand them notices of the need to vacate the premises they occupy. In case of refusal,

they are forcibly evicted. The persons expelled during this campaign are collectively designated by the already familiar term “lishentsy” – people deprived of civil rights.

These people are deprived not only of their formally existing electoral rights. They cannot get a job. They cannot enter educational institutions. They have no chance of receiving rations or food cards. The children of the *lishentsy* are not accepted at school.

The writer Mikhail Prishvin notes in his diary: “The class approach is practiced even toward the dying. Three patients, recognised as *lishentsy*, are thrown out of the hospital.”

Kirov is a qualified party official, no more and no less. Under his leadership, Leningrad firmly follows the nationwide policy of levelling the social structure of the country. In 1933, the campaign of internal passportisation will allow the Leningrad authorities to expel an additional 80,000 “former people” from the city.

Kirov is precise in his behaviour down to the smallest detail. He never appears in public wearing glasses, though he suffers from age-related farsightedness. In 1934, he is forty-eight years old. At home, he has four pairs of glasses. Before an audience, he deliberately refuses to use them. He writes his speaking notes in large letters. Glasses are “intellectual” or “bourgeois”. They are out of fashion. Kirov keeps up with party fashion.

In 1929, the head of one of the Moscow Komsomol organisations, later head of the Komsomol (VLKSM) and later shot, Aleksandr Kosyrev, proposes in the pages of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* a new style of suit for Soviet youth: a tunic with a turn-down collar, two pockets on the sides, two pockets on the chest, breeches, a belt or a shoulder strap. The colour is dark khaki. This outfit is the prototype of the famous “stalinka” jacket that will spread not only in the USSR but also in China, Vietnam, and North Korea. In most photographs from the early 1930s, Kirov is wearing exactly this outfit.

Academician Dmitry Likhachev recalls Leningrad at the height of Kirov’s rule. In 1932, Likhachev has just returned from the camps – first Solovki, then the White Sea–Baltic Canal. His native city should have dazzled him. Nevertheless, he writes: “The crowd on the street is dark, grey. If someone is dressed in white or bright colours, it means a foreigner.”

Dmitri Sergeyevich Likhachev writes that Leningrad in 1932–1933 is full of refugees from the countryside. Peasants flee to the cities from fierce hunger. Likhachev recalls: “I was returning from the Philharmonic. It was bitterly cold. From the platform of the tram on the Bolshoy Prospekt I saw a house with a deep entrance.” Likhachev will remember the number of this house all his life – 44. “The door that was locked at night was set back deep inside. Closer to the street, peasant women were standing holding some tablecloths or blankets above their heads. In this way they created something like a small enclosure for the children lying in the depths.”

Until the winter of 1933, the peasant refugees with children can still spend the night on staircases in the entryways. At the end of 1933, the city authorities issue an order: all apartment doors are to be locked in the evening. A rushed repair of front doors begins, locks are installed, bells run to the janitors, gates to the courtyards are locked. Among the 80,000 expelled from Leningrad during the passportisation are peasants fleeing hunger; they go in the same category as lawyers, doctors, engineers and scholars from the “former people”.

On the OGPU reports about the course of the expulsions from Leningrad, Kirov leaves no notes. He takes them merely for his information, and his pencil does not strike a single name off the lists.

As for the peasant question, Kirov formulated his position perfectly clearly in a speech at a conference of district leaders of the Leningrad region. The speech was published in *Pravda* on 6 August 1932. Kirov said: "Our punitive policy is very liberal. It seems to me that if a person is caught stealing collective farm property, he must be tried up to the highest measure of punishment. And if the punishment is to be commuted, then not to less than ten years' deprivation of freedom." This publication of Kirov's speech came out one day before the adoption of the draconian law "On the Protection of Socialist Property", written personally by Stalin. This law, adopted in the midst of the famine and punishing by death the theft of a potato or a handful of grain, received the popular name "the law of the three ears of corn".

Kirov's speech anticipated the adoption of the law that would be used against mothers of many children who did not know how to feed their starving offspring. These very women would flee to the big cities, including Leningrad. And it would be under Kirov that they would be swept out of Leningrad.

