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The death of M. V. Frunze in the context of the power struggle in the leadership of the Communist Party (on the 100th anniversary of his death)

Abstract

The article is dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the death of Mikhail V. Frunze, Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council and People's Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs of the USSR. He died at the age of 40, two days after an unsuccessfully performed operation for a peptic ulcer, from which he had long suffered. The decision to proceed with the surgery was made amid disagreements among the consulting physicians. The operation was strongly insisted upon by the General Secretary of the Communist Party, Joseph Stalin, despite warnings about the associated risks. He justified his insistence by the need to fully restore Frunze's health for his effective work. The article examines other possible motives behind this demand that have been previously proposed and offers a new explanation. Based on the author's conversation with former member of the party leadership Anastas I. Mikoyan, several memoirs, and archival documents, the hypothesis is put forward that Frunze was considered an

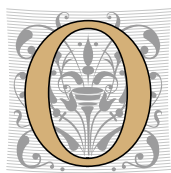
alternative to Stalin for the position of General Secretary. He was distinguished by a rare combination of strong will, humanity, tact, and the ability to get along with people of differing views. Stalin's opponents in the Politburo, Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, in early 1925, proposed that the General Secretary move to the post of Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council, while Frunze, then Deputy Chairman of the RMC, would become General Secretary. Due to Stalin's objections, this proposal was not adopted. However, Stalin remembered this proposal, and by insisting on a major surgical operation, sought to remove Frunze from active political life for an extended period and prevent his participation in the Party Congress scheduled for December 1925 and in the first organizational meeting of the new Central Committee, where he could have been elected to the Politburo. This would have altered the balance of power within this supreme body and might have hindered the implementation of Stalin's plans to defeat his opponents in the party leadership and gradually achieve virtually unchecked power. The article concludes that with Frunze's death, the opportunity was lost to unite all those within the party leadership who opposed Stalin's ambitions around a highly authoritative, strong, and charismatic figure. This might have allowed for the realization of an alternative to Stalin's course.

Keywords:

Surgery; Peritonitis; Revolutionary Military Council; Politburo; General Secretary

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On October 31, 1925, M.V. Frunze, People's Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs and Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council (RMC) of the USSR, died two days after an unsuccessful operation. He was widely popular in the country as a hero of the Civil War, having victoriously commanded three fronts in succession. His death came as a complete surprise. Frunze was only 40 years old and was actively working both in his position as People's Commissar and as a candidate member of the Politburo. Only those close to him knew that he had suffered for many years from peptic ulcer disease.

After graduating from gymnasium with a gold medal, Frunze enrolled in 1904 in the Department of Economics of the St. Petersburg Polytechnic Institute, but did not complete his studies. From 1905 onward, he became actively involved in the revolutionary movement; in 1905–1907 he took part in armed clashes with government troops and the police. In 1907, he was arrested in the city of Shuya, accused of participation in an underground militant organization, including, among other charges, wounding a police officer with a revolver.

In 1909, a military field court sentenced him to death, but upon appeal the case was reviewed and sent for retrial. In 1910, the court reaffirmed the previous sentence, which was later commuted by the commander of the Moscow Military District to six years of hard labor. Spending several months in a death row cell and several years in penal prisons caused stomach disorders that continued to trouble him in subsequent years. However, exacerbations of the illness would subside after treatment and rest.

Nevertheless, in October 1925, a medical council recommended that Frunze undergo surgery, which ultimately led to his death. Immediately after the operation, many materials about the course of his illness were published in newspapers, but not all of them can be considered reliable, given the authorities' desire to justify the urgency of the operation. The published information was later used in several books and numerous articles on the subject, often without proper references and with the addition of various conjectures. I will attempt to select the most reliable facts and supplement them with certain archival documents from the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (РГАСПИ), the Russian

State Archive of Contemporary History (РГАСИ), and the Frunze Shuya Historical, Art, and Memorial Museum, in order to present as complete a picture as possible of the development of the entire situation.

It makes sense to begin with July 1925. The Secretary of the Central Committee, Vyacheslav Molotov, reported to Stalin: “An accident has happened to Frunze. He was thrown out of a car at full speed. There are no external injuries. But it is difficult to say how this will end. For now, the doctors insist that he remain in bed and keep silent”¹. On July 7, a medical commission recommended that Frunze be granted an immediate two-week leave, about which he wrote to the Politburo. He planned to spend it near Moscow without ceasing his overall leadership of the Commissariat. Such leave was granted to him beginning on July 9. In August, his condition improved significantly, and on August 19 the Politburo granted Frunze another leave for a trip to Crimea starting September 7. Before departing for his vacation, he intended to visit Ukraine on August 31 to inspect military units. However, by the end of August his health deteriorated, and the Politburo postponed his trip. His departure was made contingent upon written permission from doctors.

