

Iron Lazar



Frontispiece. L. M. Kaganovich as People's Commissar for Rail Transport in 1935

Iron Lazar

A Political Biography of Lazar Kaganovich

E. A. Rees



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INTRODUCTION

As a leading figure in the shaping of the Stalinist state, Lazar Kaganovich has, not without cause, had a bad press. He has been treated as the *bête noir* of the Stalin era, as a kind of ogre; vilified by Trotsky, depicted as a Stalinist sycophant by Khrushchev, denounced by delegates to the XXI Party Congress as one of the architects of the Great Terror. In the post-Soviet Russia, he was characterised as the ambitious, self-hating Jew who showed little loyalty to his fellow compatriots. He was heavily implicated in many of the worst of Stalin's crimes and evokes little sympathy. At the same time, the works dealing with his life and career are often oversimplified, producing a caricature with little subtlety or nuance. This work attempts to draw a fuller picture of Kaganovich as a political actor, to understand his contribution to the creation of the Stalinist system. But the study is above all about the nature of the inner dynamics of the ruling group, and of its transformation over time. Stalin cannot be understood without understanding the role of his deputies, while the role of his deputies cannot be understood without understanding Stalin.

The Stalinist leadership had no figures of standing comparable to Trotsky or Bukharin under Lenin. Its intellectual formation was much narrower, less cosmopolitan, and more provincial. Many had only limited formal education and were essentially self-educated. Kaganovich has no claim to be considered an intellectual or theoretician. He is of interest as a political executive, administrator, organizer, and troubleshooter. The Stalinist system manifested some polycratic features, whereby institutions in certain periods exercised significant degrees of autonomy. The heads of these institutions exerted considerable influence in their own spheres and on government policy. But Kaganovich's career illustrates in a much starker manner than that of any other of Stalin's deputies, the transformation of the Stalinist leadership over time, the impact of the political and moral choices that were made by these individuals and the repercussions this carried for the regime and for themselves as individuals.

This study seeks to interpret the factors that influenced the general development of the Stalinist system. It focuses on the functions assumed by individuals, their ideological world view and their psychological make-up.

In contrast to the work of Erik van Ree that stresses the extent to which Stalin's thought derived from Marxist and Leninist precedents, the author has elsewhere argued the importance of a more cynical *realpolitik* – revolutionary Machiavellianism – as a central factor in shaping the ideology and policies of the Bolshevik leadership.¹ Machiavelli argued that it was not possible to rule innocently, to rule without dirtying one's hands, but this form of political realism still leaves unanswered the question of how far the resort to coercive, illegal or amoral measures might be judged to be prudent or commensurate. The embrace of dubious means and inhumane methods carried dangers for the state itself and for the agents of the state.

This work explores the Soviet regime's development over time, examines the degree to which the Stalinist regime differed from the Leninist regime and the extent to which the former laid the foundation for the latter. The Stalinist system was shaped by ideology, cultural factors, situational factors, in terms of domestic and external constraints, but it was also shaped by personal and psychological factors – the mindset of leaders and the impact of that on the psychology of the organizations they led.² The work examines the function of subordinate leaders under conditions of dictatorial and despotic rule, the way in which they functioned and the way they subsequently explained and rationalized their role. The centrality of Stalin's contribution in shaping the history of the period requires some effort to address the question of his psychology and its bearing on state policy (see Chapter 11).

The writing of political biographies of the leaders of the Stalin era raises other questions: Were Stalin's colleagues mere ciphers or did they help shape policy as independent actors? What were the dynamics of leadership politics within the oligarchic order of the 1920s and within the system of personal dictatorship which developed in the early 1930s? How much was the regime's development shaped by circumstances and how much shaped by Bolshevism – in terms of its ideology, methods and mindset? Here, we explore how individual Bolsheviks fashioned their own images, identities and personas.³ At the same time, we examine the demands which Bolshevism as a movement made on its adherents, the pressure of the collective discipline of the ruling group, the strong factional and clientele nature of Soviet politics and the pressures of bureaucratic politics, whereby individuals identified with the offices which they held. But Bolshevism aspired to reshape social identities, not only by education and persuasion, through its power to define its friends and enemies, but also by recourse to administrative and coercive methods.⁴

The study of Soviet history since the 1980s has been bedevilled by the debate between the totalitarian school and the revisionist school. This biography eschews both approaches. The totalitarian school highlighted important aspects of the political regime of Soviet communism, the role of

ideology, the reliance on coercive and terroristic means to enforce its dictates. It was best represented by Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, with their six-point syndrome, but represented by figures such as Leonard Schapiro, Adam Ulam, Richard Pipes and Robert Conquest. This approach was no doubt constrained by the understanding of the time, and may have oversimplified aspects of the regime. Attempts by revisionists to dismiss this as a product of right-wing ideas, as being driven by anticommunism, is simplistic and reveals a deep misunderstanding of the origins and roots of the concept in the 1930s.

The revisionist school emerged in the 1980s, heralded by Sheila Fitzpatrick, its principal representatives being J. Arch Getty, Roberta Manning, Robert Thurston and William Chase. This school now dominates the American academic scene. The revisionist school, in its attempts to write a social and cultural history of the Stalin era, has fallen into another trap: the elevation of the social and the cultural as though they can be discussed in isolation from the political. Revisionism displays a degree of political naivety, and a tendency to normalize and relativize the Stalinist system. The focus on the social and cultural aspects of the regime has been allied to attempts to depict the system of political leadership as driven by pressures from below. The identification of polycratic aspects of the Soviet party-state, including institutional and regional lobbies, should not be confused with pluralistic decision making. Polycratic structures can coexist with dictatorship and despotic forms of rule.

The polarization of debate between the totalitarian and revisionist camps reflects an ideological stasis that impedes scholarship. The division is clearly conceived of as carrying political implications – the totalitarian camp is anti-Soviet, anti-Communist, whereas the Revisionist school claims a degree of objectivity but is seen by its critics as apologists for the Stalin regime. The replacement of a ‘top down’ totalitarian model by a ‘bottom up’ social-cultural revisionist approach to explain the Soviet regime hardly amounts to an advance in theoretical sophistication. One one-sided approach is replaced by another one-sided approach.

An alternative, non-revisionist, non-totalitarian approach is represented by luminaries such as E. H. Carr, Stephen Cohen, R. V. Daniels, R. W. Davies, Isaac Deutscher, Moshe Lewin and Alec Nove. This approach recognizes the central importance of politics, but seeks to place political developments in their domestic and international context. This approach sees the Soviet regime as a modernising government, constrained by objective limits as determined by economic and social realities, but within these constraints, the political leadership faced real choices, and the choices made had a determining effect in shaping its future course.

The approach, based on close archival research, remains strongly exemplified by the work of historians such as Oleg Khlevniuk. This work sets itself in this tradition. It focuses primarily on the political nature of the regime. It does not eschew the possibility of useful comparisons between the Soviet regime and other authoritarian regimes of the era. It does not shy away from examining the nature of the system of dictatorial rule instituted in the USSR under Stalin, nor does it avoid examining the Great Terror as a stage in the establishment of a system of tyrannical rule in the USSR. It is based on the assumption that the Soviet regime's development was shaped not only by domestic and international circumstances, but was also influenced by the nature of the political leadership under Stalin. In this, an important role has to be played by the study of the ideology, language and psychology of the Soviet leadership.

The totalitarian school depicts Stalin as a ruler who dominated the life of the Soviet Union from soon after Lenin's death, and who ruthlessly used his power to transform the state and society in accordance with the dictates of Marxism-Leninism. Carl A. Linden characterized the system of Soviet power after 1917 as a form of 'ideocratic despotism'.⁵ In sharp contrast, 'revisionist' historiography has posed the question of whether Stalin was a 'weak' ruler, pushed by institutional pressures, popular opinion and the struggle among his deputies.⁶

Between these two positions, a third approach focuses on the interplay between a centralized party-state driven by its own ideology and the wider society shaped by problems of governance, development, the preservation of domestic and external security. This approach highlights the choices, political and ethical, confronting the regime. The Soviet regime was profoundly changed by the way it assumed the functions of a regime of modernization.⁷ Bertrand Russell had already cogently noted in 1920 that the Bolshevik regime had abandoned communism for modernization, but argued that this would be a project shaped by ideology and by the negation of the Enlightenment's attitude of rigour, scepticism and toleration of contending ideas about science and society.⁸ Stalinism might be seen as a species of 'developmental dictatorship' which offers the basis for comparative study with other regimes.⁹

The Soviet regime was guided by Marxist ideology, and this coloured its conception of development. Three variant developmental strategies were attempted – War Communism, the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the Command Administrative Economy. Each of these systems had its own coherence. The concept of 'developmental dictatorship' addresses the crucial problems associated with modernization and the overcoming of backwardness. The political, economic, social and cultural realms were interconnected. Domestic developments were shaped by the external environment. Investment choices made in one area profoundly affected policies in other areas. Policy

failures had a profound impact on the way in which the political system responded. Whilst the Soviet system underwent a profound transformation under the pressures of carrying through its developmental agenda, the leadership faced real choices. The choices made were determined by the perceptions, motives and ideas of its political leaders.