It is precisely in these hard years for ordinary Leningraders that the minor regional committee employee Leonid Nikolaev achieves a material success that is difficult to explain. His run of luck continues until 31 March 1934, when he is fired. He is forced to live on his wife's wages. Nikolaev's wife, Milda Draule, is a Latvian, a party member since 1919. Tall, big, red-haired. In 1930 she gets a job at the regional party committee in the statistics section, then moves to the personnel section of the light industry department.

Less than a year after the start of Milda Draule's work in the walls of the regional committee, her family receives a separate three-room apartment. Kirov is a well-known admirer of female beauty. This is perhaps his most striking characteristic, although in the unofficial list of party Don Juans he is only in third place after the chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR, Kalinin, and the secretary of the Central Executive Committee, Enukidze.

In Leningrad, Kirov's amorous adventures are spoken of as something taken for granted. It is the NKVD cadre worker Leonid Raikhman who speaks explicitly of a special relationship with Milda Draule. He tells this to another high NKVD official, Pavel Sudoplatov.

A few years later, Raikhman's wife will be the Bolshoi Theatre ballet star Olga Lepeshinskaya.

Sudoplatov's wife works in the secret-political department of the NKVD, which deals with ideological and cultural issues and oversees the Bolshoi and Mariinsky theatres. Sudoplatov, basing himself on the words of his wife and Raikhman, notes: "In the operational reports of NKVD informers from the Mariinsky Theatre, the special relationship between Kirov and Milda Draule is emphasized." In other words, the ballet troupe of the Mariinsky shows signs of jealousy toward Milda Draule. The Leningrad ballet of the early 1930s is a world thoroughly and very closely familiar with Kirov. Kirov actively appreciates the beauty of the female part of the troupe. When, after Kirov's assassination, the Leningrad Opera and Ballet Theatre is named the Kirov Theatre, Stalin will be doubly right – both politically and essentially.

In the summer of 1933, Milda Draule is unexpectedly removed from the regional committee and transferred, with a pay rise, to the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the People's Commissariat of Heavy Industry. This commissariat is headed by Sergo Ordzhonikidze. The Leningrad administration comes under his authority. Ordzhonikidze is Kirov's closest friend.

Nikolaev could not have been unaware of the rumours about his wife and Kirov. After Kirov's murder, even Academician Pavlov, having heard the conversations of his assistants and his maid, commented categorically on what had happened: "Jealousy."

But it is not just jealousy. Leonid Nikolaev – narrow-shouldered, with crooked legs, disproportionately long arms, suffering from rickets from birth, unable to walk until the age of eleven – this withdrawn, nervous man is extraordinarily proud and ambitious. He is jealous of his wife and at the same time wants to enter history. The experience of the Russian revolutionary struggle suggests to him that the best way to enter and remain in history is terror. In his diary, Nikolaev writes: "By committing a terrorist act, I will enter history; they will erect monuments to me, my name will stand in one row with Zhelyabov."

Andrei Zhelyabov is the organiser of the assassination of Emperor Alexander II, who abolished serfdom in Russia.

In a certain sense, Nikolaev is old-fashioned. He dreams of individual terror, whereas for seventeen years it has been state terror that is in fashion. With one of the pillars of state terror, Lavrenty Beria, Kirov had worked hand in glove back in 1921. At that time Stalin had not even heard of Beria.

In 1921, Kirov is first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan. Beria, under Kirov, is deputy head of the Azerbaijani Cheka. In fact, their paths had crossed earlier. In May 1920, Kirov was appointed plenipotentiary representative of the RSFSR in Menshevik, still non-Soviet Georgia. Beria at that moment is in prison in Kutaisi. It is Kirov who sends note no. 327 to the Georgian foreign minister, demanding Beria's release and his expulsion beyond Georgia's borders. It is after this release that Lavrenty Beria ends up in Azerbaijan, where he becomes responsible secretary of the Central Committee for the expropriation of the bourgeoisie. This is Beria's first Chekist post. In a certain sense, Kirov is his godfather in this field. In 1935, already the first person in Transcaucasia, Beria oversees the publication of a collection entitled *Sergei Mironovich Kirov in the Struggle for Oil*.

It should be said that at the start of his party career, Kirov dressed differently from the way he did in his Leningrad period. In 1919, at the height of the Civil War, in Astrakhan, Kirov does not wear a military uniform, which surprises everyone. He is in a suit and tie. Before his diplomatic assignment to Tbilisi, Kirov has himself dressed in Moscow with the greatest care. The best Moscow tailors outfit him in the latest fashion: blue suit, mackintosh, soft hat, suede gloves.