In early September, the People’s Commissar experienced consequences from a second automobile accident. A report on Frunze’s illness published in *Pravda* on October 31 stated that he had suffered from gastrointestinal diseases for about ten years: “During these years, more significant intestinal hemorrhages occurred three times... The last severe intestinal hemorrhage took place in early September of this year after a bruise sustained from a fall out of an automobile”. However, it did not specify when exactly this fall had occurred. Nevertheless, on September 5, Lev Levin, head of the therapeutic department of the Kremlin Hospital, concluded that Frunze’s health condition did not prevent his departure. Frunze forwarded this conclusion to Molotov, and on the same day, through a poll of Politburo members, obtained permission to go on leave. He traveled to the Mukhalatka rest home in Crimea, where Stalin was also vacationing at the time.

Accompanying Frunze was Pyotr Mandryka, head of the surgical department of the Central Military Hospital, who had been assigned to

¹ РГАСПИ. Ф. 558. Оп. 11. Д. 766. Л. 43.

monitor and treat him. Mandryka kept a health diary for Frunze from September 5 to 12, which is preserved in the Frunze Shuya Historical, Art, and Memorial Museum. In it, he noted the presence of a wound from the bruise sustained in the fall, to which he applied a dressing, but overall, on September 5 and 6 the condition was satisfactory. On the night of September 7, Frunze felt unwell, but he endured the journey to Crimea. From September 8 to 10, the patient's condition did not cause concern. Thus, the diary entry for September 10 reads: "General condition satisfactory. The patient bathes, lies on the beach. The wound is healing well"². However, already on September 11, the doctor noted: "Condition poor. The patient mostly lay down".

Such fluctuations in well-being were sometimes characteristic of Frunze's health. When he felt better, he tended to display excessive activity, forgetting about his illness, after which exacerbations would occur again. On September 14, Stalin returned to Moscow from his vacation, and after that doctors in Moscow intensified their actions. Mandryka was recalled to Moscow and on September 16 reported to a medical council of several physicians. Among them were, in particular, the already mentioned Levin and the head of the surgical department of Botkin Hospital, Vladimir Rozanov, who enjoyed Stalin's trust after successfully removing his appendix in 1921. The medical council deemed it necessary to immediately dispatch a surgeon and a therapist to Mukhalatka in order to monitor Frunze's health. "He must remain in bed under conditions of absolute rest and a liquid diet"³.

The following day, at Stalin's proposal, the Politburo adopted the following resolution: "a) instruct Comrade Frunze to strictly comply with all doctors' prescriptions; b) assign Comrade Semashko to establish strict supervision over the observance of medical instructions"⁴. On October 1, Frunze returned to Moscow, and on October 2 the newspaper *Ekonomicheskaya Zhizn*, the organ of the Council of Labor and Defense (a commission of the Council of People's Commissars that oversaw current economic activity), published the following notice in

² ШИХММ. 95-н.в. 4286.

³ РГАНИ. Ф. 3. Оп. 62. Д. 186. Л. 16.

⁴ РГАСПИ. Ф. 17. Оп. 3. Д. 519. Л. 5.



М.В. Фрунзе на маневрах. Худ. И.И. Бродский.
Центральный музей Вооруженных сил Российской Федерации. Москва

its “Chronicle” section, where official news was reported: “Yesterday, Comrade M.V. Frunze, Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council of the USSR, returned from leave and resumed his duties”. Apparently, this report was based on information about his normal condition, which was natural after rest in Crimea under medical supervision. However, other central newspapers, *Pravda* and *Izvestiya*, informed readers on the same day about Frunze’s return to Moscow on October 1 without indicating that he had resumed work. Possibly, they were printed somewhat later and had received more accurate information about his admission to the Kremlin Hospital.

On October 2, a council of professors at the Kremlin Medical Administration, under the leadership of its head and the Medical Commission of the Central Committee of the RCP(b), Pavel Obrosov, with the participation of Rozanov and Levin, decided “to admit Frunze to the Kremlin Hospital from October 2 for comprehensive clinical examinations and observation in order to establish an accurate diagnosis and to consider the extremely serious question of the indication for surgical intervention. Until a new decision of the council, the patient



Петр Васильевич Мандрька.
From open sources

must remain in the hospital without leaving”⁵. This meant that he could not take part in the plenary session of the Central Committee of the RCP(b), which opened on October 3. Frunze could not object after the above-cited Politburo resolution.

The next medical council took place on October 8 with the participation of People’s Commissar of (Public) Health Nikolai Semashko and eleven physicians. The council concluded that Frunze was suffering from a duodenal ulcer and residual effects of influenza, which had begun on his way from Crimea to Moscow. The main conclusion was that “the disease, due to its persistence and tendency to bleeding, requires surgical intervention”⁶. It was stated that, in preparation for the operation, Frunze should remain in the hospital for at least ten days, and the exact date of the operation would be determined by a subsequent consultation.

A new council of fifteen participants, now without Semashko (who had left Moscow), was held on October 24. It confirmed the previous diagnosis and the conclusion regarding the necessity of surgery: “The duration of the disease and its tendency toward bleeding, which may prove life-threatening, do not permit the risk of further expect-

⁵ РГНИ. Ф. 3. Оп. 62. Д. 186. Л. 17.