Most scholars accept that Stalin acquired dictatorial power, but there remains disagreement as to the chronology of this transition. There also remains considerable confusion in the literature as how to characterize Stalin – as oligarch, autocrat, dictator, despot or tyrant. The terminology employed reflects more than semantic nuances; it points to a fundamental difference in interpreting the internal dynamics of the ruling group. Stalin has been described as a ‘neo-patrimonial’ leader within a collective leadership.¹⁰ Oleg Khlevniuk argues that Stalin became a dictator after 1936.¹¹ Professor Stephen Wheatcroft has characterized the ruling group as ‘team Stalin’, but argues that in the final years the system became one of tyrannical rule.¹² The ruling group might alternatively be characterized as a cabal, camarilla, circle, clan, clique, coterie or faction. T. H. Rigby compared Stalin’s relations with his immediate subordinates to that of a gangland boss and his men.¹³ Andrea Graziosi argues that the terms used within the Stalin group to designate the leader – *vozhd’* (leader), *khozyain* (boss), *roditel’* (guardian or father) – were also associated with mafia or criminal argot.¹⁴ Rigby and Graziosi point to the importance of the ‘criminalization’ of the leading group’s actions and mentality.

Four periods of Stalin’s rule can be demarcated: (1) from 1924 to 1928, as the leading figure with an oligarchic system, in which no faction was dominant; (2) 1929 up to 1933, as leader of the triumphant Stalinist faction, with Stalin clearly more than *primus inter pares*; (3) from 1933 to 1936 as personal dictatorship; and (4) from 1936 to 1953, as despotic ruler. The period of the war 1941–45 marks a phase of its own but does not contradict this basic chronology. The transition from each phase to the next followed a certain inherent logic. Stalin, of course, was neither omnipotent nor omniscient, and continued throughout his period of rule to rely on his deputies. The contributions of Stalin’s subordinates can only be understood in relation to the changing nature of this system of leadership.¹⁵ But the study of the Stalin era can also help us refine our categories and concepts, to define more precisely what constitutes dictatorship, where it is appropriate and where it is an inappropriate category.

As a political biography, this work is above all an examination of politics from above, and about the importance of agency, the role of the political leadership and the contribution of one individual within that leadership, and thus about intention, motivation and calculation. The study eschews the traditional totalitarian and the revisionist and post-revisionist conceptions of

Soviet politics, and seeks to offer an alternative conception of the way in which the Soviet system evolved. In this, it seeks to draw on alternative theoretical conceptions of the nature of politics and society, and of their interactions.

It starts from the premise that politics was the principal and determining factor in shaping the Soviet regime. It emphasises Lenin's restricted conception of politics.¹⁶ The Soviet system systematically dismantled the limited 'public sphere' and embryonic civil society that had emerged in the late tsarist period.¹⁷ An emergent legal culture was subsumed by a regime of state lawlessness.¹⁸ The Bolshevization of language transformed the concepts and categories in which political and social issues could be discussed.¹⁹ Real public opinion gave way to popular opinion or popular moods that the government sought to gauge and direct.²⁰ Underlying the relations of state and society lay a profound crisis of legitimation, which the regime sought to manage through a strategy of self-legitimation.²¹ The regime that emerged thus was endowed with strong cultic aspects that manifested, in large part, the features of a 'political religion'.²² Class, ethnic, and gender identities and even individual identities were ascribed, mediated and manipulated by the state.²³ The elaboration of the party-state as the supreme political and ethical arbiter involved an attack on individual conscience and on the integrity of the self.²⁴

The best biography of Kaganovich is in Italian by Loris Marcucci, *Il Commissario di Ferro di Stalin*, but this is based only on secondary sources.²⁵ The brief biography by Roy Medvedev in *All Stalin's Men* remains useful,²⁶ as is the more extended treatment in *Zhelezni yastrebi*.²⁷ There is also the short study of Kaganovich by the Ukrainian historian Yuri Shapoval.²⁸ The biography by Stuart Kahan, *The Wolf in the Kremlin*,²⁹ supposedly by the American nephew of Kaganovich, adds little to existing knowledge and its reliability as a source is questionable.³⁰ Kaganovich himself asserted that his American relatives denied that Stuart Kahan was related to them.³¹

The basic details of Kaganovich's career are given in various older Soviet reference works.³² In 1996 Kaganovich's memoirs, *Pamyatnye zapiski rabocheho, kommunista-bol'shevika, profsoyuznogo, partiinogo i sovetskogo rabotnika*, were published.³³ These memoirs, written between 1961 and 1985, are useful on his childhood, early revolutionary career and the role he played in 1917, during the Civil War, and the early years in the party Secretariat after 1922. However, for most of the Stalin era, the memoirs are of limited use and have to be handled with great circumspection.³⁴ There are also Kaganovich's conversations with the Russian journalist Feliks Chuev, *Tak govoril Kaganovich: Ispoved' stalinskogo apostola* (*Thus Spake Kaganovich: Confessions of a Stalinist Apostle*),³⁵ and with the historian G. A. Kumanev.³⁶ These works are characterized by significant silences and omissions that illustrate Kaganovich's own 'state of denial'.

The publication of a wealth of archival documents and a great number of books and articles based on archival sources over the last fifteen years has made possible a much fuller account of the internal workings of the Stalinist regime and the internal debates on matters of policy. Of particular significance has been the publication of the correspondence between Stalin and Kaganovich from 1931 to 1936, when Kaganovich was at the height of his influence.³⁷

In this study we trace the evolution of the leadership of the Soviet regime. The changes at the apex of the political system were intimately connected to wider developments within the party-state apparatus and in its relationship with the wider society. The career of Kaganovich as a case study illustrates these developments. In this, it raises questions about the nature of authoritarian rule and of the rationality of the whole system.

Chapter 1

THE MAKING OF A BOLSHEVIK, 1893–1917

The Russian Empire in which Lazar Kaganovich grew up was convulsed by upheavals which threatened the very survival of the state. Under Nicholas II, the autocracy sought to transform itself into a modernizing state. The industrialization drive, directed by finance minister Sergei Witte in the 1890s, had a profound impact on the whole country. The defeat of the imperial navy and army by Japan in the Far East in 1904–5 administered a major shock to the state. Peasant resentments and working-class protests ignited the abortive 1905 revolution. The dynasty's claims to legitimacy were seriously compromised. The tsar's gestures toward constitutional reform by means of the October Manifesto were followed by a new repression under Piotr Stolypin combined with an attempt to reform agriculture. From 1909 onward, the rearmament drive stimulated economic recovery. The tsarist regime was beset by the dilemma of promoting industrial development while dealing with the backwardness of agriculture, and preserving Russia's standing as a major power while addressing the demands for domestic reform.

The autocracy was heavily dependent on the support of privileged society and of the backing provided by the state administration, the police and the armed forces. The advocates of constitutional reform drew on a narrow base of middle-class support. Peasant radicalism posed a direct threat to the existence of landed interests. The working class, although numerically small, was characterized by its radical temper. The non-Russian nationalities provided the base for secessionist movements. The political opposition in Russia was strongly revolutionary in outlook – Socialist Revolutionary, Social Democratic, Trudoviki, Bundist and Anarchist. Russian Marxists, perplexed by the failure of a Russian bourgeois revolution, embraced a militant, revolutionary variant of Marxism that rejected reformism. From 1905 to 1917 the society was polarized between the advocates of autocratic order and of revolutionary transformation.

Lazar Kaganovich's early life was shaped by the stresses and tensions through which the society passed in these years. It was influenced by the political

choices that were available, as expressed by the various political parties. But individuals are not simply the product of circumstances, they are active agents who interpret their circumstances, who make choices in their lives and fashion their own identities. The early life of Kaganovich illustrates what he shared in common with the generation of young radicals that grew up in this period and what was distinctive about his own experience. It sheds light on the way in which he became a Bolshevik and highlights the nature of Bolshevism as a political movement in this period and its appeal to revolutionary, young workers.