Had the boldest idea of Soviet oppositionists been realised and Stalin somehow been replaced by Kirov, the cult of the leader would still have inevitably arisen. A cult is always, to a greater extent, a characteristic of the country than of the leader. But the cult of Kirov, in its external manifestations, would have differed from what was created around Stalin. The cult of Kirov would rather have resembled the scene of an opera tenor being met at the stage door by his overwrought admirers. The women scream; he smiles his trademark Kirov smile. But unlike an opera singer, he does not spare his voice. He speaks without end. Kirov is an tireless public talker.

From his youth, Kirov is drawn to the theatrical entrance, to the stage. From 1909 to October 1917, he works in Vladikavkaz for the newspaper *Terek*. He signs his articles with the pseudonym Sergei Mironov. Among other things, he writes a column as a theatre critic. As a reporter, he has a permanent seat in the second row of the stalls. Here is a fragment from Kirov's review of a production of *Anna Karenina* at the Vladikavkaz city theatre: "The moment is highly dramatic,

when Anna tells her husband that she is pregnant. Words are not needed here; there is nothing to say. One must be able to convey one's feelings with one's body."

In terms of economic policy, if Kirov had come to power, there would have been no fundamental changes. Kirov was no theorist. Maintaining the previous economic line would still have required enormous free labour resources. That is, arrests would have continued. In Kirov's economic domain we find the Khibinogorsk combine, the Volkhov aluminium plant, the construction of the hydroelectric station on the Svir, peat workings in the Leningrad region. The main type of labour power at all these sites is dispossessed peasants and prisoners. Kirov finds this acceptable. He looks at them in purely practical terms.

Kirov visited the construction of the White Sea–Baltic Canal twice. The first time alone, in June 1932; the second time together with Stalin, Voroshilov, and Yagoda.

In his report to the 17th Congress of the VKP(b), Kirov will say of the construction of the canal, which swallowed up more than one hundred thousand lives: "We must do justice to our Chekists, who directed this work. They literally performed miracles."

"We are building communism and we will build it to the end, despite any difficulties and sacrifices. By any price, by any means, we will go toward the goal we have set, by the shortest path," said the head of the NKVD Directorate for the Leningrad region, Filipp Medved, Kirov's closest assistant and associate.

The idea of replacing Stalin with Kirov, which really did wander about in the early 1930s, is tied precisely to the fact that Kirov in no way belonged to any opposition to Stalin. In the conditions that prevailed in the country in the early '30s, Stalin could only be replaced through a coup by a loyal Stalinist. That is exactly what Kirov was. He actively and faithfully contributed to the creation of the cult of Stalin. He constantly cites Stalin in his numerous speeches. He declares: "It is hard to imagine such a giant figure as Stalin." In such statements, Kirov is not original. But the very idea of the cult is natural to him. As a man and as a politician, Kirov finds Stalin likeable. When Kirov comes to Moscow, he prefers to spend the night in Stalin's apartment rather than with his old friend Ordzhonikidze. He sleeps in Stalin's bed. Stalin gives up his bed to him. Under Kirov, on Stalin's orders, masterpieces of the Hermitage are sold off and half the churches of the city are destroyed. In his last years, Kirov sometimes shifts to direct imitation of Stalin's style.

He stops smoking cigarettes and switches to a pipe, though he does not display this publicly.

It is precisely the closeness between Stalin and Kirov that gives rise to the idea that in the event of a coup, Kirov's figure could be accepted by the party top and the population. The events of 1933 were described to his son by the writer and dramatist Vsevolod Ivanov, a man close to Gorky. The picture – or rather, the version – of events looks like this. One of the active supporters of putting Kirov forward for the top role in the country is Gorky. His main motive is that despite all his love for Stalin, Kirov personally is much more tolerant and balanced than Stalin. Gorky believes that Kirov is not prone to political hysteria. Gorky himself is under constant OGPU surveillance. Every action and word of Gorky is impossible without the knowledge of OGPU deputy head Yagoda. But Gorky's scheme is senseless without Yagoda's participation. Gorky is on friendly personal terms with Yagoda. In this situation, it is hard to say which of them – Yagoda or Gorky – was actually the initiator of the idea of removing Stalin and replacing him with Kirov. One thing is obvious: Stalin's entire security detail is under Yagoda's authority. Yagoda can carry out any operation against the head of state. Under Yagoda, the OGPU in the early 1930s is stronger than ever and depends little

on the party leadership. It has its own troops, an army of staff and freelance informers. Moreover, it is the OGPU under Yagoda that supervises the country's economy, built on the camp system. Yagoda has, perhaps more than anyone, a direct interest in preserving his position. Under Stalin, these positions are constantly under threat. Gorky, an "engineer of human souls", knows Stalin's suspiciousness. He is able to foresee the political near future and make Yagoda understand what awaits him.

