Screenplay for the film "1953 — Lavrenty Beria. Historical Chronicles with Nikolai Svanidze" written by Marina Zhukova, translated by AI, and preceded by a summary also written by AI.

Screenplay Summary:

The text follows the few turbulent months after Stalin's death in 1953, focusing on Lavrenty Beria – the former head of the secret police – and on his sudden attempt to dismantle key elements of the Stalinist system, only to be overthrown and eliminated himself.

It opens with a telling anecdote: a very young married couple in Moscow, with one child and another pregnancy, live apart because they have no room of their own. He, a disabled war veteran, lives in a dormitory; she lives with a hostile stepmother in a tiny, overcrowded 15-square-meter room. Desperate, the wife wants an abortion, but abortion has been banned in the USSR since 1936 and allowed only in "exceptional cases". Although an official commission acknowledges their hardship, they are refused housing. Instead, "by way of exception", the wife is granted permission to abort, by personal order of Shvernik, chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet. This cruel logic – the system refuses to help them live, but facilitates terminating the pregnancy – is presented as typical of a deformed but stable system built entirely around one man: Stalin. Then Stalin dies.

His death produces a huge psychological shock. Many people genuinely feel lost and abandoned, as if the father figure has disappeared: "What will happen now? How can we live without him?" Others, quietly, are relieved or even pleased. The text quotes soldiers and citizens saying that Stalin's death is "for the better". The official mourning turns chaotic and deadly: the authorities fail to manage the huge crowds wanting to see the body in the Columned Hall. Trucks and tanks form crude barricades, narrow passages create bottlenecks, people are crushed, trampled, or fall into open manholes; the morgue overflows. The "nation in tears" is also a city in panic, where people die trying to say goodbye to their leader.

At the top, everything moves very fast. On the evening of 5 March, while Stalin is still officially alive, a joint meeting of the Party Central Committee, the Council of Ministers and the Presidium is held. In forty minutes the new power structure is agreed: Georgy Malenkov becomes chairman of the Council of Ministers, with four first deputies – including Beria, who takes over a merged Ministry of Internal Affairs, combining regular police and state security. The key idea, pushed by Beria, is to shift the centre of power from the Party to the government. Khrushchev is sidelined, kept only as a Party secretary with no government post.

Beria now looks like the most formidable figure in the leadership. He controls the security apparatus, has survived all purges, and understands how fragile the system is. In spring 1953 he suddenly launches a wave of initiatives that, coming from him, seem astonishing. He changes terminology around the infamous "doctors' plot", calling those involved "arrested doctors" rather than "killer doctors". He revisits the "Mingrelian affair" in Georgia, openly acknowledges torture and even cites Stalin's direct instructions to use "physical pressure" and to deport groups of citizens. He issues an order explicitly banning torture, and criticises mass fabrications of cases that led to innocent people being convicted of espionage and terrorism.

He initiates a sweeping amnesty for more than a million prisoners (mainly non-political), transfers most camps and colonies from the Interior Ministry to the Ministry of Justice, and proposes

abolishing internal passport restrictions and "closed cities", pointing out that such practices do not exist in Western countries and that they damage both families and the economy. He is, in effect, preparing the ground for mass rehabilitation and a partial dismantling of the Gulag-based economy.

On the foreign and economic front, Beria reacts to growing unrest in East Germany and other Eastern bloc states by proposing a radical change of course in the GDR: abandon "accelerated socialist construction", curb forced collectivization and heavy-industry-at-all-costs, allow private capital, guarantee citizens' democratic rights, and work toward the peaceful reunification of Germany. Behind this lies a very pragmatic calculation: the Soviet economy, particularly agriculture, is in deep trouble, and Beria hopes to obtain a long-term loan from a reunited Germany. He also advocates cancelling onerous state bonds imposed on citizens, reducing defense spending, halting non-essential prestige projects, raising procurement prices for farm products, and reorienting production toward consumer goods.

Politically and ideologically, he goes even further: he calls for a more objective history of World War II, for limiting the Party's role in the state and strengthening the soviets, for promoting national elites in the republics, for restoring relations with Yugoslavia, for possibly returning some Kuril islands to Japan, for reducing Soviet espionage in capitalist countries. He suggests banning portraits of leaders – dead and living – at demonstrations, ceasing publication of Stalin's collected works, and organizing an intra-party condemnation of Stalin. In a few months, Beria sketches out the blueprint for a sharp, top-down de-Stalinization.

The population, however, is not ready. The simple rehabilitation of the arrested doctors already provokes confusion and letters of protest: people wonder whom to believe and "where to find the truth" if the state now says that those it called "murderers" are innocent. For the other leaders, Beria is now doubly dangerous. He controls immense police power and holds compromising material on all of them. If he continues, he can arrest them, expose their participation in Stalinist crimes, and pose as the white-robed saviour delivering the country from terror. The showdown becomes existential: who will destroy whom first?