Family and Childhood

Lazar Moiseevich Kaganovich was born and brought up in the village of Kabany, Kiev province, 30 kilometres from Chernobyl. This was part of the region of Polese that constituted part of the Jewish pale of settlement. The surrounding countryside, well wooded with rivers and lakes, was rich in wildlife.¹ According to Kaganovich's recollections, Kabany had about 300 households, of which five to ten were rich 'kulaks' and 30 were well-to-do peasants. He recalled how the poor peasants and landless labourers (*batraks*) were exploited by the kulaks and middle peasants.² The population was predominantly Ukrainian, with some Byelorussians and Jews. Ukrainian was the language of the village. The Jewish families lived together in what was termed the 'colony', which comprised about 20 families, most of whom were poor artisans. The Kaganovich family was the only Jewish family to live outside the colony, but they had relatives and friends in the colony.

Kaganovich's father, Moisei, was born in Kabany in 1863, and lived there all his life. He had a brother who emigrated to America. Moisei received no education and began work at 13 years of age as an agricultural labourer, then worked in timber felling, and then in a wood-resin tar factory. His wife, Genia Dubinskaya, was born and grew up in a small town near Chernobyl in a family of coppersmiths. Genia gave birth to thirteen children, of whom six survived – five sons (Izrail, Aron, Mikhail, Yuli and Lazar) and one daughter (Rachel). Lazar was born on 23 November 1893.³ The youngest and the favourite, he was the 'Benjamin of the family'.

The family was poor and their circumstances became more difficult when Moisei was badly burnt in an accident with a boiler at work. His health remained poor thereafter, and he died of bronchial asthma in 1923. Moisei leased a plot of land to grow potatoes, vegetables and buckwheat. He tried to go on seasonal work at a local brickyard, with Yuli and Lazar to help him. But Genia became the main breadwinner, through dressmaking, dying wool and baking. The children also earned money picking sugarbeet on the nearby Khorvat estate. The family received help from Genia's brother, Mikhail. Things eased

when the two eldest sons began work, Izrail in timber felling, and Aron as a joiner. The family was able to move from their earth-and-turf hovel (*stepka*) to a larger one-room, wooden-planked cottage (*khat*). They slept on benches.⁴ But they now had a stove and oil lamps, with more space to entertain friends and neighbours, and the house often overflowed with people.⁵

Lazar Kaganovich's brother Mikhail began work in 1903 as a metal worker in Chernobyl and then Kiev. In 1905 he joined the Russian Social Democratic Party and, in Kaganovich's words, became 'a fearless revolutionary'. The Russo-Japanese War stirred popular ferment, while the land question continued to agitate the peasants. At the village of Lubyanka, three kilometres from Kabany, there was a peasant uprising.⁶ The grenadiers, who were sent to suppress it, were quartered in Kabany. The poor peasants of Kabany, Kaganovich recalled, sympathized with their neighbours in Lubyanka.

The population of Kabany was mixed, and Kaganovich recalled that the children of the poor and middle peasants – Russian, Ukrainian, Jews, Poles and Byelorussians – socialised freely. Zionist ideas had little influence among the poor Jewish workers, and among Russian and Ukrainian workers there was little anti-Semitism. However, the Jewish population of Kabany was well aware of the pogroms in Odessa, Kishinev and elsewhere.⁷

Although his parents were practically illiterate, they brought up their children with intelligence and tact. It was a close family. They lived modestly and were self-reliant. Mosei had a quiet temperament, never scolded the children, but was serious and supportive. Genia was an important influence. Kaganovich describes her as proud, religious and with a love of life.⁸ After the marriage of her daughter Rachel, Yuli and Lazar had to help at home. The children were brought up with a love of labour and a sense of social justice.

The family name 'Kaganovich' (pronounced ka-gan-o'-vich, with the stress on the 'o') was the same in root as Kagan, Kahan and Cohen, indicating a family descended from a rabbi. The memoirs make no mention of the family attending the synagogue, nor of their observation of Jewish customs and rituals. We might infer that they were still quite conventional in these matters.⁹ In his personal file written in the early twenties, Lazar recorded that he knew Russian, Ukrainian and had a weak command of Yiddish.¹⁰

Kaganovich attended a Jewish school (*kheder*) attached to the synagogue in the Jewish colony. Thereafter, the Jewish families enlisted the services of a teacher from Chernobyl, but this school was closed down by the school inspector.¹¹ He was then sent with his brother Yuli to a school in Martynovich, where they were taught the Bible and the Talmud, Russian and general subjects. The two brothers travelled from Kabany to Martynovich, taking their food with them and staying in lodgings. The school gave him the basis for self-education and a passion for self-improvement. Yuli, Lazar recalled, was his favourite brother;

he had a kindly disposition. But he himself, he admits, was temperamentally closer to his brother Mikhail, and had a 'stormy character'.¹²

He finished school at the age of thirteen, and was then apprenticed to a blacksmith in the nearby town of Khochava.¹³ In the local library he immersed himself in reading the literary classics, Dickens and Victor Hugo.¹⁴ As well as the Russian classics, he read the brochures and newspapers which Mikhail brought from Kiev. Kaganovich recounts that as an adolescent he was quite widely read in history.¹⁵

In his memoirs Kaganovich refers to how in his youth he was attracted by the Book of Amos in the Hebrew Bible – with its condemnation of the rich and powerful.¹⁶ It also depicts a jealous and vengeful God, Yahweh, 'the God of Armies', who directs his wrath at the children of Israel for their transgressions. We can only speculate as to how far he was drawn by the same apocalyptic and messianic side of Bolshevism.

Maxim Gorky was a favourite author. His stories from this period deal with the life of the lower classes and celebrate the strong figures who, by an assertion of will, were able to master their fate, and carry a strong Nietzschean theme. He also admired the German Social Democrat Wilhelm Liebknecht's tale *The Spider and the Fly*.¹⁷ The gist of this story is that the downtrodden and the oppressed, though weak and divided, can assert themselves through organization and leadership. His first introduction to philosophy was Spinoza's *Ethics*, and for a time, he recalled, he was drawn to 'idealistic pessimism' before embracing a materialist understanding of history.¹⁸ When he had money, he visited the bookshops. The purchase of a lamp to allow him to read at night was an important event.

The World of Work

His career as an apprentice blacksmith was short-lived. He moved to Kiev and there worked with his brother Mikhail in a scrap metal yard. They stayed in a dosshouse in Nizhnyi Val. As a result of illness brought on by this work, he had to return home to recuperate for three months. Through tutoring the children of his uncle Aron in Russian, he was able to raise enough money to return to Kiev.

There, he took a series of heavy manual jobs, working twelve hours a day for meagre wages.¹⁹ He worked mainly in the bustling district of Podol, with its shops, workshops, large enterprises, wharves and ship repair yards. Many of the owners and a large proportion of the workers were Jews. In prolonged periods of unemployment, he spent his time on Kreshatik Boulevard and Bibikovsky Boulevard. In observing the lives of the various social classes, he recalls, he came to despise the unfeeling rich and scorn the petty bourgeoisie. At 14 years

of age in 1907, he began working as a shoemaker in factories and workshops. When he was just 16 years old, he organized his first worker self-education group.²⁰ His attitude toward the working class, however, was not uncritical; he sharply distinguished between the backward and progressive elements in the proletariat. The possibility of further study at school or university was an impossible dream, but it may be that there was a stage in his teens when he aspired to such a course.²¹

Kiev was a large, prosperous city, a centre of administration, education and culture. It possessed a large middle class and politically was fairly quiescent but developed into a stronghold of Ukrainian nationalism. Among the revolutionary parties, the Bolsheviks competed with Zionists, Bundists, Socialist Revolutionaries, Mensheviks and Anarchists to recruit Jewish youth. The political repression following the defeat of the 1905 revolution slowly ebbed. Gradually, political opposition began to revive, with the Kiev Social Democrats issuing leaflets on 1 May 1910. The revolutionaries directed their attention at the city's large contingent of railway workers. The district of Podol had a particular reputation because of its many politically educated, young workers.

Kiev, with its cosmopolitan make up – Ukrainians, Russians, Poles, Germans, and Jews – was a place where racial animosities could easily be stirred. In 1911 the infamous Beilis case took place, in which a Jewish worker from the city was accused of the ritual murder of a Christian child. Anti-Semitic feelings were whipped up by the Black Hundred organizations, 'The Union of the Archangel Mikhail' and 'The Twin-Headed Eagle', with the connivance of leading public figures, including the minister of justice. Radical parties mobilized in protest and on 4 October many factories, especially in Podol, went on a demonstrative strike. The assassination of Piotr Stolypin, the prime minister, in the Kiev Opera House on 1 September 1911, caused a huge stir, with attempts by 'The Twin-Headed Eagle' to whip up a pogrom. The Bolsheviks took measures to protect themselves and to rebuff this threat.