According to one version, Gorky's son Maxim was sent in April 1934 on a special mission to Leningrad to see Kirov. The mission remained unfulfilled: the conversation with Kirov did not take place. Gorky's son was urgently recalled to Moscow. He would die two weeks after his trip to Leningrad. And Yagoda, two months after Gorky's death, would receive the post of head of the NKVD. Kirov and Stalin would each remain in his post. In 1937, Yagoda would be arrested. In 1937, the USSR's prosecutor Vyshinsky would question the arrested Yagoda about his intention to "change the Soviet leadership". Gorky by that time would have been in his grave for a year.

On 1 December 1934, Nikolaev did not expect to see Kirov at the Smolny. Kirov was not supposed to be at the Smolny. He dropped in there unexpectedly on his way to the party activists' meeting at the Tauride Palace. Shortly before five o'clock, Nikolaev comes to the Smolny for the second time that day. He has failed to obtain an invitation to the meeting. On the third floor he goes into the lavatory. When he comes out, he sees Kirov walking straight toward him down the corridor. It is at this moment that courier Fyodorova, walking in front of Kirov, sees Nikolaev. The bodyguard accompanying Kirov, operations commissar Borisov, as usual is unhurried and has fallen behind. Nikolaev stops at the wall, turns away, lets Kirov pass. Kirov turns into the small corridor leading to his office. Nikolaev quickly takes several steps, pulls out his revolver on the run and fires a single shot into the back of Kirov's head. Kirov falls face down.

Nikolaev cocks the hammer again and intends to shoot himself. At the end of the corridor, standing on a stepladder, is the Smolny electrician, Platoch. At the sound of the shot, Platoch turns and throws his hammer at Nikolaev, striking him on the head. It is precisely for this reason that Nikolaev does not manage to kill himself. The shot is fired, but the bullet hits the wall. Nikolaev falls half a metre from the man he has just killed.

It is the head of the Leningrad NKVD, Filipp Medved, who reports what has happened to Stalin by telephone: "Today at the Smolny Comrade Sergei has been killed." "Fools!" Stalin replies. He says this in the presence of Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov and Zhdanov. After the call from the Smolny, Stalin summons Yagoda. Then Orjonikidze, Mikoyan, Kalinin, Andreyev, Erukidze arrive. Then everyone leaves. Only Yagoda remains.

Stalin arrives in Leningrad on the morning of the 2nd. First he goes to Sverdlov Hospital, where Kirov's body lies, then to the widow, then to the Smolny.

An eyewitness recalls: "I see a group of people walking. I look – Stalin in the middle. In front of Stalin is Genrikh Yagoda with a raised revolver in his hand. He orders: 'Everyone face the wall! Hands at your sides!'"

On 2 December, in the Smolny, Stalin interrogates Nikolaev himself. No record is kept of the questioning. The report by NKVD officer Katsafa, who was guarding Nikolaev in his cell, conveys Nikolaev's words after the interrogation: "Stalin promises me my life if I name accomplices. I have no accomplices."

There in the Smolny, Stalin also interrogates NKVD informant Maria Volkova. In 1934, Volkova had provided various information about preparations for attempts on Kirov's life. She had gone to an NKVD rest home, where she discovered a conspiracy of NKVD employees whose aim was to kill Kirov. After that, she reported that a counterrevolutionary organisation, "Green Lamp", with 700 members, was active in Leningrad. Volkova's denunciations were checked. The results of the checks were discussed at meetings chaired by the head of the Leningrad NKVD, Medved. It was then, at one of these meetings, that the head of the NKVD medical service was advised to show Volkova to a psychiatrist. After examination, Volkova was sent to the famous Obukhov psychiatric hospital. It is into this very hospital that Hermann ends up, at the end of Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades*, muttering: "Three, seven, ace! Three, seven, queen!" It is from there that Volkova was brought to the Smolny to see Stalin. Here is how, in the late 1930s, she described to her daughters her meeting with Stalin: she is riding in a car with Stalin, the city is draped in mourning flags, and she learns that Kirov has been killed. She cries, and Stalin calms her, hands her his handkerchief, and she wipes away her tears.