⁶ Pravda. 3 November 1925.



Владимир Николаевич Розанов.
From open sources

ant treatment”⁷. At the same time, the council acknowledged that the operation would be difficult and serious, that relapses were possible afterward, and that the patient would need to adhere to a certain regimen and continue treatment. Nevertheless, the council scheduled the operation for the coming days.

During his stay in the hospital, Frunze felt capable of working: he read documents, met with officials, and received visitors. However, on the eve of the operation he became nervous. Indicative is a letter to his wife dated October 26, which she did not receive in time because she had urgently departed for Moscow upon learning of the operation. The letter was returned to Frunze’s secretariat and on November 5 was forwarded to Stalin. It has been partially quoted many times in books and articles, yet several excerpts are worth citing here. Frunze wrote: “At present I feel absolutely healthy, and it even seems somewhat absurd not only to undergo but even to think about an operation... Increasingly, I find myself thinking that there is nothing serious, for otherwise it is difficult to explain the fact of my rapid recovery after rest and treatment”⁸. In this connection, he expressed surprise at the doctors’ decision: “Nev-

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Фрунзе М.В. Неизвестное и забытое. М.: Наука, 1991. С. 262.



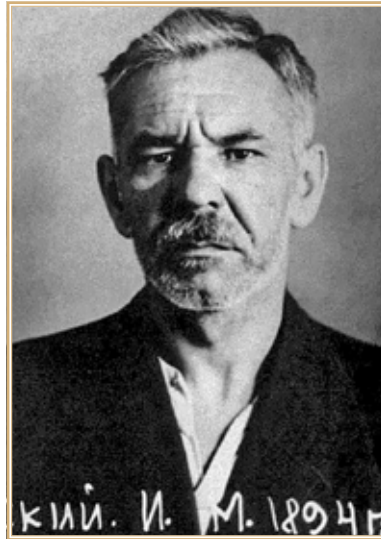
Николай Александрович Семашко.
From open sources

ertheless, both councils have decided that it should be performed”. Seeking to reassure his ailing wife, he stated: “Personally, I am satisfied with this decision. Let them once and for all take a proper look at what is there and try to determine a genuine course of treatment”. At the end of the letter, Frunze wrote: “I am in good spirits and completely calm”⁹.

On the same day, he met at the Kremlin Hospital the party official Ivan Gronskey, whom he had once seen during the Civil War. Gronskey later recalled that Frunze told him the operation would not be particularly significant: “Vladimir Nikolaevich Rozanov assures me — and I believe him — that they will not keep me in the hospital for long”¹⁰. Frunze’s expectation of a quick return to work is also confirmed by the content of his lengthy letter to Stalin, written the next day, October 27. In it, he expressed his views on various state matters and described how he had discussed them on October 26 in meetings with the Soviet plenipotentiary in China, Lev Karakhan (Frunze headed the Politburo’s China Commission, established in March 1925), and with the chairman of the Supreme Council of the National Economy and the OGPU, Felix Dzerzhinsky. At the same

⁹ Ibid. С. 263.

¹⁰ О Михаиле Фрунзе: Воспоминания, очерки, статьи современников, М.: Политиздат, 1985. С. 234.



Иван Михайлович Гронский.
From open sources

time, he remarked that the whole matter connected with the operation “will, at the very least, take me away from work for several weeks”¹¹.

Frunze spoke in a different tone with his old friends. His acquaintance Izrail Hamburg, assistant to the commander of the Air Force, visited him a few days before the operation and noticed that he was in a gloomy mood. Hamburg urged him to refuse the surgery if he had bad premonitions: “But he shook his head negatively: ‘Stalin insists on the operation; he says that one must once and for all get rid of the stomach ulcer. I have decided to go under the knife’”¹². Of course, many people feel anxious before surgery, but in Frunze’s case the situation was complicated by the fact that he felt healthy and was conducting business meetings in the hospital.

On October 29, a brief report about Frunze’s illness appeared in *Pravda*. It stated that, according to the conclusion of four professors, including Obrosov and Rozanov, Frunze had been admitted to Botkin Hospital “to eliminate pathological conditions of the gastrointestinal tract”. For medical professionals and the party leadership, this meant that an operation was being prepared, since such procedures were not performed at the Kremlin Hospital. Nevertheless, the report ended re-

¹¹ Ibid. Л. 54.

¹² *Гамбург И.* Так это было... Воспоминания. М.: Политиздат, 1965. С. 182.

assuringly: “Comrade Frunze’s condition is good; pulse and temperature normal”.