Khrushchev moves to act. He forges an alliance with Malenkov, Molotov, Bulganin, and later brings in Kaganovich and eventually Voroshilov; Mikoyan remains more cautious. A plan is drawn up: at a meeting of the Council of Ministers, Beria will be attacked politically, then immediately arrested by the military. On 26 June 1953, while Beria is pressing the scientists to hurry the construction of the hydrogen bomb, the meeting begins at the Kremlin. Khrushchev accuses him of careerism, of abandoning socialism, of fostering nationalism and even of having been suspected long ago of being a foreign agent. At the prearranged signal, Marshal Zhukov and other officers enter the room and arrest Beria. The next day, the leadership attends an opera at the Bolshoi as if nothing unusual had happened. Later, physicists Kurchatov and Aleksandrov will say they had the impression Beria planned to use the H-bomb as an instrument of blackmail, with spectacular scenarios involving bringing the weapon right up to the Kremlin.

In the end, Beria's "second life" – that of the executioner turned would-be demolisher of Stalinism – lasts only a season. The man who had helped build and run the machinery of repression tries, for reasons of power politics rather than conscience, to start dismantling it. The system responds in its usual way: he is removed, judged, and destroyed, and the path of Soviet history follows a slower, less radical de-Stalinization under other hands.

Screenplay:

1953 – Lavrenty Beria

One day, shortly before Stalin's death, a married couple came for a personal audience with Nikolai Shvernik, chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet.
He was on crutches, a disabled war veteran. He was 25. She was even younger. They already had a child. Now she was pregnant again and wanted to have an abortion. But abortions had been banned in the USSR since 1936. Permission was given only in exceptional cases. And this family was not considered an exceptional case. There were millions like them. But they were the ones who dared to go to Moscow to ask for help.

This family had nowhere to live. He lived in a dormitory. She lived with her stepmother and the stepmother's married daughters in a 15-square-meter room. There were eight of them in those 15 square meters. During the day, the stepmother looked after their one-and-a-half-year-old child. For this, she took 200 rubles out of the young woman's 500-ruble salary. But at night the stepmother forbade them to leave the child there, so they had to carry the child back to the dormitory to sleep.

This young family had been on the waiting list for a room, but they were refused. So they went to the reception office of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, because people said that there, they were closer to Stalin, and there they would help.

They were indeed received. They allowed themselves to hope they would be given a room where they could raise two children. A commission was set up to inspect their housing conditions and it recognized that the young family needed help. But no, they were not given a room. She was allowed, "as an exception," to have an abortion. By personal order of the chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, N. M. Shvernik.

This story is characteristic of the system that existed for many years. That system is a monstrosity. But it is distinguished by its stability. Because throughout all the years of its construction and functioning, one man stands at its head – Stalin. And now Stalin is dead.

The essence of the mass stress immediately after Stalin's death lies in the question: what will happen now? How can we live without him? The meaning of all the tears shed by the country from 5 to 9 March 1953 lies in this childish, infantile sense of abandonment, in the uncertainty about the future and the fear of change.

From the memorandum of Minister of State Security Ignatiev to Malenkov, Beria, Bulganin and Khrushchev on the reaction of servicemen to Stalin's death:
"Typist at the headquarters of a motorized rifle division: 'It feels scary somehow. Who knows what people are thinking. Someone will take his post, and then it will turn out he's an enemy of the people. And what if there's a war? Right now is the perfect time for it, because winter is ending and war always starts in summer.'"

Opposing opinions were recorded in the numerous denunciations received during those days of mourning.

From one denunciation:
“On 5 March 1953 I met Muravyev at the market and we went into a kiosk. A citizen named Basov, whom I didn’t know, also came in. We started talking about Stalin’s health. Someone said, ‘Millions of people will cry for him.’ To which Basov replied, ‘Not cry, millions will rejoice.’ Muravyev and I detained Basov.”

And a soldier from an armored depot said:
“Stalin’s death is actually better. You’ll see how everything will change at once.”

In the upper leadership, the question “How will we go on now?” has its own particular meaning. It is a question of power. For the main players, the situation is clear even before Stalin’s physical death. As early as 3 March, invitations were sent out for a joint meeting of the plenum of the CPSU Central Committee, the Council of Ministers of the USSR, and the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. The meeting was held on the evening of 5 March. It lasted forty minutes. Khrushchev presided.

Minister of Health Tretyakov gave a report on Stalin’s condition. Officially, Stalin was still alive. Then the floor was given to Malenkov. Malenkov said:
“The most important task is to ensure the uninterrupted leadership of the country.”

Then Beria spoke. Beria said:
“The Bureau of the Presidium of the Central Committee considers it necessary to appoint the chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR right now. The Bureau proposes to appoint Comrade G. M. Malenkov chairman of the Council of Ministers.”