Volkova will remain in service with the organs until her death in the mid-1970s – and simultaneously on the psychiatric register. It is quite possible that it was after this conversation with a mentally ill woman that Stalin got the idea of presenting Kirov's murder as the product of a collective political conspiracy.

Nikolaev's wife, Milda Draule, was questioned first of all. Fifteen minutes after Kirov's assassination. She was at the Smolny.

According to some suppositions, it was precisely to meet her that Kirov stopped at the Smolny. NKVD officer Popov, who interrogated Nikolaev's wife, remembers her words: "They talk to me here about jealousy – really, who could come up with such an idea?"

In fact, these are the last words that have any relation to Kirov's real life – as well as to his death. In reality, Kirov's death – killed on the spot out of jealousy – is a "beautiful death". In 1937, his death might have been of a different sort. Closeness to Stalin, love for Stalin guarantee nothing. Besides, since the 17th Party Congress, Kirov had been burdened with an unforgivable sin. In the vote for membership in the Central Committee, Kirov received almost as many votes as Stalin.

To be exact, there were fewer votes against Kirov than against Stalin. Nikolaev's shot removed from the agenda the question of Kirov's future. Nikolaev's shot made Kirov a martyr twice over. In Stalin's official mythology, he is the victim of an opposition conspiracy. In post-Stalinist mythology, Kirov is a victim felled by a bullet guided by Stalin.

Until 5 December, Nikolaev maintains that "he alone carried out the act against Kirov". Deputy NKVD chief Yakov Agranov, whom Stalin has left in Leningrad, passes on to Stalin the materials from Nikolaev's interrogations of 4 December. Agranov writes to Stalin: "Nikolaev is standing extremely firm." Agranov's remark clearly indicates what task Stalin has already set before leaving Leningrad. The killing of Kirov must be presented as the work of an organisation, not a lone individual. The political orientation of this organisation is not yet voiced.

Regardless of Nikolaev's interrogations, during the first few days 103 people are arrested in various cities – people who had returned to the USSR from abroad. Their motives for returning were prosaic: to be reunited with relatives and loved ones. The motive for arrest: participation in preparing a terrorist act against Kirov. All 103 are shot.

On 5 December, Kotolynov and Shatsky are arrested, their names having been mentioned in passing in Nikolaev's diary, which was confiscated. On 6 December, after increased psychological pressure, Nikolaev agrees that the two arrested men were participants in the terrorist act. Following the first two, another eleven people are arrested. Four of them Nikolaev does not know at all. After an attempted suicide, Nikolaev testifies that all the arrested belong to an organisation which, in the course of the investigation, receives the name "Leningrad Centre".

In 1937, at a plenum of the Central Committee of the VKP(b), People's Commissar for Internal Affairs Yezhov recalls: "I remember as if it were today: Comrade Stalin summoned Kosyrev and me and said, 'Look for the killers among the Zinovievites.'" On 14 December 1934, the names of Kamenev and Zinoviev appear for the first time in the investigation protocols. On 15 December, at a plenum of the Leningrad regional committee of the VKP(b), Zhdanov announces from the rostrum to the party activists that Nikolaev's hand was directed by the supporters of Zinoviev and Kamenev.

On 16 December, at a closed session of the regional committee plenum in the Chess Hall of the Smolny, Agranov declares: "The murder was organised by the youth wing of the former Zinovievite opposition."

On 18 December, *Leningradskaya Pravda* calls Zinoviev and Kamenev "fascist scum" for the first time.

Leonid Nikolaev and the thirteen arrested with him on fabricated charges are shot on 29 December. By this time, Soviet jurisprudence has already been equipped with special regulations on judicial procedure in cases of terrorists and counterrevolutionaries: "The investigation is to be concluded within ten days. The case is to be heard without participation of the parties. Petitions for clemency are not to be allowed. Sentences of the highest measure of punishment are to be carried out immediately upon pronouncement."