On the same day that this report appeared, Rozanov, who was considered the country’s leading surgeon, performed the operation. Obrosov was present at the surgery as a political overseer. According to the surgical report, “the patient had difficulty falling asleep and remained under general anesthesia for 1 hour and 5 minutes, while the operation itself lasted 35 minutes”¹³. The anesthesia was administered by Rozanov’s student Alexei Ochkin, who had known Stalin since the Civil War, when he had served as Chief Physician of the First Cavalry Army hospital. Initially, he unsuccessfully attempted to anesthetize the patient with ether, administering 140 grams, and then resorted to a large dose of chloroform — 60 grams according to the official report¹⁴ — which, in the opinion of physicians both then and now, is considered dangerous. As a result of the operation, an exacerbation of purulent inflammation of the peritoneum and a decline in cardiac activity occurred, from which Frunze died two days later. The autopsy report referred to the “instability of the organism in response to anesthesia and its poor resistance to infection”¹⁵. The well-known publicist Mikhail Koltsov wrote in *Pravda* on November 3: “Can we reproach the poor heart for yielding to sixty grams of chloroform?”

Immediately after the publication in newspapers of the autopsy report and information about the course of the operation, discussions about medical errors arose within the professional community. For example, Professor Tereshenkov sent a note to *Rabochaya Gazeta* titled *One Cannot Remain Silent. What Did Frunze Die Of?*, which the editorial board forwarded to Stalin on November 4. Citing specific examples from the published information, it concluded: “Undoubtedly, in the operation on Comrade Frunze we are dealing with major mistakes by the doctors”¹⁶.

Of course, the opinion of a single physician cannot be regarded as indisputable truth. However, such discussions served as grounds for examining Frunze’s death at a meeting of the bureau of the Society of Old

¹³ *Pravda*. 3 November 1925.

¹⁴ *Pravda*. 31 October 1925.

¹⁵ *Pravda*. 1 November 1925.

¹⁶ РАНИ. Ф. 3. Оп. 62. Д. 186. Л. 68.

Bolsheviks on November 19, with Semashko invited. The minutes of this meeting are preserved in the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History. Ten individuals holding responsible positions were present. A report was delivered by Alexander Vinokurov, Chairman of the Supreme Court of the USSR. He had graduated from the Faculty of Medicine of Moscow University and, before the revolution, had practiced privately for some time alongside his participation in the revolutionary movement. Comparing the diagnostic data before the operation with the autopsy results, he concluded that there had been no indication for urgent surgery: “It would have been possible to wait and to perform the operation with the involvement of foreign specialists in this field. As a result of the operation, purulent peritonitis (inflammation of the peritoneum) developed, which quickly led to death from cardiac paralysis”¹⁷.

Semashko spoke next, attempting to justify the necessity of the operation and defend the doctors who performed it. He stated that Frunze had experienced repeated hemorrhages leading to severe exhaustion. At the same time, he acknowledged that at the first consultation attended by him (October 8) “there were disagreements among the doctors. Levin, as well as Rozanov, were against the operation”. He continued: “Before the operation, Rozanov spoke with Comrades Stalin and Zinoviev, explaining that the operation was very complex, that this was a case of a long-standing illness, etc. As a result, Comrade Stalin spoke in favor of the operation (Semashko said nothing about Zinoviev’s position). Rozanov postponed surgical intervention”. Semashko attributed the cause of death to the anesthesia, to which Frunze reacted extremely poorly, in the presence of the complicating condition of peritonitis.

Prosecutor of the Supreme Court Pyotr Krasikov asked: “Why were no eminent foreign specialists invited, or why could Comrade Frunze not have been operated on abroad, where anesthesia is administered more gently?”¹⁸ In response, Semashko said that operations for stomach ulcers were routine in Russia and that Rozanov could be fully trusted. He held a different opinion about Obrosof: “It is true that I dismissed him from the People’s Commissariat of Health, but what can one do

¹⁷ РГАСПИ. Ф. 124. Оп. 3. Д. 15. Л. 134.

¹⁸ Ibid. Л. 134 об.



Александр Николаевич Винокуров.
From open sources

if the Central Committee and the Central Control Commission trust him?” He stated that had he been present during the operation itself, he might have halted its continuation. It is worth noting here that Rozanov likely could have stopped the operation when difficulties with inducing anesthesia became apparent, but this would have required him to enter into conflict with Obrosof, which he did not wish to do.

Krasikov was not satisfied with Semashko’s explanations. According to him, “the issue of the consultation is posed incorrectly: in case of disagreement, an even more competent medical council should be convened”. He expressed a fundamentally important point regarding political oversight: “The words of Stalin and Zinoviev mean nothing to us, since they are not physicians. A political physician must have the decisive say, not Stalin. Obrosof is not an authority, despite the fact that he is recognized by the Central Committee and the Central Control Commission”. There were certain contradictions in Krasikov’s remarks. Using the term “political physician”, by which he meant a qualified doctor who was also a party member, but who, in accordance with party discipline, would always say what Stalin wanted.

The chairman of the meeting, member of the Central Control Commission Nikolai Podvoisky, had visited Frunze a few days before the operation, and for him the fatal outcome came as a complete surprise.