The floor was then given again to Malenkov. Malenkov appointed four first deputies – Beria, Molotov, Bulganin and Kaganovich. The chief new idea was to concentrate power in the hands of the government, rather than in the party structure. This was Beria’s idea, which he had previously discussed with Malenkov. In this situation Khrushchev received no government post at all. He remained a Central Committee secretary, and nothing more. He also lost his position as First Secretary of the Moscow city party committee.

The coordination of the appointments and the remarkable smoothness in the distribution of posts show that it had all been thought out and discussed in advance. There is no sense of improvisation. What can be seen is a driving force, a source of initiative and pressure.

In the last years of Stalin’s life, Beria had been linked with Malenkov. Even before Stalin’s final illness, Beria had designs on Malenkov. Khrushchev recalls:
“Beria once said to me himself about Malenkov: ‘Listen, he’s a man without will. He’s a goat. He might leap if you don’t hold him. That’s why I keep him close, walk with him. He’s Russian, a cultured man, he may prove useful.’”

It was Beria who, at the meeting on 5 March, nominated Malenkov for the post of chairman of the Council of Ministers. Konstantin Simonov, who observed Beria and Malenkov at that meeting, writes:
“As for Beria and Malenkov, they both spoke from the rostrum lively, energetically, in a businesslike way. There was something in their voices that did not match the mournful endings of their speeches about Stalin’s illness. They were somehow unwrapped, as if the swaddling clothes had been taken off them.”

Molotov, Voroshilov and Mikoyan, ever since the October 1952 plenum and Stalin's crushing attack on them, were expecting arrest. At the end of his life, Stalin had started yet another campaign to exterminate his entourage – Beria included. Of all those marked for elimination, Beria was the most energetic, the best informed, and the one who possessed levers in the security apparatus, including among the military and among the intellectuals engaged in the production of atomic and hydrogen weapons. Beria was ready to play a survival game against Stalin.

In these conditions, with Stalin still alive, Molotov, Mikoyan and Voroshilov supported the distribution of posts proposed by Beria. At the Kremlin meeting on 5 March 1953 these potential victims of Stalin received positions in the country's leadership. Molotov became foreign minister. Mikoyan was appointed people's commissar for trade. Voroshilov became chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet. Simonov writes:
"The appointments announced at the meeting showed that Stalin was about to die. I had the feeling that the old members of the Politburo entered with a hidden sense of relief. It showed through on their faces somehow."

Malenkov continued his speech. He proposed merging the Ministry of State Security and the Ministry of Internal Affairs into one ministry – the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the USSR – and appointing Comrade L. P. Beria minister of internal affairs.

After the Kremlin meeting, the main actors went at 20:40 to Stalin's dacha. After their arrival, at 21:50, Stalin's death was officially recorded.

In his memoirs, recorded in the late 1960s, Khrushchev insists that by the early 1950s he had already suspected Beria's strengthening:
"By the 1950s I even thought that if we allowed Beria to occupy a leading position in the party, he would turn the development of the country off the socialist path onto a capitalist one. That was my view."

Khrushchev recalls:
"When Stalin was dying, we stood watch over him in pairs."

Khrushchev's partner was Minister of the Armed Forces Bulganin. Sitting beside the dying Stalin, Khrushchev said to Bulganin:
"You know what position Beria will take for himself?"
"Which one?" Bulganin asked.
"Minister of State Security. We absolutely must not allow that. It would be the beginning of our end. He'll take it only in order to destroy us, to wipe us out. We must not allow it, absolutely not."
"And then Bulganin and I," says Khrushchev, "began to discuss how we should act."

This topic receded for a while, during Stalin's funeral.

After the radio announcement of Stalin's death, which was broadcast on 6 March at four in the morning, the Moscow correspondent of the New York Times rushed to the Central Telegraph office to transmit the news. Telegrams about Stalin were not being passed. Not only would they not accept the telegram, but on the switchboard of the international telegraph all the wires had been pulled out of their sockets. Then a technician ran in, yanked open the back door of the switchboard and ripped out the main cable.

At around six in the morning on 6 March, a column of trucks with soldiers from special battalions of the Ministry of Internal Affairs entered the city center. The soldiers lined up along and across all

the large and small central streets. The trucks formed barricades. A column of tanks appeared on Gorky Street. The tanks reinforced the truck barricades at key points. The route the crowd was supposed to follow to the Columned Hall, where the coffin was displayed, was not announced on the radio.

The human mass, filling the whole city and pressing tighter as it moved, searched for a way to the Columned Hall. The line spontaneously began on the square at Belorussky Station. Then, along Gorky Street, the crowd moved to Mayakovsky Square. From there they were driven left onto the Garden Ring. Along the Garden Ring to Chernyshevsky Street, where they turned onto the Boulevard Ring. Finally the human wave reached the top of Rozhdestvensky (Nativity) Boulevard. There, for a moment, it froze at the sight opening below: an unbroken sea of human heads.