Kaganovich only joined the Bolshevik party after these momentous events. In his retirement he claimed that he was introduced to the Bolsheviks by his brother Mikhail and had joined the party in August 1911.²² He declared: 'I entered the Great university of the revolution, the university of the great party – the university of Lenin!'²³ This is not quite true. In his autobiographical sketch, which he was required to write for the party in the early 1920s, he revealed that his initial contact with revolutionaries was with Grabovsky, a Menshevik with whom he worked. He established links with the Bolsheviks only after January 1912, and he appears to have become a member later that year.²⁴ Notwithstanding his claim to see his brother Mikhail as a role model, Lazar Kaganovich joined the Bolshevik party seven years after him.

The Bolshevik party, headed by V.I. Lenin, represented the most revolutionary wing of Russian Social Democracy. For self-educated workers, Marxism offered a powerful tool for analysing the world, and engendered a great self-confidence. Admission into the party was closely regulated, and membership was coveted by young radicals. The two brothers defined themselves as Bolsheviks, not Mensheviks or Socialist Revolutionaries, and they had rejected the main Jewish socialist organization, the Bund.²⁵ Three other brothers – Aron, Izrail and Yuli – joined the Bolshevik party after the Revolution, but, Kaganovich claims, their attitude was revolutionary before then.²⁶

The choice of the Bolshevik party was significant in another sense. The Menshevik party was stronger than the Bolsheviks in Ukraine and the south generally, even in key industrial centres such as Ekaterinoslav. The Mensheviks recruited strongly from the national minorities, such as Jews and Georgians, whereas the Bolsheviks recruited predominantly from the Great Russians, although a significant number of their leading figures were Jews. The Bolsheviks were successful in recruiting young workers who had newly arrived in industry. By 1907 the Bolshevik party had about 46,000 members.²⁷ For a core who became members, this was to be a lifetime's commitment. Lenin's conception of the vanguard party, guided by a doctrinaire reading of Marxism, as outlined in 'What is to Be Done?' of 1903, led several fellow Marxists to characterize him as a 'Jacobin'. Bolshevism, as critics such as Nikolai Berdayev and Semon Frank were quick to point out, manifested a form of quasi-religious messianism, moral and legal nihilism, and subscribed to a form of party idolatry.²⁸

Kaganovich recalls that he began studying Lenin's works, and his article 'Stolypin and Revolution', written following Stolypin's assassination, made a big impression. While liberal journalists deplored this outrage, Lenin characterized Stolypin as the head of the 'counter-revolutionary government', the 'arch-hangman', and an organizer of Black Hundred gangs and anti-Semitic pogroms. The 'semi-Asiatic, feudal Russian monarchy', Lenin declared, could defend itself only 'by the most infamous, most disgusting, vile and cruel means.'²⁹

In 1911 a Kiev city party conference elected a committee.³⁰ Yu. L. Pyatakov, the son of a wealthy Kiev sugar magnate, who had been expelled from St. Petersburg as a student agitator, was its leader. Another prominent member was Evgeniya Bosh. In June 1912 the arrest of Pyatakov and other committee members precipitated the collapse of the city's party organization. In 1917 Pyatakov and Bosh returned to take charge of the Kiev party organization, but by this time Kaganovich had moved elsewhere.

An underground group of Social Democrats met in a garret on Nizhnyi Val. The meetings were often attended by the sisters Maria and Liza Markovna

Privorotskaya. Together with Roza Vorob'evaya (Grinshpon), they distributed *Igla* (Needle), the paper of the hosiery workers union, and other agitational literature among Kiev's women workers.³¹ In 1912 Kaganovich and Maria Privorotskaya were married.³² Born in 1894 of Jewish parents, she started work as a young girl in hosiery enterprises. She was active in the workers' revolutionary movement, joining the Bolshevik party in 1909, when just fifteen years of age. Whether they married in a synagogue or registry office is unclear.

In 1912 a number of the trade unions in Kiev were legalized, but the more militant Bolshevik-controlled leather workers union, of which Kaganovich was a member, was only legalized at the beginning of 1913. The Social Democrats participated in the election campaign to the IV Duma. They fought with strike-breakers hired by employers who sought to play on ethnic divisions to divide the workers. In Kiev, the Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and Bundists used clubs – the Society for the Dissemination of Education to the People, and the Scientific-Technical Club – as front organizations, a cover for agitation work and illegal meetings. Kaganovich as a member of the Podol district party committee (*raikom*) worked as an agitator, organized self-education groups, and campaigned for the legalization of the leatherworkers union. Lacking the necessary residence permit, he was obliged to change accommodations to avoid arrest. In the factories, labour organization was severely weakened by the Stolypin reaction, with employers calling in the police to deal with troublemakers.

In 1913 Kaganovich and his wife lived in a flat at 31 Yaroslavsky Street. Their home became a meeting place for other Bolsheviks. They organized circles to study political economy and the Communist Manifesto, and produced revolutionary posters and leaflets which they distributed in the workers' quarters of Kiev. L. A. Sheinin, one of the group, later recalled Kaganovich's skill in conspiratorial activities.³³

In early 1914, against the background of mounting labour unrest, a group of Kiev Bolsheviks were sent into exile. A demonstration was organized at the railway station, with Kaganovich brandishing a banner. He was arrested and released after questioning, but his flat was put under police surveillance, and he had to move elsewhere. The decision by the authorities to prohibit the celebration of the centenary of the birth of the Ukrainian poet and revolutionary democrat Taras Shevchenko in March 1914 was also used by the Kiev party committee to denounce the tsarist empire as a 'prison of the nationalities'.

Kaganovich's memoirs significantly ignore any reference to Kiev Marxists who later fell afoul of Stalin. He makes no reference to Leon Trotsky, who lived in Kiev for a brief period after 1905 and acted as the correspondent of the journal *Kievskaya Mysl'* on the Balkan Wars (1912–14).³⁴ He is silent about Pyatakov and Bosh, who supported Trotsky in the 1920s, although he must have known both of them. Similarly, he makes no mention of Yan Gamarnik,

a student at Kiev University, and V. P. Zatonsky, a member of the Marxist Borot'bist group, both of whom became prominent under the Soviet regime.

The Great War

In August 1914 Russia went to war with Germany and Austro-Hungary despite former interior minister P. N. Durnovo's warning that a prolonged war carried the serious danger of revolution. Initially, the war cut off the rising tide of labour unrest and produced a rallying of patriotic feelings. The Bolsheviks in Kiev ineffectually attempted to campaign against the war. Efforts to organize the city's party organization were aided by the arrival of Stanislav Kosior. Although just 25 years of age, he was regarded as an experienced Bolshevik. In an interview in 1991, Kaganovich spoke of Kosior as a friend and father figure (*roditel'*) who had examined him in political economy and Marxism, and had co-opted him onto the Kiev city party committee in 1915.³⁵

In the first half of 1915 Degtiarev, Veinberg and other leaders of the Kiev party committee were arrested, while Kosior fled the city. Kaganovich records that he himself was arrested and sent back to Kabany, but he soon returned to Kiev. He and his wife left Kiev in October. In 1916, under the pseudonym Stomakhin, he worked in a shoe factory in Ekaterinoslav (Dnepropetrovsk) and became chairman of an illegal trade union. The Old Bolshevik Serafim Gopner, in her memoirs, recalled that, on her return from emigration in the summer of 1916, in the town 'there worked the still very young but already tempered and energetic L. M. Kaganovich (Boris)' – a member of the district and all-city committee. He was linked with other party activists, notably the leaders of the party organization of the Briansk works.³⁶

Kaganovich was fired for organizing a strike at the shoe factory where he worked. The workers came out on strike for six weeks, demanding his reinstatement. The workers' demand was met, but, as a result of what Kaganovich called 'accusations by a provocateur', he had to flee to Melitopol' where he worked under the name of Gol'denberg and became chairman of an underground union of bootmakers and an organizer of Bolshevik groups.³⁷

In the second half of 1916 Kaganovich and his wife moved to Yuzovka, the industrial centre of the Donbass, dominated by the New Russia Metallurgical Company, founded by the Welsh ironmaster John Hughes. He worked there under the name Boris Kosherovich (Yiddish-kosher), a sign that he had both pride in his Jewish background and a sign that he was not without a sense of humour, but also an indication that he was clearly recognizable as a Jew. He worked in a shoe factory and was the leader of the Bolshevik organization. At Yuzovka he organized an illegal union of bootmakers, which successfully carried out a number of strikes.