He spoke quite sharply: “The picture of how Comrade Frunze hesitated and wavered, or the report that Dr. Levin tried to dissuade him from the operation, deeply depresses me. Frunze hesitated, the doctors hesitated, and the People’s Commissar of Health leaves, abandoning the patient in the hands of Obrosof and Rozanov”¹⁹. He also saw fault on the part of the doctors, especially Obrosof: “The latest bulletins had the character of self-justification by the doctors... How could Comrade Semashko, having dismissed Obrosof from the People’s Commissariat of Health, keep him in the Central Committee and leave Comrade Frunze in his care?”²⁰ In fairness, it should be noted that the appointment of the head of the Kremlin Medical Administration and the Medical Commission of the Central Committee was hardly dependent on Semashko.

An attempt to defend the doctors was made at the meeting by the respected medical figure Boris Veisbrod. Before the revolution, he had worked for many years in the surgical department of the First City Hospital in Moscow, and since 1922 was Chief Physician of the Second City Hospital. He argued: “The operation was undoubtedly necessary. Otherwise, Comrade Frunze would soon have become an invalid”²¹. But he would not have died. At the same time, the doctor admitted: “In the presence of disagreement within the consultation, it was impossible to agree so quickly to the operation”. In his opinion, death resulted from peritonitis, which had not been present before the surgery.

The bureau’s resolution emphasized “the need to renew the group of physicians treating responsible officials, in view of a number of unsuccessful cases”²². As an example, it cited the death of a prominent party and state figure, Chairman of the Central Auditing Commission of the RCP(b) and Chairman of the All-Russian Textile Syndicate, Viktor Nogin. He had suffered for several years from stomach pain and had been diagnosed with a duodenal ulcer in an even more severe form than Frunze’s. On May 17, 1924, Rozanov performed surgery on him, but five days later Nogin died of peritonitis. Undoubtedly, the surgeon remembered this

¹⁹ Ibid. A. 135.

²⁰ Ibid. A. 135 o6.

²¹ Ibid. A. 134 o6.

²² Ibid. A. 134.



Борис Соломонович Вейсброд.
From open sources

outcome and therefore attempted to postpone Frunze's operation. It is likely that Stalin also remembered Nogin's death following the operation.

From the minutes of the bureau meeting, it clearly follows that the operation was carried out at Stalin's insistence. But the question remains: why did he insist? He himself claimed that he was concerned about Frunze's health, even though he was aware of the risks associated with the operation. One of Stalin's closest associates, Anastas Mikoyan, who at the time was Secretary of the North Caucasus Regional Committee, recalls in his memoirs how he and Stalin met with Rozanov shortly before the operation. Stalin asked the surgeon: "Is it true that the operation awaiting Frunze is not dangerous?" He replied that, like any operation, it involved a certain degree of risk. Stalin then asked: "And if, instead of Frunze, it were, for example, your brother — would you perform such an operation on him, or would you refrain?"²³ Rozanov answered that he would refrain, and further explained that with ulcer disease, if the patient follows the prescribed regimen, surgery can be avoided. He then added a rather unconvincing remark that it was impossible to keep Frunze within such a regimen. After this, as Mikoyan writes, the decision to proceed with the operation remained in force.

²³ Микоян А. Так было. М.: Вагриус, 1999. С. 284.



Борис Андреевич Пильняк (Бернгард Ворау).
From open sources

Rumors about Stalin's involvement in the decision to operate on Frunze prompted Boris Pilnyak to write *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon*, published in the May 1926 issue of the journal *Novy Mir*. He wrote it based on conversations with people close to Frunze, in particular with the editor of the journal *Krasnaya Nov'*, Alexander Voronsky, to whom the story was dedicated. In it, the army commander Gavrilov, against his will, is ordered by some unnamed high-ranking authority to undergo surgery to cure a stomach ulcer. True, in the preface the author wrote that he did not intend to depict Frunze's death, but few believed this.

Soon after the publication, on May 13, 1926, a Politburo resolution was adopted declaring the story "a malicious, counterrevolutionary, and slanderous attack against the Central Committee and the Party"²⁴. The resolution further effectively confirmed the widespread circulation of the rumours used by Pilnyak: "(we) note that the entire plot and individual elements of Pilnyak's story *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon* could not have been created otherwise than on the basis of slanderous conversations conducted by certain communists around the death of Comrade Frunze, and that part of the responsibility lies with Comrade

²⁴ Млечин Л. Фрунзе. М.: Молодая гвардия, 2014. С. 245.

Voronsky. (We decide) to issue a reprimand to Comrade Voronsky”²⁵. The print run of the journal was confiscated. At the Central Committee Plenum in July 1926, Stalin called the hint in the story of his involvement in Frunze’s death a “vile legend”²⁶.

Pilnyak rejected all accusations against him in a letter to the Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR, Alexei Rykov, in October 1926, after returning from abroad. He claimed that he had not intended to accuse Stalin, but had “set out to write a story about how the machinery of the human collective subordinates individual human beings, and about how good intentions in our Russian reality very often turn into catastrophic irreparabilities... my hostility was directed only against the doctors”²⁷. Regardless of whether he was being disingenuous, there was much truth in his explanation.