But new waves were already pushing from behind. And the crowd, no longer in control of itself, rolled down the hill. At the bottom, in the left corner of the boulevard where it opens onto Trubnaya Square, a narrow passage had been left. This was the only way through to Stalin. The crowd continued to grow. No one could help someone who twisted an ankle or fell. Sometimes people had to lift their feet, because they were walking over bodies. Many came with children. In the crush, children began to be handed up to officers standing in the trucks. People were sucked in, crushed in the narrow gap between the trucks. People shouted: “Move the trucks!” An officer on one of the trucks was crying and shouting: “We have no orders!” In the tightly compressed crowd, a whirlpool formed. There was no way out. It went on for two days. The crushed were taken to the Lefortovo morgue. It could not hold them all. The trampled corpses lay directly on the snow.

On 8 March they suddenly announced that “at the numerous request of the working people”, access to the body of Comrade Stalin would be opened one last time. In reality, this was a provocative announcement. Many people felt they were missing their chance. On 8 March, they no longer let people in through Trubnaya, but through Chekhov Street. This old, narrow Moscow street was jammed full of people, just like on the first day. Above the crowd there was a continuous roar of cries and groans. Underfoot, manhole covers shifted. People fell into the manholes. The pits were filled to the top with people.

At two in the morning, they announced a break until five. People waited, warming themselves in entranceways. The goal was near. On their faces there was an expression of sporting excitement. From a Moscow school in Presnya, everyone went off to try their luck at seeing Stalin. In the classroom, only one boy remained. He sat at his desk and read a book.

On 6 March 1953 Stalin’s coffin was checked by a special commission for poisonous substances, radioactive materials and timing mechanisms. The funeral commission was headed by Khrushchev.

In the Columned Hall, journalist and Ogonyok special correspondent Alexander Avdeenko met his wartime friend Vasily Mefodievich Verkhovykh. They went out into the foyer.
“Judging by your puffy eyes, you’ve been crying day and night, my dear,” said Vasily Mefodievich.
“Like everyone,” Avdeenko replied.
“Not everyone, my dear, not everyone is crying and sobbing. There are plenty who cross themselves and say: ‘Glory be to God, he finally took him,’” said Vasily Mefodievich, gently patting the frightened Avdeenko on the shoulder. “Don’t be afraid, my dear. He can’t reach us now. The temporary ruler is finished. He has breathed his last. By his death, the Boss has brought more benefit to the country than by his long life.”

Avdeenko stood up to leave.
“Go, my dear, go,” said the veteran Vasily Mefodievich. “Go and weep.”

Professional mourners were brought from Georgia for Stalin’s funeral.

On the same day as Stalin, the great Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev died. His family and friends could not get to his apartment on Kamergersky Lane. Everywhere there were cordons and police lines. You could not buy flowers anywhere: they were all on Stalin’s coffin.

The period from March to June 1953 is the time of Beria’s memoranda and of the decrees that were passed, or not passed, as a result of those memoranda. The very first document signed by Beria in his new capacity as Minister of Internal Affairs demonstrated a change in terminology. The professors involved in the “doctors’ case”, long and everywhere called “killer doctors” or “saboteur doctors”, were described in the document, issued only a week after Stalin’s death, as “arrested doctors”. A formulation impossible a week earlier, and smelling of rehabilitation.

Then, on that same day, 13 March, came a memorandum on reviewing the cases of people deported from Georgia. The deportation of these citizens to Kazakhstan had been carried out in the framework of the so-called “Mingrelian affair”, launched by Stalin in 1951 and directed against Beria.

In April 1953, a memorandum by Beria appeared, addressed to the Presidium of the CPSU Central Committee, about the improper handling of the so-called “Mingrelian nationalist group case”. In his memo, Beria repeated the testimony of the arrested about torture used against them. What is more – and this was unprecedented – Beria wrote:
“J. V. Stalin demanded the use of physical measures of pressure on those arrested… On Stalin’s direct instructions the Central Committee of the VKP(b) passed a resolution on the deportation of citizens from the territory of the Georgian SSR.”

And there was no word “comrade” in front of Stalin’s name.

On 18 March 1953 an order was issued by Beria reviewing the case against the former leadership of the Air Force and the Ministry of the Aviation Industry. This was followed by the rehabilitation of the heads of these departments.

On 26 March 1953, Beria’s memorandum on an amnesty followed. Under the amnesty fell those sentenced to up to five years for official and economic crimes, pregnant women and women with children under ten, minors, elderly men and women, and the incurably ill.

A total of 1,201,738 people were amnestied – just under half of all Soviet prisoners. Those convicted of banditry and murder, as well as those sentenced under Article 58, the political article, were not subject to amnesty. Two days later, on 28 March, there came a letter from Beria to the Presidium of the Council of Ministers on transferring camps and colonies from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the Ministry of Justice. Remaining under the Ministry of Internal Affairs were only the special camps for those sentenced under Article 58 and former prisoners of war.

A week later, Beria issued an order “On the prohibition of applying any physical coercion to arrested persons”. The document began:
“The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the USSR has established that in investigative work there have taken place arrests of innocent citizens, unbridled falsification of investigative materials, and the

widespread use of various forms of torture. The torturous methods of interrogation brought the innocently arrested to the loss of human likeness."