The February Revolution

The crisis of the Romanov dynasty culminated in the abdication of Nicholas II on 2 March 1917, with power passing to the Provisional Government. The abdication was triggered by a wave of popular protest which was exacerbated by the economic crisis caused by the war. The implosion of the regime reflected a loss of authority and its desertion by even those institutions and social groups that had acted as its bulwark. The limited constitutional reforms attempted in 1905 came unstuck. The tsarist regime's attempt to chart a course of development – Sergei Witte's programme of industrial development and Piotr Stolypin's programme of agrarian reform – had failed to create a basis for the regime to stabilize itself.

The Romanov dynasty was engulfed by a rising tide of popular protest. On 25 February 1917 mass meetings were organized in the works and mines in the Donbass, and Kaganovich spoke at a meeting at the New Putilov works. On 1 March 1917 in Yuzovka, the Bolsheviks held two meetings, one of which was attended by the Menshevik-Internationalists. The well-known Yuzovka Bolshevik F. Zaitsev recalled that Kaganovich spoke at this meeting, defending the Bolshevik line of turning the imperialist war into a civil war.³⁸

The first time Kaganovich spoke at a mass meeting was on 3 March when he addressed a meeting of several thousand miners and metal workers in Yuzovka. He discovered that he had a talent for oratory. At one such meeting, he first met Nikita Khrushchev, not then a Bolshevik but a representative of the workers of the Ruchenkov mines.³⁹ In Yuzovka the Menshevik Defencists and the Bolsheviks battled for control of the newly constituted local soviet. The Bolshevik gained a majority on its executive committee and Boris Koshevorich (Kaganovich) was elected as deputy chairman.⁴⁰ On 10 March he became a member of the Yuzovka unified committee of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (the RSDLP), which included Bolsheviks and Menshevik-Internationalists.⁴¹

In April 1917 he returned to Kiev and there was conscripted into the army. In his memoirs, he simply implies that the party sent him into the army to work as an agitator. At Kiev, he asserts, he fell afoul of various Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, who, via the soldiers' section of the Kiev Soviet, arranged for him to be transferred from Kiev to Saratov, which had a garrison of 50,000 soldiers.⁴²

From May 1917 Kaganovich served in the 7th company of the 42nd Infantry Regiment in Saratov. He was elected a member of the executive committee of the soviet of workers and soldiers deputies and a member of the Saratov committee of the party. In the middle of May, a general meeting of party members of the military organization was held. At this, Kaganovich asserts, he clashed with the Old Bolshevik V. P. Milyutin regarding Lenin's April Theses. The meeting established

the Military Organization of the Saratov RSDLP, which worked under the city and province party committee. Kaganovich was elected as its chairman.⁴³

By 10 June, the Saratov Bolshevik party organization had a membership of 2,500 and its military organization had 400 members.⁴⁴ Kerensky's June offensive produced a major shift in the mood of the soldiers. The elections for the soviet prompted intense struggle in the barracks. Kaganovich claims that he was arrested on a pretext by Socialist Revolutionary officers and held for two days.⁴⁵ The Bolsheviks used the soldiers' self-help organizations (*zemliachestva*) to propagandize among the great non-party mass of soldiers and to extend their influence into the countryside.

Kaganovich attended the All-Russian Conference of Bolshevik military party organizations in Petrograd, as a representative of the Georgian army.⁴⁶ The conference, held in the Kshesinsky palace, opened on 16 June. His first visit to the capital – Piter – made a big impression on him.⁴⁷ He participated in the 'White Nights Meetings' in the Vyborg-side working class district. He and V. Antonov-Ovseenko addressed a mass meeting at the Aivazov factory, where Maria Spiridonova, the prominent Socialist Revolutionary (SR), and various Mensheviks were speaking. The two became close friends.⁴⁸

Addressing the All-Russian Conference of Bolshevik Military Organizations on June 20, Lenin opposed the radicals in the military organization and in the Petrograd party organization who favoured an immediate insurrection. The conference was deeply divided on the issue. Kaganovich and N. V. Krylenko argued in favour of the Leninist line in opposition to the radicals led by A. Vasiliev and Shemaev. Kaganovich argued that most of the people were following the SRs and Mensheviks. The Bolsheviks had to win over popular support before embarking on the insurrectionary course, or otherwise a premature attempt to take power might pitch the proletariat into a disastrous civil war.⁴⁹

On Nikolai Podvoisky's suggestion, Kaganovich issued greetings to Lenin on behalf of Old Bolsheviks of the Military Organization. He heard I. V. Stalin's report which argued against the idea of forming national units in the army. He was involved in drafting the conference resolution, and for the first time met Stalin, who, he recalled, showed great tact in handling questions.⁵⁰ He also met Vyacheslav Molotov, who headed the Central Committee's Information Department.⁵¹

The conference elected an All-Russian Bureau of Military Party Organizations attached to the Central Committee of the RSDLP (Bolsheviks). The bureau was chaired by N. I. Podvoisky. The relatively unknown Kaganovich was one of the eleven members.⁵² The radicals in the bureau – V. I. Nevsky, N. I. Podvoisky, K. A. Mekhonoshin, N. K. Belyakov, A. Ya. Semashko – played the leading part in promoting the mood that led to the insurrectionary attempt during the famous July Days.⁵³

The members of the bureau were intended to remain in Petrograd after the conference to direct the work of the Military Organization. Podvoisky and Yakov Sverdlov tried to persuade Kaganovich to stay and work in Petrograd, but he insisted on returning to Saratov.⁵⁴ He travelled via Moscow, where the Moscow party committee sent him to the Skobelev monument to address a meeting – organized by the Socialist Revolutionaries – which was also addressed by Nikolai Bukharin.⁵⁵

He returned to Saratov. In the second half of June, Valerian Kuibyshev arrived in the town, and lectured on ‘Revolution and counter-revolution’. Kaganovich and Kuibyshev were to form a close friendship. After the July days, an anti-Bolshevik campaign was launched. Kaganovich was accused of going to Petrograd without authorization; he was arrested and listed with other Bolshevik activists to be dispatched to the front. At Gomel’ station, the Polese committee of the Bolshevik party intervened to block his further transportation. He and other arrested soldiers were released.⁵⁶

The Polese committee of the Bolshevik party operated in what is present-day Belarus. Polese encompassed the territory of the Jewish pale, with Gomel’ as its principal centre, and also included Kaganovich’s home region. He was

Figure 1. L. M. Kaganovich with his wife Maria in Saratov in 1917



elected a member of the Gomel' soviet of workers and soldiers deputies. He was also elected chairman of the Polese Bolshevik party bureau, which also included T. M. Privorotsky (responsible secretary – and Kaganovich's brother-in-law), Mendel Khataevich (deputy chairman) and five other members. Kaganovich assumed general leadership and was in charge of mass political work among the workers, soldiers and peasants, and he also headed the special military commission. His wife Maria worked in the Polese soviet's section for work among women.⁵⁷

From September 1917 Kaganovich worked in Gomel'. Following the abortive counter-revolutionary coup, headed by the Supreme Military Commander General Lavr Kornilov, at the end of August the Bolsheviks rallied strong support among railway workers and soldiers, many of whom joined the Red Guards. Kaganovich also sat on the board of the Gomel' union of leatherworkers, who in September–October struck in support of a strike by fellow workers in Moscow. The Bolsheviks and the Bund fought intensely to gain influence amongst Jewish workers. As a Bolshevik who could speak Yiddish, Kaganovich was a major asset. As a result of a debate, Kaganovich claimed, the leading Bundist, Mark Liber, was sent packing from Gomel'.⁵⁸

Kaganovich, as a member of the All-Russian Bureau of Military Organizations of the Bolsheviks, was elected chairman of a delegation to go to Petrograd in order to lobby for the publishing of the tsarist government's secret treaties, to end the war and to conclude peace. However, because of the difficult situation in Gomel', he was unable to go.