The story was republished during the period of perestroika, and already at that time the idea emerged that Stalin had intended, through the hands of doctors, to eliminate the prominent politician Frunze in order to replace him with the compliant Kliment Voroshilov as People’s Commissar. This idea continued to circulate in post-Soviet Russia. Thus, Viktor Topolyansky, a physician by profession, examined Frunze’s death in detail in his book *Vozhdi v zakone (Essays on the physiology of power)*, published in 1996. In it, he argued that the operation was necessary, while at the same time pointing to errors by Ochkin, who administered an excessive dose of anesthesia. He linked these errors to instructions from Stalin. Leonid Mlechin adopted Topolyansky’s concept and cited him in his book *Frunze*, published in the *Lives of Remarkable People* series in 2014.

I believe that the explanation of Stalin’s insistence on performing the operation, despite the possible risks to the patient’s life, as being motivated by a desire to replace Frunze with Voroshilov, is influenced by the repressions against the top military command in the 1930s. However, in the mid-1920s the situation was different. Frunze, who had normal relations with Stalin, adhered to party discipline, and he could,

²⁵ Ibid. С. 246.

²⁶ Объединенный пленум ЦК и ЦКК ВКП(б). 14–23 июля 1926 г. Документы и материалы. М.: Научно-политическая книга, 2023. С. 722.

²⁷ Киянская О., Фельдман Д. Очерки истории русской советской литературы и журналистики 1920-х – 1930-х годов. М.: Форум, 2015. С. 118–119.



Бела Кун, Жак Садуль, Лев Троцкий, Михаил Фрунзе, Сергей Гусев.
From open sources

if desired, have been removed by a Politburo decision. What, then, is a more probable reason for Stalin's actions?

In searching for an answer, I rely on a conversation with former member of the party leadership Anastas Mikoyan, which took place in the autumn of 1977. I went to see him in the Kremlin to arrange a lecture at the Institute for Physical Problems, where I was working at the time, in connection with the anniversary of the October Revolution. He had already spoken at our Institute in 1967, and his talk had generated great interest. Ten years later, Director of the Institute, RAS member Pyotr Kapitsa, suggested inviting him again. During my conversation with Mikoyan, I asked whether there had been a real alternative to Stalin as party leader. He replied that there had been only one figure in the party leadership who could have constituted such an alternative – Frunze. In 1925, Mikoyan was a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and personally knew all members of the leadership well. He named a person for whom members of the Central Committee might indeed have voted had his candidacy for General Secretary been put forward.

A similar idea was later expressed in her memoirs by Elizaveta Drabkina, daughter of the prominent party figure Sergei Gusev, who held various important positions. In particular, in 1920 he was a member of the Revolutionary Military Council of the Southern Front when it was com-

manded by Frunze; in 1921 he served as head of the Political Directorate of the Revolutionary Military Council; and in the mid-1920s he was head of the Press Department of the Party and a member of the Presidium of the Central Control Commission. In this capacity, he attended many meetings of the party leadership and was aware of the prevailing sentiments at the top. Drabkina learned of these sentiments from her father.

In her book *Zimny pereval (Winter Pass)*, published in 1990, she recalled that the delegates of the 13th Party Congress did not follow Lenin's advice in his *Letter to the Congress* to remove Stalin from the post of General Secretary, and added: "There were, however, comrades who believed that Lenin's testament should unquestionably be carried out. There was a name that was mentioned as that of a person capable of replacing Stalin as General Secretary — the name of Mikhail Vasilyevich Frunze"²⁸. She then explained why he was respected: "Above all because the gift of an outstanding military leader was combined in him with integrity of character and a talent for comradeship, which created around him a welcome atmosphere of noble cooperation".

Indeed, memoirs about Frunze emphasize his charm, humanity, and ability to deal with people. Thus, Alexei Kiselev, Secretary of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, who had known Frunze for many years, wrote: "He was a remarkable man [of] extraordinary sensitivity, gentleness, a humane approach to every comrade"²⁹. His headquarters commissar Vladimir Sulatsky recalled: "What especially impressed us was Mikhail Vasilyevich's ability to speak with people. He never humiliated anyone, never imposed his thoughts on others, but patiently persuaded"³⁰. Brigade commissar Yakub Chanyshev wrote that he "never once heard Frunze use abusive language, rudeness, or humiliation toward his subordinates"³¹. His close friend Voronsky noted: "He knows how to get along"³². Stalin, in his letters to those close to Frunze after his death, also wrote about his tactfulness. For example, in a letter to corps commander

²⁸ Дрaбкина Е. Зимний перевал. М.: Политиздат, 1990. С. 362.

²⁹ Большевик-воин. Михаил Васильевич Фрунзе. М., 1926. С. 33.

³⁰ О Михаиле Фрунзе: Воспоминания, очерки, статьи современников. М.: Политиздат, 1985. С. 240.