Then Beria wrote:
"Investigators shoved fabricated confessions of anti-Soviet and espionage-terrorist activity under their noses."

In other words, in Beria's 4 April 1953 order it was spelled out in black and white that masses of people had been groundlessly accused of espionage and terrorism, and convicted under Article 58 on the basis of testimony obtained by torture.

Thus, in the order of the Minister of Internal Affairs, the letter "a" was spoken, and the "b" loomed just behind it – review of cases and a wave of rehabilitations of those unjustly convicted for political reasons, including death sentences. And that would mean revising three decades of the country's history, revising all of Stalin's rule. Now, in the spring of 1953, only the political will of the leadership was needed to do it. Stalin was gone.

Meanwhile, Stalin had been dead for only a month. Only a month had passed since the day the country finished crying for him. The country's readiness, in early April 1953, to look at itself with fresh eyes was far from obvious. Beria had a chance to see this.

On 1 April Beria wrote a memorandum on the rehabilitation of those involved in the so-called "doctors' case". On 3 April, on the basis of his memorandum, the Presidium of the Central Committee adopted a resolution rehabilitating the arrested doctors. On 4 April the news appeared in Pravda. The analysts of the Ministry of Internal Affairs recorded the reactions. The most typical one ran:
"But how can this be?! The people were outraged at the killer doctors, the people held meetings, and suddenly – the doctors are not guilty. After the death of the great Stalin things are happening that cause bewilderment," wrote V. F. Kryukov from Sverdlovsk to Pravda.

Law students at the University of Lvov wrote:
"This fundamentally undermines the authority of our judicial and investigative organs. And what position does it put the MVD in? Who are we to believe now? Where are we to look for the truth?"

Thousands of similar letters poured in after the rehabilitation of the thirty-seven arrested doctors.

The rehabilitation of hundreds of thousands of people unjustly convicted would have been an unbearable experience for a country that had not yet come to its senses after Stalin. And even in 1956 the condemnation of the cult of personality would be a shock. A mass rehabilitation, had Beria launched it in 1953, would have been hard to interpret as a mere populist step on his part.

Beria was not betting on populism. In that sense it was pointless for him to compete with the Stalin who had just departed. In his leap toward power, Beria was betting on something else entirely: he – yes, he, the executioner Beria – wanted to enter power, and thus history, as the man who led the country out of Stalinism. Tactically, he was doomed to just that. He would erase Stalin, and with him his own past. And all his rivals.

All of the remaining leaders after Stalin had no less blood on their hands than he, Beria. He possessed compromising information on them. They – Khrushchev, Malenkov, Molotov – knew this and felt it constantly. Beria was in a hurry. He had never been so close to power. And he loved power more than pleasure.

Those who came after Beria – first Malenkov, then Khrushchev – would also take up the idea of rejecting Stalin and would use it in varying doses in their internal party struggles at the top, that is, in the struggle for personal power. Beria was the first and least successful of those who set out on this path.

Everyone implicated in the “doctors’ case” was freed on 4 April 1953. They were driven home from Lubyanka by car. The cars arrived at the professors’ house in Serebryany Lane at night, a few hours before the newspapers with news of the rehabilitation came out. The yardwoman, who had served as a witness at the searches and arrests, seeing the same professors who had been arrested in her presence now returning to their apartments, rushed to the police station crying: “The enemies have escaped!”

A couple of days after the yardwoman, whose nerves had snapped from everything that was happening, had run through the night-time Moscow streets, members and candidate members of the Central Committee were gathered in three rooms at the Kremlin to be shown documents attesting to Stalin’s personal involvement in the “doctors’ case”.

Konstantin Simonov recalls:
“The idea of providing us with these documents to read undoubtedly belonged to Beria. He wanted to show himself as a man in no way inclined to continue the cruelty and lawlessness which, judging by the documents presented, were directly connected with Stalin, with his initiative and his demands. Beria, as it were, asserted that he did not intend to cover up Stalin’s sins. ‘Here is your Stalin,’ Beria was in effect saying. ‘I don’t know about you, but I renounce him. I intend to tell the whole truth about him.’ The documents I saw were not falsified. That is why I was probably better prepared than many others for the moral blow I experienced during Khrushchev’s speech at the 20th Congress.”

Khrushchev, speaking of Beria in March–early April 1953, says:
“Beria showed great attention and respect towards me, which surprised me. He did not break with Malenkov, but he began to establish relations with me. If, for example, he and Malenkov got together to walk around the Kremlin, they would invite me too. Once we were walking, strolling around, and Beria suddenly said: ‘We all walk under God. We are already getting old. Anything can happen to any of us. We must think about old age and about our families. Therefore I would propose building personal dachas and transferring them into the private ownership of those for whom they are built.’”