The October Revolution in Gomel' and Mogiliev

On 16 October, the province conference of the Soviets, held in Minsk, witnessed a clash between the Bolsheviks and their critics. Kaganovich spoke as representative of the Gomel' soviet, denouncing the bankruptcy of the 'social conciliators', arguing that the masses were increasingly supporting the Bolsheviks. After the conference, he discussed the military situation with A. F. Myasnikov, leader of Minsk province party committee. Myasnikov noted that the Central Committee had referred to him as 'very energetic and fervent', and proposed that he be nominated as a candidate for election to the Constituent Assembly.⁵⁹

The Polese committee's Military Commission, led by Kaganovich, began organizing and arming the Red Guards for insurrection. The Polese committee, through the Gomel' soviet, led the campaign among the soldiers. It secured the release of soldiers who had been imprisoned in June 1917, some of whom had been accused of killing their commanding officer who had ordered them to fire on their fellow soldiers.⁶⁰

In October, there were fears that front-line units would be deployed to suppress the revolutionary movement in Petrograd and Moscow. The Polese

committee, with the help of railway workers, succeeded in impeding the movement of these units. Kaganovich and others were involved in propagandizing the Cossack and other regiments to turn them against the government and against their own officers.⁶¹ On 28 October the Provisional Government was overthrown and the new Soviet government, comprising an alliance of the Bolsheviks and the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, under Lenin was proclaimed in Petrograd. By this time the Polese committee's military revolutionary committee had control of Gomel'.⁶²

The Supreme Military High Command's headquarters (Stavka), based in Mogiliev, became the major centre of opposition to the new Bolshevik government. The Stavka proposed to transfer itself to Kiev to link up with the Ukrainian nationalist forces of Petlyura and to escape the advancing army of Bolshevik soldiers and sailors led by Krylenko. Socialist Revolutionary leaders, including Viktor Chernov, had gathered in Mogiliev and were considering forming a government there.⁶³ The Mogiliev soviet was dominated by Socialist Revolutionaries and Menshevik Defencists, and refused to recognize the new Soviet government's appointee, Krylenko, as Supreme Commander. On 31 October, Kaganovich, in disguise, and using the name Zheleznoi (Iron) visited Mogiliev. The Mogiliev railway workers, on Kaganovich's suggestion, adopted the tactics of the Gomel' railway workers to frustrate the movement of the Stavka to Kiev. A pro-Bolshevik battalion of the Grigorievsky cavalry assisted in withholding transport facilities to the Stavka.⁶⁴ By the middle of November, Krylenko had gained control of Mogiliev.

Kaganovich visited the Stavka of the Supreme High Command of Krylenko.⁶⁵ Krylenko proposed that Kaganovich join him in Petrograd to work on plans for the creation of a new Soviet army. Kaganovich also had contact with Myasnikov, who was Krylenko's deputy, and with whom he had worked in Minsk and Gomel'.

In the middle of December Kaganovich presided over the third congress of soviets of Mogiliev province. On his initiative, the Mensheviks were expelled from the unified Social Democratic organization and a purely Bolshevik organization was formed. The Soviet established an Extraordinary Commission (Cheka) to combat counter-revolution, headed by Privorotsky, who went on to become a leading Chekist.⁶⁶

Kaganovich's activities in Minsk and the western region need to be set in context. This was no backwater, but a major stronghold of Bolshevik support. The results of the elections to the Constituent Assembly at the end of 1917 showed that the Bolshevik party commanded large support in Petrograd and Moscow, the two capitals, in the major industrial regions and in the army. Their support in the countryside was very weak. The Bolsheviks gained large support in the Western–Byelorussian region with its large Jewish population, especially in Minsk, Vitebsk and Smolensk.⁶⁷

The unfolding of the revolutionary crisis in Russia from February to October 1917 was influenced by the war and the crisis in the army. For the Provisional Government and for the Bolsheviks, control over the armed forces was a decisive factor. The Bolshevik seizure of power in October was facilitated by their control over the Red Guards in the capital and the support they had within the army via the Military Organization. The surge of popular support for the Bolsheviks in the autumn of 1917 gave them 24 per cent of the vote in the elections to the Constituent Assembly. The Bolshevik opposition to war commanded wide approval, especially in the army. Their commitment to the granting of land to the peasants defused potential peasant opposition.

The Bolsheviks were not the plaything of historical forces. They were able to harness, channel and guide the popular movement at crucial stages. Lenin's decisions on doctrine and tactics had profound implications. He adopted a position of intransigent opposition to the Provisional Government and was contemptuous of the Socialist Revolutionary and Menshevik parties. It was his decision to reject the idea of a broad-based socialist government in October, and his decision to disperse the Constituent Assembly in January 1918. The October Revolution was predicated on the Bolsheviks' belief that it would act as a trigger for a socialist revolution on a European and global scale. But the Bolshevik–Left SR government lacked popular legitimacy. The domestic economic crisis was exacerbated, and the threat of a German advance increased as the army disintegrated. The October seizure of power was the inevitable prelude to civil war.

Creating the Red Army

Kaganovich was elected as a deputy to the Constituent Assembly on the Bolshevik list. The assembly met in Petrograd on 5 January 1918. He arrived the following day, after the assembly had been dispersed, and attended the meeting of the Congress of Deputies where Lenin defended his decision to dissolve the assembly. In his memoirs, he records his strong approval of this decision, arguing that the Bolshevik party, in a revolutionary situation, could not be constrained by legal niceties.⁶⁹

On 8 January 1918 Kaganovich, as a delegate, attended the III All-Russian Congress of Workers and Soldiers deputies. There he heard Sverdlov and Lenin defending their decision to disperse the assembly, Stalin's speech on the nationalities policy and Zatonsky's speech on the establishment of a Ukrainian Soviet government. In his memoirs, he claims that at the congress he berated Yuli Martov, leader of the Mensheviks, over his refusal to endorse the October seizure of power. At this congress, he was elected a member of its Central Executive Committee of the Congress of Deputies and for the next forty years

was to remain a member of this body and its successors, theoretically the supreme organ of the Soviet Republic.

At the congress, Lenin issued a directive for the creation of a new Soviet army. The All-Russian Bureau of Military Party Organizations, attached to the Central Committee, was assigned the task of drafting the decree. The new People's Commissariat of Military-Naval Affairs (NKVMDel) was established.⁷⁰ Nikolai Podvoisky, who was charged with drawing up the decree, recruited Kaganovich onto the drafting committee.⁷¹ A meeting with Lenin made a big impression on him. When introduced, Kaganovich recounted, Lenin recalled his speech to the Conference of Bolshevik Army Organizations in June 1917. On 16 January the Soviet government (the Council of People's Commissars or Sovnarkom) issued the decree, incorporating some of Lenin's amendments, on establishing the Red Army.⁷²

The All-Russian Collegium for Organizing the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, headed by Podvoisky, attached to NKVMDel was given the task of forming the army. After discussion with Sverdlov, Kaganovich was relieved as head of the Polese party organization and was assigned to work in the collegium. He referred to Podvoisky as 'my unfailing friend and boss'. The collegium's small staff was housed in the Marinsky palace. Kaganovich worked 12 to 14 hours a day as a commissar in the Agitation-Propaganda Department. The department also issued a newspaper, *Workers and Peasants Red Army and Fleet*. He lived in the Astoria hotel, where conditions were good but the food supply was very bad. His wife Maria worked in the administration of Central Executive Committee of the Congress of Deputies.⁷³

The threat of a German invasion prompted an upsurge in army recruitment. On 1 March the German army seized Kiev, and military units were formed in Ukraine to repel them.⁷⁴ On 3 March the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed.⁷⁵ The treaty was bitterly opposed by the Left Communists, and precipitated the departure of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries from the government. Kaganovich supported the treaty, and later expressed disapproval of Trotsky's handling of these talks. He scathingly rejected the policy of revolutionary war advocated by the Left Communists and Left Socialist Revolutionaries.⁷⁶

In the spring of 1918 the seat of the Soviet government was transferred from Petrograd to Moscow. The All-Russian Collegium was housed on Sretensky Boulevard. In April 1918, on the recommendation of Podvoisky and Mekhonoshin, Kaganovich was appointed to the Organization-Agitation Department of the All-Russian Collegium for Organizing the Red Army, on a salary of 500 rubles a month. He was housed at the hotel Alpine Rose on Kuznetsky Most.⁷⁷

On 25–26 March a conference of the provincial military sections of the Moscow military region was convened. Its chairman was Mikhail Frunze,

whom Kaganovich had known in Minsk in 1917. The main report was given by Podvoisky, who proposed to speedily create an army of 1.5 million men.⁷⁸ By June the Red Army, the Red Guards and the food supply and partisan units numbered about half a million men. The authority of the officers was reestablished, and the elected soldiers' committees were disbanded. Conscription was introduced to boost the army's ranks.⁷⁹

Kaganovich, in his memoirs written long after in his retirement, disparaged Trotsky's role in creating the Red Army, giving most of the credit to Lenin, Sverdlov and Stalin, while emphasizing the practical role of the All-Russian Collegium under Podvoisky.⁸⁰ By June 1918 the All-Russian Collegium had been dissolved and its officials dispersed. Kaganovich was employed for a month as a worker at the Mercury factory in Moscow,⁸¹ before accepting Podvoisky's invitation to join the Higher Military Inspectorate. But before he took up this new post, his career took a new turn.