³¹ Ibid. С. 177.

³² Большевик-воин. Михаил Васильевич Фрунзе. М., 1926. С. 41.

in Ukraine Jan Fabricius dated November 25, 1925, he described Frunze as “a kind and by no means harsh person”³³. Lenin, in his *Letter to the Congress*, recommended electing as General Secretary a person “who in all other respects differs from Comrade Stalin in only one advantage, namely being more tolerant, more loyal, more polite, and more attentive to comrades, less capricious”³⁴. Frunze precisely met these criteria.

A characteristic feature of Frunze was his ability to get along with people who could hardly tolerate one another. For example, he recruited former tsarist officers and generals for service. When he commanded the Eastern and Turkestan Fronts, his second-in-command was General Fyodor Novitsky. He pursued this line in accordance with the policy implemented by the Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council, Lev Trotsky, with Lenin’s support; Lenin defended this policy against attacks by radical communists who opposed appointing former tsarist officers to command positions.

Even after Lenin ceased active work in 1923 and the struggle against Trotsky began, led by the Troika of Politburo members — Stalin, Chairman of the Comintern Executive Committee Grigory Zinoviev, and Chairman of the Council of Labor and Defense Lev Kamenev — Frunze continued the same line. He defended military specialists against accusations from the OGPU, which initiated cases against them, including against the personnel of the Artillery Directorate headed by Lieutenant General Georgy Sheidemann. Shortly before his death, on August 18, 1925, Frunze wrote to the deputy chairman of the OGPU, Genrikh Yagoda, regarding the continuation of the investigation into the Artillery Directorate: “I have fully familiarized myself with the results of the previous inquiries and, in my opinion, there are no grounds for initiating a trial. I consider it most expedient to discontinue this case, at least with regard to Sheidemann, and to allow him to use his remaining strength for work”³⁵.

On the other hand, he maintained friendly relations with Voroshilov and Budyonny, who were among those distrustful of former tsarist officers. This ability to find common ground with different people helps explain

³³ РГАСПИ. Ф. 558. Оп. 11. Д. 821. Л. 63.

³⁴ Ленин В.И. ПСС. Т. 45. М.: Политиздат, 1982. С. 346.

³⁵ ШИХММ. 95-Н.В.4075.

why some party figures saw in him an acceptable compromise candidate when conflict began among members of the Troika in the Politburo.

This conflict was initiated by Stalin, who was striving for unchecked power. Two weeks after the Central Committee Plenum in early June 1924 re-elected him as General Secretary, he delivered a report on the results of the 13th Party Congress at courses for district party secretaries under the Central Committee of the RCP(b). The report, published in *Pravda*, contained attacks on Zinoviev and Kamenev. This public action violated the agreements within the so-called “group of seven”. This group had been functioning since early 1924 and consisted of six members of the Politburo (excluding Trotsky) and the chairman of the Central Control Commission, Valerian Kuybyshev. According to Zinoviev, it was initially loosely organized.

Its purpose was to reach consensus on contentious issues in a closed format without involving officials. Decisions agreed upon within the Seven were then formalized at Politburo meetings attended by a broader circle of officials. On some particularly sensitive matters, discussion was confined to this group. The idea was to prevent disagreements within the Politburo majority from becoming public or even known to many Central Committee members.

Stalin’s speech disrupted this plan, and Zinoviev and Kamenev began discussing countermeasures. It was decided to bring the conflict to the level of the Central Committee, though not in full composition, but in the form of a so-called “Leninist faction”, excluding Trotsky’s supporters and economic administrators. In early August, the Politburo decided to convene another Central Committee Plenum in mid-August, during which this faction meeting was to take place. In preparing for it, Zinoviev and Kamenev discussed with some participants various ways to curb the General Secretary’s claims to sole power. Some proposed finding another candidate for the post; among those mentioned, for the reasons outlined above, was Frunze.

Stalin was aware in advance of all his opponents’ plans. As former Stalin secretary Boris Bazhanov, who defected abroad in 1928, wrote, Stalin could eavesdrop on his colleagues’ conversations conducted over the secure government telephone line (*vertushka*) using a special auto-

matic system³⁶. To reduce the threat, he decided to resort to the assistance of doctors in order to prevent Frunze from attending the faction meeting. After all, the fact that Frunze had a chronic gastrointestinal illness had long been known to the country's leadership. As early as April 1922, the Politburo had reviewed the results of medical examinations of senior officials, and among other things it was recommended that Frunze be sent to Germany for treatment.

On August 7, 1924, the Politburo sent him on a month-long leave. Stalin's plan, apparently, was to prevent him from speaking as an authoritative and impartial figure whose opinion could influence many Central Committee members who feared an open split within the Politburo. They might have been receptive to some compromise proposals from Frunze.