Khrushchev would later say that Beria had “a non-communist way of thinking”. Indeed, it is hard to suspect Beria of communist convictions – as it is all the others. But in the dacha story he stepped beyond the accepted rules of the game.

Dachas, high fences, domestic staff – these were indispensable attributes of the Stalinist nomenklatura lifestyle. But they were granted by Stalin and taken away by Stalin – often along with the life of their recipient. Nomenklatura privileges at the people’s expense were a kind of payment for fear. And suddenly Beria uttered the blasphemous word “ownership”.

Khrushchev recalls:
“I was convinced that he was doing all this for provocative purposes.”

Beria had already begun sharing his plans in detail with Khrushchev and Malenkov: the dachas would not be built near Moscow but in Sukhumi. “The peaches there are so wonderful, the grapes

so excellent," he said. The design and construction would be handled by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The main man on the project would be a specialist in building atomic facilities.

"I listened to him," Khrushchev says. "I did not contradict him."

They talked, then drove out of town, to the dacha on the Rublyovka highway. At first they all three rode together in the same car – Beria, Malenkov and Khrushchev. Khrushchev and Malenkov needed to turn left, while Beria had to go straight. Khrushchev and Malenkov transferred to another car that had been following behind.

Khrushchev said to Malenkov:
"These dachas are pure provocation. Let's not argue with him now. Let him keep at it and think that no one understands him."

Beria also offered a dacha to Molotov. Molotov agreed, only asking that it be built not in the Caucasus, but near Moscow.

Regarding the dacha story, Khrushchev continues:
"I was no longer surprised by this non-communist way of thinking of Beria's. It fit perfectly with his image."

He had in mind a series of documents that had come from Beria's pen and had had a shocking effect on the party leadership.

First and foremost, there was Beria's project for improving the political situation in the German Democratic Republic.

In fact, this document was a lightning reaction to events in Eastern Europe. In the GDR there was a wave of strikes in May 1953, in June in Czechoslovakia, the same in Poland. In Romania there were hunger riots. There were major problems in Hungary.

The document dated 2 June 1953 noted the mass flight of GDR residents to West Germany. Most of the fugitives were working people – workers, peasants, as well as housewives, members of the intelligentsia and members of the ruling party, the SED.

The document stated:
"The reason for the flight of hundreds of thousands of people is the wrong line of accelerated construction of socialism. Namely: the forced development of heavy industry, the restriction of private initiative, the compulsory creation of agricultural cooperatives. All this has led to a breakdown in the supply of industrial and food goods to the population, to the ruin of small proprietors. Five hundred thousand hectares of land have been abandoned by thrifty German peasants who are moving to West Germany. The exchange rate of the German mark is sharply falling."

Thus Beria said that the political and economic course imposed on the GDR by Stalin was ruinous and destructive. Meanwhile, this was the very course along which Stalin had driven the USSR for thirty years. And so, in speaking of the GDR, Beria allowed himself, at least in a narrow circle, to revise the Stalinist system.

"To correct the situation in the GDR," Beria wrote, "it is necessary to abandon the course of accelerated construction of socialism. To bring private capital into the economy. To take measures to ensure democratic rights for citizens."

And finally:
“At present, the chief task is the struggle for the reunification of Germany on democratic and peaceful foundations.”

This was the beginning of June 1953.

Beria himself read the text aloud. The first to speak against Beria’s proposals was Molotov. Khrushchev supported Molotov. They were in turn supported by Minister of the Armed Forces Bulganin. Other members of the Presidium of the Central Committee spoke in the same vein. That same day Molotov proposed that Khrushchev switch to the familiar “ty” with him.

Meanwhile, the reasons that pushed Beria to discuss such radical proposals as abandoning socialism in the GDR and beginning German reunification are extremely important. What drove Beria was the Soviet economy. Above all, the situation in agriculture. It required investment. But any investment was ineffective.

The rural population had been degraded by Stalin’s long-term policies. Soviet industry did not have sufficient capacity to increase investment in agriculture. The reports of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which Beria had before him, reflected reality. The problems in agriculture could easily turn into political problems.

The need to raise the purchase prices for farm products loomed. That threatened spontaneous unrest. Nine years later, after all the efforts and resources thrown into the virgin lands campaign, an increase in prices would provoke the mass uprising in Novocherkassk, crushed by troops with heavy loss of life.

The abolition of collective farms was not in question. In 1953 Beria and Malenkov proposed lowering the agricultural tax, something to which Stalin had been categorically opposed and for which he had lambasted Mikoyan at the October 1952 plenum. But even a tax cut did not solve the problem.

The entire postwar restoration of the economy had not produced structural changes. The gap between the military-industrial complex and civilian branches was growing. Beria, better than anyone, knew the true cost of the atomic project to the Soviet economy. That is why he looked for loans abroad.

There was no hope of help from the United States in the context of the Cold War. It was no longer possible to count on international Jewish capital, which had helped the USSR during the war: Stalin’s deathbed state antisemitism and Israel’s turn toward the United States had closed off that possibility.