Kaganovich's account of his early life stands at variance with other hostile accounts. In 1933 a writer in the Menshevik journal claimed that Kaganovich had become a worker during the war in order to avoid military service, and that prior to this he had been an 'intellectual without specific profession'. Moreover, it was asserted that for a period he worked in a department store in Kiev, but left after accusations of theft.⁸² After his political fall in 1957, some Old Bolsheviks cast aspersions on his early revolutionary career, accusing him of supporting the Provisional Government in March 1917, of siding with the Mensheviks and of enthusiastically volunteering to join the army.⁸³ These accounts are suspect and are contradicted by other sources.⁸⁴ Allegations that he had been an active Zionist in his early years are also unfounded.⁸⁵

While the accusations directed at Kaganovich need to be read with caution, his own account of his early life is not entirely straightforward. No satisfactory explanation is offered for his delay in joining the Bolshevik party. This suggests that in his early teens he may have contemplated a career other than the revolutionary course which he adopted in 1912. The circumstances behind his departure to Melitopol in 1916 are unclear. The memoirs offer no real explanation as to how he avoided being conscripted into the army from 1914 to 1917 or of the circumstances under which he was finally enlisted.

Although Kaganovich had strong intellectual interests, he belonged more to the category of the revolutionary worker autodidact. Photographs of him from these early years show a handsome, dapperly dressed young man in coat, collar and tie, with a fresh face and well-groomed, dark, wavy hair and, in some pictures, a moustache. His eyes (which were blue) gaze confidently into the camera. He appears as the conscious worker aspiring to dignity, but he might easily be taken for a student or young intellectual.⁸⁶

Attempts to trace Kaganovich's adherence to the revolutionary cause to some psychological roots yield little. He was a well-adjusted individual. In his memoirs he wrote nostalgically of his childhood, describing his upbringing in a stable and warm family, and recalled with affection his native region. The deprivations of a straitened childhood and thwarted ambition for advancement via education fuelled a sense of grievance against the injustice of the *ancien regime*. Undoubtedly, the disabilities imposed on Jews was a factor in his radicalization. His political outlook was forged during the aftermath of the 1905 Revolution, by the Stolypin reaction and the Great War. His adherence to Bolshevism was to be absolute, colouring all aspects of his existence, and lasted the whole of his life. It was a choice that was to bring great power and status, but which was also to make extraordinary demands.

Conclusion

Kaganovich was a remarkably self-possessed man. His formal education was limited, but he was intelligent, quick-witted and had boundless energy. He was an accomplished orator, a good organizer and a natural leader who possessed a real charismatic quality. He came from the milieu of the small-town Ukrainian Jewish artisans who were being proletarianized. He belonged to that substantial group of deracinated, radicalized Jewish workers and intellectuals, who made up a significant component of the revolutionary movement. He was what Gramsci termed an organic intellectual of the working class who were proud of their self-identity as class-conscious workers and part of the revolutionary vanguard. He won a reputation as a leading activist in Kiev and the Donbass. After being conscripted into the army, his role in the Bolshevik Military Organization dramatically propelled his career. During the October Revolution he worked in the big Jewish centres of Minsk, Gomel' and Mogiliev.

He was a committed trade unionist and worked in legal and semilegal unions from 1911 onward. In his memoirs, he emphasized that his allegiance to the trade unions was instrumental in turning him into a Bolshevik.⁸⁷ He was an ardent, idealistic revolutionary. He subscribed to Lenin's doctrinaire, uncompromising conception of socialism and his views on party organization. He embraced a cosequentialist view of ethics, that the ends justified the means. He did not lack courage, and was self-controlled and focused. Like other Bolsheviks, there was something ascetic, puritanical, self-righteous in his makeup. As with many revolutionaries, his marriage was one of revolutionary comrades. His clandestine political and trade union activities tempered a personality already characterized by its toughness and resilience. The October Revolution opened up new vistas for him, and at the age of 24, his career was about to take off dramatically.

Lenin's conception of socialism was coloured by utopian aspirations, untempered by engagement in practical affairs of state and economic management. The Bolsheviks' attempt to realize the unrealizable carried with it the danger of the perversion of the idealistic project with profound consequences for themselves and the regime they had created. Dostoevsky, writing of modern revolutionary socialism, prophesied that the attempt to realize its aims would produce "such darkness, such chaos, something so coarse, so blind, so inhuman that the entire edifice would crumble away to the accompaniment of the maledictions of mankind, even before it would finally have been constructed".⁸⁸ In that, Dostoevsky proved a better prophet and a more perceptive thinker than Lenin.

Chapter 2

RED TERROR AND CIVIL WAR, 1918–1921

In October 1917 the Bolsheviks, in coalition with the Left SRs, established their government, the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom). The new regime offered unprecedented opportunities for advancement to a wide cohort of party members and sympathizers. The consolidation of the Soviet state became the overriding priority of the regime. The winter of 1917–18 witnessed a collapse of industrial production and acute problems of food supply in the urban centres. The dispersal of the Constituent Assembly in January 1918 was perceived, even by some Bolsheviks, as an illegal usurpation of power. The advancing German armies threatened to overthrow the Soviet regime. By the summer of 1918 the first phase of the Civil War had begun, with the White Armies of Kolchak, Denikin, Yudenich and Wrangel in league with the interventionist forces from Britain, France, America and Japan. The failure of the European revolution left the Russian revolutionary government beleaguered and isolated. In this period Kaganovich underwent a baptism of fire into the realities of revolutionary politics and into the practicalities of *realpolitik* in major battle fronts such as Nizhnyi Novgorod, Voronezh and Turkestan.

Nizhnyi Novgorod

In 1918 Kaganovich was sent by the Central Committee to Nizhnyi Novgorod initially as a party agitator.¹ On 26 May the province party committee heard a report on behalf of the Central Committee from N. A. Semashko, who had close links with the city, and on his recommendation the committee co-opted Kaganovich and one other as members.² Kaganovich served as the Bolshevik political chief of Nizhnyi Novgorod from June 1918 until September 1919. This period in his career is glossed over in his memoirs.³ According to him, the appointment was authorized by Sverdlov with Lenin's approval.⁴

Nizhnyi Novgorod (Nizhnyi or Nizhegorod) was a major industrial centre with a strong revolutionary tradition. In October 1917 the Bolsheviks, in alliance with the Left SRs, took control of the Nizhnyi soviet, with I. P. Romanov

elected as chairman of the province soviet executive committee (*gubispolkom*).⁵ The party's position was buttressed by the Cheka and the Revolutionary Tribunal (established in March 1918) and the Military Commissariat.⁶ The alliance between the Bolsheviks and the Left SRs broke down in March 1918 over the question of the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The city held a commanding position on the Volga, and constituted a major Bolshevik outpost during the Civil War.

Popular opinion in Nizhnyi was highly critical of Bolshevik method and policies. In March 1918 the local authorities accused the Mensheviks and Right SRs of stirring up the workers of the great Sormovo engineering works.⁷ On 23 April there was an attempted uprising in Nizhnyi, allegedly fomented by an unlikely alliance of Anarchists and Kadets, exploiting the discontent within the army. Trotsky reported on the great reluctance of workers in Nizhnyi to join the Red Army.⁸ Bolshevik grain requisitioning provoked strong opposition in the countryside. In the province alone in 1918 there were some 40 peasant risings against the Bolshevik authorities that were attributed to SR, Menshevik and White Guard agitation.⁹ The risings peaked in the summer of 1918 and were brutally suppressed.¹⁰

On 11 June Sovnarkom established the committees of poor peasants (*kombedy*). In Nizhnyi and elsewhere the *kombedy* were employed for grain requisitioning, directing their actions against the kulaks, 'speculators', and even against the middle peasants. They worked in league with the Cheka and revolutionary tribunals. On 20 June the Nizhnyi province Cheka ordered the surrender of all civilian-held firearms.¹¹ The province party committee placed a special armed detachment of 100 communists at the disposal of the Cheka to conduct mass searches and to combat counter-revolution.¹²

On 10 June a conference of 200 worker delegates (representing, according to different estimates, 40,000 or 100,000 workers) convened in Sormovo as a focus of worker opposition to Bolshevik rule. The meeting was disrupted by the Red Guards, who rampaged through the workers' district, shooting wildly, killing two and wounding several dozen. The next day the conference called for a general strike against the Bolshevik authorities. The Mensheviks lodged a protest with the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets. A Menshevik report at this time spoke of the workers of Nizhnyi as having completely deserted the Bolsheviks.¹³

On 18 June Sormovo went on strike and shops, cafes and businesses closed in sympathy. The same day, the crowd released from the local prison 105 local capitalists, arrested by the Cheka for non-payment of a levy imposed on them by the Nizhnyi soviet.¹⁴ The strike lasted several days. The Sormovo Cheka arrested the strike leaders, and the Nizhnyi province soviet confiscated all enterprises which had closed.¹⁵ In accordance with the Sovnarkom decree of

26 June nationalizing all large industrial enterprises, the state took over the giant Sormovo, Kulebansky and Vyksynsky works in Nizhnyi.