Academician Ivan Pavlov reacts to this legal innovation: "No defence at all for the condemned. Fifty years ago the killer of Tsar Alexander II, who freed the peasants and did much good, was tried by a court with defence and with right of appeal."

Pavlov's reaction is an isolated case. The country, after Kirov's assassination, meets the New Year 1935 in a state of mass hysteria. Thousands upon thousands of people at rallies all across the country chant with rapture: "Death! Shoot them! Degenerates! Bastards! Wipe them off the face of the earth!" This is heard everywhere from the first days of the investigation and throughout it. In this atmosphere it is normal and natural that USSR Prosecutor Vyshinsky brings from Moscow a ready-made verdict. The text of the verdict is written by Stalin.

During these days of hysteria accompanying the investigation, Academician Pavlov sends a letter to the Council of People's Commissars. He writes: "Those who have been turned into beaten-down animals will hardly be able later to become beings with a sense of their own human dignity."

In the first days after Kirov's assassination, writer Raisa Vasilieva drops in at the State Publishing House in Leningrad. She says loudly: "Now we are all finished." No one contradicts her. Indeed, on 28 February 1935 the "clean-up" of Leningrad begins. Since the plan for arresting supporters of the Zinoviev opposition has failed – only 983 people are arrested in the city – the regional committee and the Leningrad NKVD decide to resort to the deportation of "former people". The operation is completed in a month. From a special report of the Leningrad NKVD Directorate to People's Commissar for Internal Affairs Yagoda: "Top secret. In twenty-eight days of operation, 11,702

‘former people’ were removed from the city of Leningrad and sentenced by the Special Board of the NKVD.”

Among them, 1,434 nobles. All the others are people of various estates and professions. They are removed from the city together with their families.

In 1935, Dmitry Sergeyevich Likhachev works as a proofreader at the publishing house of the Academy of Sciences. In the corridor, a young woman – head of personnel – runs past him. As she hurries by, she shouts to Likhachev: “I’m drawing up the list of nobles. I’ve put you on it.”

Likhachev, who has only recently returned from the camp, instantly understands what awaits him. He grabs the personnel chief by the sleeve and begins to explain: “My father had personal nobility; it is not inherited.” “As if I’m going to have the list retyped because of such a trifle,” she says. Likhachev himself pays the typist to retype the list.

At the beginning of 1935, crowds of people gather daily near the so-called “Big House” on Liteiny Prospekt. The “Big House” is the colloquial name for the Leningrad NKVD building. It was built at breakneck speed under Kirov for the 15th anniversary of October. All the streets around the Big House are filled with people carrying their belongings. These are those who are being driven out of their native city. An old woman in the crowd says: “Well, let it be us. But why our children and grandchildren? Is this revenge down to the tenth generation?”

Ordinary conversation in the city at that time runs: “Let them be deported. Maybe workers will get apartments more quickly.” In reality, of course, it will be others who get the vacated apartments. After the expulsion of members of the Zinoviev opposition, 450 rooms and apartments are freed. After the expulsion of the “former people”, the city gains 9,950 rooms and apartments. They will be moved into by party activists, NKVD staff, and military personnel brought in to “strengthen the situation” in the city.

In addition, in March, Finn-Ingrian residents are expelled. Those living in the 22-kilometre border zone with Finland are deported to Tajikistan. In the Leningrad region, the Finnish national district, which existed up to 1935, is abolished. It is liquidated within one day. About a hundred villages are destroyed, 22,000 people are deported.

We know the scale of Stalin’s repressions against the peasantry in 1929–1931; we know the merciless policy towards the starving in 1931–1933. We know what a powerful wave of terror will sweep over the country in 1937. In this context, defined by the amount of blood shed, Stalin’s reaction to Kirov’s assassination looks extremely moderate, suspiciously mild.

The murder of Kirov blew up Stalin’s confidence in the stability of his own power and his personal safety. He lost his sense of footing. The NKVD is useless – or rather, dangerous – in its existing form. It was precisely Kirov who was killed. Kirov was not Lenin’s man; he was his, Stalin’s, man. And in the villages – supposedly already crushed – a little rhyme appears: “A plane flies by, / Beneath it the snow is thawing, / They killed Kirov, / They’ll kill Stalin.”

Stalin’s shock is so strong that, according to every law of medicine, its consequences will not show themselves immediately. The pause will last two years. 1935 is the first year of this pause. In the West, it was even called pink. Meaning: not red. Meaning: less blood. And sometimes, in haste, people spoke of a new NEP.