That left Germany. It was in return for German reunification that Beria hoped to obtain a long-term loan. He planned to entrust the testing of the waters to actress Olga Chekhova, who already had experience with delicate assignments from the Soviet leadership.

In June 1953, Colonel Zoya Rybkina, head of the German Department of the foreign intelligence service, arrived in Germany. She met Olga Chekhova on 26 June, the day of Beria’s arrest. The operation ended there.

On 13 May 1953 a memo from Beria appeared on abolishing passport restrictions and restricted areas.

“If one looks at a map of the USSR,” Beria wrote, “one can see that the entire country is speckled with restricted cities and forbidden zones where residence is prohibited for citizens with criminal records and those who have served their sentences. This creates difficulties not only for these citizens, but for their families as well. It gives rise to legitimate discontent.

Such practices of passport restrictions do not exist in any country. In the USA, England, Canada, Finland, Sweden, no marks about convictions are made in citizens’ identity documents. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the USSR considers it necessary to abolish the existing passport restrictions as unnecessary. The regime of restrictions and passport limitations hampers economic development.”

This already resembled preparation for a mass rehabilitation.

Further, Beria proposed transferring construction directorates and industrial projects belonging to the Gulag from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the appropriate branch ministries. That is, he proposed to dismantle the camp-based foundation of the Soviet economy.

Next, Beria proposed cancelling the state bonds imposed on citizens by Stalin, which had become unbearable. He proposed renouncing increases in defense spending, stopping expensive construction projects that were not of primary importance for the national economy, raising procurement prices in agriculture, and reorienting the economy toward the production of consumer goods.

Further, Beria proposed writing a new, more objective history of the Great Patriotic War.

He proposed limiting the party’s role in the state, and placing emphasis on the organs of Soviet power. He proposed increasing the role of national cadres in the republics. Raising the question of returning disputed Kuril islands to Japan. Restoring relations with Yugoslavia. Reducing the size of Soviet intelligence in capitalist countries.

He proposed banning the use of portraits of leaders, both living and dead, at demonstrations.

Stopping the publication of Stalin’s collected works. Carrying out an internal party condemnation of Stalin.

It is hard to say how long Beria had been thinking about these proposals. Three months in the spring of 1953 is too short a period to understand what they really represented: a short-term calculation aimed solely at seizing power, or the result of long analysis, knowledge of the regime’s inefficiency, an understanding of its exhaustion despite its apparent inviolability.

It is quite possible that the spring of 1953 could have been the counterpoint of all subsequent national history. The country, stunned, might have accepted the new course. Especially the still-young front-line veterans, who remembered their impressions of Europe. The veterans could have become the motor of a new country.

In 1953, the country was separated from 1917 by only one generation. But all this is in the realm of the subjunctive. In reality, Beria’s “second life” did not come to pass. In his first life, hand in hand with Stalin, Beria took part in the brutal exploitation and destruction of the country’s population. In this sense, he could easily have been considered a spy and declared a terrorist. But such a view of Beria’s activity under Stalin diverged from the party’s official assessment.

Khrushchev writes:
“We saw that Beria was forcing events.”

That, without doubt, was true. The confrontation with the Khrushchev–Molotov–Bulganin group was obvious to Beria. In discussions on a number of issues at the Presidium of the Central Committee, the confrontation had already entered an acute phase. The question was simple: who would destroy whom?

Beria pushed straight ahead; either they supported him in his programmatic actions, including exposing Stalin, and thereby ensured his actual ascent to the highest rung of power, clad in the white garments of the liberator from tyranny, or he would arrest them, open his archives and arrange a public trial in which all of them, up to the elbows in the blood of Stalinist terror, would appear as enemies of the people, and he, no better than them, would stand as judge and defender of the tormented country.

Khrushchev had only one option – to act. And act he did. He had little time. The countdown was in days.

Khrushchev spoke with Malenkov:
“Listen, Comrade Malenkov, can’t you see where this is going? We’re heading for catastrophe. Beria has picked up the knives.”
“I see it,” Malenkov said, “but what is there to do?”
“Resist,” said Khrushchev.

By virtue of his position, Malenkov was the first man in the state. The constant pressure from Beria, running counter to the others, frightened him. The competition from Beria was obvious, although Beria realistically understood that a Georgian could not yet occupy the highest post. But Stalin’s death, his disappearance, removed the brakes even from such an experienced player as Beria, and he rushed forward alone, without a base, despite everything.

In his conversation with Khrushchev, Malenkov agreed to the common plan. Khrushchev had already spoken to Minister of the Armed Forces Bulganin. Bulganin understood the danger.

Khrushchev went to Voroshilov. He recalls:
“As soon as I crossed the threshold of his office, Voroshilov said: ‘Comrade Khrushchev, what a wonderful person Comrade Lavrenty Pavlovich Beria is, what a wonderful man!’”

Khrushchev left Voroshilov and went to Molotov.
“Beria is very dangerous,” said Molotov. “I think we must, so to speak, resort to extreme measures.”