The introduction of what became known as ‘War Communism’ in the summer of 1918 was intended as a leap into the new communist order. It was ideologically driven and only in part dictated by the needs of managing a civil war economy. Large, medium and small-scale industries were nationalized. Grain was gathered by forcible requisitioning. In the countryside, the Bolsheviks sought to mobilize the poor peasants via the poor-peasants committee against not only the kulaks, but also against the middle peasants.¹⁶ The Nizhnyi party committee enthusiastically embraced these policies.

In June the IV Nizhnyi Province Party Conference elected a new party committee with Kaganovich as chairman.¹⁷ He replaced M. S. Sergushev, a worker and long-standing Bolshevik, who remained as a committee member.

At the end of June the II Province Congress of Soviets witnessed heated exchanges between the Bolsheviks and the Left SRs. Kaganovich vigorously defended the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk: ‘Our task is not to die with honour, but to preserve the Soviet republic, whatever the odds... Thus, it is laughable to shout about war when we have absolutely nothing.’¹⁸ V. G. Zaks, for the Left SRs, continued to advocate revolutionary war against Germany. He denounced the ‘food supply dictatorship’, warning that the *kombedy* would provoke more peasant risings, and lead to a diminution of the acreage sown. The Bolsheviks’ agrarian policy, based on the poor peasants (*bedniaks*), was doomed to fail.¹⁹ The Bolshevik-dominated congress ignored these warnings and approved the policy on peace and a resolution on the committee of poor peasants

On 27 June the Nizhnyi province Bolshevik party committee condemned the threat by the Left SRs to withdraw from the province soviet executive committee, declaring that it did not fear to rule alone, and would ‘resolutely stand at its post’.²⁰ The V All-Russian Congress of Soviets, which met on 5 July, finalized the split between the Bolsheviks and the Left SRs. The assassination of the German ambassador, Count Mirbach, was followed by the attempted putsch of the Left SRs in Moscow on 6 July. Three days later, the Nizhnyi province soviet executive committee closed down the newspaper of the Left SRs and on 11 July, expelled the Left SRs from its ranks.²¹

In response, the SRs staged political risings in Yaroslavl, Murom and Rybinsk. Yaroslavl was not relieved until 21 July, with the sending in of Cheka detachments from Petrograd and elsewhere. The Cheka detachment from Nizhnyi, led by N. A. Bulganin, played an important part in the repression which ensued. Fifty-seven of the insurgents were shot, and a special commission sent to the town sentenced another 350 to death.²²

The Red Terror in Nizhnyi Novgorod

By summer, the position of the Bolshevik government was precarious – deserted by Left SRs, threatened by peasant rebellion and working class discontent. The commencement of the allied intervention also deepened the mood of despair. The Czechoslovak Legion, which supported the Socialist Revolutionary Komuch government, seized Simbirsk, Samara and Izhev and took Kazan on 6 July. Against this background, the decision to execute all the members of the royal family was taken. In July–August, Lenin instructed local Bolshevik leaders to institute a policy of terror, to execute and take as hostage rich peasants who withheld grain and to ruthlessly suppress peasant rebellions.²³

On 7 August Trotsky, as People's Commissar for War, was appointed commander of the Revolutionary Military Council (Revvoensoviet) of the Eastern Front. He later described Nizhnyi as Moscow's bastion against the Czechoslovak Legion and as the main supply base for the Fifth Army.²⁴ Two days later, Lenin, after discussing the situation with Ya. Kh. Peters, acting chairman of the Cheka, sent an urgent letter to G. F. Fedorov, chairman of the Nizhnyi province soviet executive committee.²⁵ He instructed him to immediately establish a 'troika of the dictatorship' to suppress the threat of a White Guard rising. There then followed a series of blood-curdling injunctions: 'to institute immediately a mass terror', 'to shoot and deport hundreds of prostitutes who get the soldiers drunk, former officers, *etc.*'; those found in possession of weapons to be shot; Mensheviks and other unreliaables to be deported en masse. Lenin also assigned F. F. Raskol'nikov and K. Kh. Danishevsky, members of the Revvoensoviet of the Eastern Front, to Nizhnyi to assist in suppressing the threatened counter-revolution.²⁶

On 10 August the Nizhnyi province party committee established a Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) with full power. It comprised five members, including the heads of the local soviets, Cheka and Military committees, with Kaganovich as head of the province party committee.²⁷ The following day, Lenin issued instructions to the MRC for the defence of the city. The MRC drew up plans for the city's defence, including proposals for the creation of a concentration camp to hold arrested army officers.²⁸

On 16 August Ya. Z. Vorob'ev, head of the province Cheka, reported to the first Nizhnyi province conference of the Cheka and the Military Commissars on the arrest of members of the local bourgeoisie, army officers, kulaks, former police and Okhrana officers.²⁹ Three days later, Lenin instructed Raskol'nikov, of the Revvoensoviet of the Eastern Front, to send forces to Kazan and to Nizhnyi to establish revolutionary order.³⁰ On 22 August the MRC discussed plans for the evacuation of the city.³¹ The following day, the MRC ordered the mobilization of all party workers between 18 and 28 years of age.³²

Efforts were made to rally working class support behind the regime.³³ Some smaller factories, under Bolshevik control, passed resolutions of support, but the party's influence in the major factories was weak. At the Vyksynsky works, with 8,000 employees, there was virtually no party organization by August, while at Sormovo, with 15,000 workers, party membership had slumped from 1,200 in March to 107 by September.³⁴

G. Ya. Sokolnikov, a Central Committee emissary, addressed a poorly attended meeting at the Sormovo works on 30 August and upbraided them for their inactivity, chiding them that, in 1905, they had been in the front rank of the fighters for the freedom of the working class. Kaganovich, in his speech, berated the workers for failing to support the Bolshevik authorities:

And what have you Sormovichi done to secure grain? Have you organized a single food supply detachment? Have you – 15,000 strong mass – sent one detachment to the front to struggle with the Czechoslovaks to win Volga grain? No! You have done nothing!³⁵

A party activist from Nizhnyi reported to the Secretariat in Moscow that the situation in the city left an 'oppressive image', and that the mobilization of activists for the front had precipitated a collapse of membership numbers.³⁶

On 30 August Lenin was wounded in an assassination attempt in Moscow. The All-Russian Central Executive Committee immediately called for reprisals. *Pravda* even implied that the bourgeoisie as a class should be exterminated. The suggestion was repeated by Georgi Zinoviev in Petrograd.³⁷ On 4 September a telegram signed by G. I. Petrovsky instructed local soviets to carry out a Red Terror in earnest.³⁸ Six days later Sovnarkom published its decree 'On Red Terror', drafted by Felix Dzerzhinsky, head of the Cheka, and Sverdlov,³⁹ which gave the actions retrospective legal cover.

On the day of the attempted assassination, the MRC of Nizhnyi resolved 'to answer the terror of the bourgeoisie with the Red Terror' by shooting bourgeois hostages and by instituting 'mass terror against the bourgeoisie and its minions.'⁴⁰ Already on 31 August the Nizhnyi Cheka reported that they had shot 41 people 'from the bourgeois camp' and seized up to 700 people as hostages.⁴¹ The shooting of unarmed hostages in flagrant violation of the rules of war set an ominous precedent of class justice. The conduct of the terror in Nizhnyi is shrouded in mystery and local newspapers of the period are hard to find.

On 3 September mass meetings were held in the province and supportive resolutions were passed.⁴² At this time the MRC co-opted V. I. Mezhlauk as a member, and decided to place Sormovo and other works under military discipline. The Military Revolutionary Committee appointed a commandant