In 1935, Stalin suddenly begins to court the peasantry. An amnesty is granted for collective farmers and chairmen of collective farms convicted of economic crimes – including those convicted under

the “law of the three ears of corn”. Children of the “dekulakised” are formally granted the right to higher education. At the 2nd Congress of Stakhanovite Collective Farmers, Stalin personally proposes granting maternity leave to collective farm women. Stalin personally proposes expanding the household plots of collective farmers.

1935 is the year of the Stakhanovite movement. It takes its name from the Donbass miner Aleksei Stakhanov, who set a record for coal extraction in the night of 30–31 August. The Stakhanovite movement is promoted and spread everywhere. Stakhanovite congresses are held in Moscow. It is at these events that Stalin appears in a new guise. He is good-natured; he behaves in a fatherly way, without any aloofness; he smiles. He is in the thick of the people. It is in 1935 that Stalin, at public, non-party events, first appears as the “father of the people”.

Winners of the Stakhanovite movement receive rewards. They are given money, sewing machines, sometimes even automobiles, furniture, gramophones. In 1935, unlike in previous years, people can and must take pride in material acquisitions. This is the new line.

In 1935, bread ration cards are abolished. In reality, this spectacular measure is not caused by any growth in production. On the contrary, the state is unable to fulfil its obligations and abandons them. The ration card system has driven the Soviet economy into a dead end. Trade as a mechanism simply does not exist in the USSR. Money does not return to the budget through trade. The budget deficit means no capital investment in industry, no payment of wages. The state lives on monetary emission. Stalin remembers economic incentives to labour. He says: “We must bring money back into fashion.”

The term “free trade” appears in the newspapers. It has nothing to do with a market economy. But it produces a dizzying effect on a population long accustomed to rationing. The commercial shops that open are expensive, but their shop windows inspire hope.

And in the streets, ice cream begins to be sold everywhere. People without ration cards can buy suddenly appeared sausages. The shortage of consumer goods remains. But women change into crepe de Chine dresses and silk blouses. The men’s suit pushes out the “stalinka”. Members of the Politburo at the 1935 sports parade wear light white jackets. In the Moscow department stores there are evening gowns and tuxedos.

A woman party member, invited to a Kremlin reception for 8 March, recalls: “At the last moment we were given the instruction that all our leading women must look like women. Our activists rushed around Moscow like mad, putting themselves into the state specified by Stalin.” To crown it all, on the eve of the approaching year 1936, the Christmas tree is legalised, having been banned in 1928 as a religious survival.

In the cities, Christmas tree markets open everywhere.

Everything described applies mainly to Moscow and Leningrad. Access to goods in the commercial shops is enjoyed by the nomenklatura and the intelligentsia close to power. In Moscow, the top strata of the Stakhanovite movement shop there. Nevertheless, since the abolition of the NEP – that is, from the late 1920s – there had essentially been no store-based trade; there was only direct distribution of goods according to minimal needs. In this light, 1935, outwardly, looked distinctly better than previous years, and this produces the deceptive psychological impression of a turn for the better. This false impression works to stabilise the Stalinist regime and, above all, Stalin’s own sense of security.

On 17 November 1935, at the closing of the All-Union Stakhanovite Conference, Stalin says: "Life has become better, comrades; life has become more joyful." And on 1 December, exactly one year after Kirov's assassination, Stalin pronounces another famous formula: "A son is not responsible for his father." In 1935, no one knows that in two years' time, children will be taken away from their parents at arrest. They will be sent to children's homes, where they will be stripped even of their family names. The lives of these children will be the price of the fear Stalin experienced after Kirov's murder.

On 8 December 1934, the day after Kirov's funeral, a little girl, Nadya Artyukhina, wrote a letter to the secretary of the Central Executive Committee, Avel Enukidze:

"Hello, dear Comrade Enukidze! I heard your speech at the funeral rally on the radio, and I liked it very much. When I heard that Comrade Stalin had kissed Kirov, I felt very sorry for him and wanted to cry, but I did not cry, because one must not cry. I will definitely learn to shoot at the bourgeois. Dear Avel Sofronych, I want you to live a very, very long time, until the world revolution."

The fate of the girl, Nadya Artyukhina, is unknown to us. Avel Enukidze was shot in 1937.