Khrushchev recalls:
“We decided to speed things up, because we might be listened to or someone might somehow let something slip.”

They talked to members of the Presidium Saburov and Pervukhin. Then Kaganovich returned to Moscow. Khrushchev writes:
“Kaganovich had been in the forests, inspecting logging operations.”

Kaganovich came back and said he was “for” it. Malenkov was tasked with speaking to Voroshilov.

Malenkov went to Voroshilov and told him about the decision they had made. Voroshilov embraced Malenkov, kissed him and began to cry.

Khrushchev still had to speak with Mikoyan. That conversation took place on the very day that the meeting of the Council of Ministers was scheduled, at which the question of Beria would be raised. Mikoyan stopped by Khrushchev's dacha on the way to the meeting. They spoke for a long time.

Khrushchev recalls:
"Mikoyan's position was this: Comrade Beria has negative qualities, but he is not hopeless, he can work in a collective. This was a completely special position which no one else held."

Mikoyan and Khrushchev then got into a car and drove to the Kremlin.

On Friday, 26 June 1953, Academician Kurchatov and future Academician Aleksandrov were at the site where the hydrogen bomb was being assembled. Several days earlier, some generals sent by Beria, who oversaw the project, had appeared at the site. Aleksandrov recalls that they had been given the task of finishing the work immediately. The first specimen of the new thermonuclear device was to be handed over to the generals. "The generals were practically sitting on top of us," Aleksandrov recalls.

Kurchatov phoned Beria twice a day to report on progress. On 26 June Kurchatov called Beria – Beria was gone.

At that moment, in Moscow, in the Kremlin, the meeting of the Council of Ministers was beginning. Malenkov presided. Khrushchev asked for the floor. It had been agreed in advance that he would. Khrushchev proposed that they discuss the question of Comrade Beria.

He recalls:
"Beria was sitting to my right. He took my hand, looked at me and said: 'What are you doing, Nikita? What nonsense are you babbling?' I answered: 'Well, listen. That's exactly what I want to talk about.'"

Khrushchev talked about Beria's memoranda and actions after Stalin's death, about giving up socialism in the GDR, about how Beria wanted to unite nationalists in the republics against the Russians, about how, back in the 1930s, people said that he, Beria, was an agent of the Musavatist intelligence service working for the British – and how those who said so had disappeared.

Khrushchev concluded:
"I came to the conclusion that Beria is not a communist, that he is a careerist."

Then Molotov spoke, and others. Then Mikoyan. He stuck to his position: Beria was not a hopeless man.

Malenkov was supposed to sum up. But he got flustered. There was a pause. Khrushchev took the floor again. He proposed that they put to a vote the question of relieving Beria of all his posts.

Malenkov was to put the question to a vote. Instead, he pressed a button and called in the military earlier than the agreed time.

The military were waiting for the signal in a waiting room next to Malenkov's office. Before the meeting, Khrushchev, Bulganin, Malenkov and Molotov had spoken to them.

Marshal Moskalenko recalls:
“They began to tell us that recently Beria had been behaving insolently, spying on members of the Presidium of the Central Committee, listening in on their telephone conversations, keeping track of where they went, and being rude to everyone. They told us that on signal we should enter and arrest Beria.”

Marshal Zhukov was among these officers. Moskalenko recalls that Khrushchev had given his approval for Zhukov’s participation in the coup, but had said that Zhukov was to be unarmed.

After the agreed signal, Zhukov was the first to enter the meeting room. The confused Malenkov said: “In the name of Soviet law, arrest Beria.”

Zhukov searched Beria. At the door of the office where Beria was arrested, Leonid Brezhnev was standing. Beria was led away.

The next day, 27 June 1953, the country’s leadership went to the Bolshoi Theatre to see the opera *The Decembrists*.

On 28 June 1953, Academicians Kurchatov and Aleksandrov received the newspapers. Aleksandrov recalls:
“The performance at the Bolshoi, the government sitting in the box, and no Beria among them. We had been sent to the site with a clear order from Beria – to finish the work quickly and hand over the device, that is, the bomb, to the generals. And suddenly all the generals disappeared. I had the impression that Beria wanted to use this bomb, which he controlled, for blackmail. Kurchatov had the same impression. We talked about it while walking in the garden.”

There were two possible scenarios.

Scenario number one: the Highway of the Enthusiasts and then all the streets leading to the Kremlin would be blocked. The hydrogen bomb created with Sakharov’s participation would be brought into the Kremlin. Final assembly would be carried out in a special tent near the Tsar Cannon. Then an announcement would be made that the bomb was in the Kremlin and could be detonated at any moment.

The second scenario was a public one. It would be announced that the hydrogen bomb was on the Highway of the Enthusiasts. After the announcement, it would begin moving toward the Kremlin. Under guard, the bomb would be taken into the Kremlin.

Beria liked scenario no. 2 best. The public one.