Here Stalin may have recalled his experience of restricting Lenin's activity during his illness. On December 18, 1922, the Central Committee Plenum placed personal responsibility on Stalin for enforcing the regime prescribed by doctors for Lenin. Among other things, Lenin was forbidden from receiving visitors and from obtaining information about political life, so as not to agitate him, though he was allowed to dictate notes. In the diary of Lenin's duty secretaries, there is an entry by Lidia Fotieva dated February 9, 1923, according to which Lenin said that the German doctor Otfrid Foerster had noted improvement and was inclined to allow him visitors before access to newspapers. However, just three days later, on February 12, Fotieva recorded that Lenin's condition had worsened: "The doctors upset him to such an extent that his lips trembled. Foerster said that newspapers, visits, and political information were categorically forbidden to him". When Lenin asked what was meant by "political information", the doctor replied, for example, that it included issues such as the census of Soviet employees. "This awareness on the part of the doctors upset Vladimir Ilyich. He formed the impression that it was not the doctors giving instructions to the Central Committee, but that the Central Committee was giving instructions to the doctors"³⁷.

³⁶ Бажанов Б. Воспоминания бывшего секретаря Сталина, М.: III тысячелетие, 2002. С. 61.

³⁷ Ленин В.И. ПСС. Т. 45. М.: Политиздат, 1982. С. 485.

This, in fact, was the essence of Stalin's method, which Lenin understood earlier than his Politburo colleagues. Even doctor Foerster was prepared to follow Stalin's instructions, likely because he was receiving a very substantial fee for treatment. Stalin was especially concerned about the possibility of Zinoviev and Kamenev visiting Lenin, which they had requested. All three of them were aware of Lenin's *Letter to the Congress*, recommending Stalin's removal from the post of General Secretary. Although Zinoviev and Kamenev initially opposed this proposal in order to prevent Trotsky from taking the position, Stalin feared a change in their stance after a conversation with Lenin.

Molotov later described this episode in a conversation with Felix Chuev: "Stalin pushed through a Secretariat decision not to allow Zinoviev and Kamenev to see Lenin, since the doctors had forbidden it. They complained to Krupskaya. She was outraged and told Stalin, and Stalin replied: 'The Central Committee has decided, and the doctors believe that Lenin must not be visited.' — 'But Lenin himself wants it!' — 'If the Central Committee decides, we can also prevent you from seeing him'"³⁸.

Nevertheless, Zinoviev and Kamenev, as Lenin's closest long-time associates, insisted on meeting with him. Stalin then submitted to the Politburo a proposal to relieve him of his responsibility for supervising the enforcement of the regime prescribed by doctors for Lenin. On February 1, 1923, the Politburo rejected this proposal. There is little doubt that Stalin had first persuaded his colleagues in the Politburo — Rykov and the trade union leader Mikhail Tomsky — that, for Lenin's successful treatment, it was necessary to prevent anyone from seeing him, thereby securing a majority. In itself, restricting visits to Lenin was justified, since his health deteriorated when he received bad news. However, a meeting with his closest associates would not have worsened his condition, whereas prohibiting such meetings might have had negative consequences.

At the meeting of the "Leninist faction" in mid-August 1924, the majority condemned Stalin's public criticism of Zinoviev and Kamenev. There were discussions about transferring him to another post while keeping him in the Politburo. Demonstrating his firm and resolute character, on August 19 Stalin submitted a request for resignation to Kuybyshev, which

³⁸ Чувев Ф. Сто сорок бесед с Молотовым. М.: Терра, 1991. С. 212.

has often been cited in recent times. It is important to note that he wrote not only about resigning from the post of General Secretary but also about relinquishing his duties as a member of the Politburo, the Orgburo, and the Secretariat. This meant that he did not intend to accept any position other than that of General Secretary. His resignation was not accepted.

The faction formally institutionalized the previously existing Seven, to which candidate members of the Politburo were added with advisory votes, including Frunze. Members of the Seven agreed not to speak publicly against one another. As Zinoviev reported in July 1926 at a joint Plenum of the Central Committee and the Central Control Commission, “this factional group of seven met every Tuesday, sometimes more often... it drew up the agenda of the Politburo and discussed it in advance... It discussed not only issues on which we disagreed with Comrade Trotsky, but also questions concerning the entire life and activity of the Party”³⁹.

Even after this meeting of the Leninist faction, Stalin continued to use the albeit subtler methods to weaken the influence of Zinoviev and Kamenev. For example, he did not prevent the publication in October 1924 of Trotsky’s article *Lessons of October*. In it, the author recalled Zinoviev’s and Kamenev’s public disagreement in October 1917 with the armed uprising. A Central Committee Plenum — and accordingly a meeting of the Leninist faction — was scheduled for late October 1924, where Zinoviev and Kamenev could once again raise the question of the General Secretary.

Once again, the need arose for Frunze’s treatment. On October 2, 1924, the Politburo decided to grant a month-long leave to Frunze and Voroshilov, and a week later clarified the decision regarding Frunze on the basis of a letter from Semashko: “a) oblige Comrade Frunze to go abroad for treatment for the period indicated by the doctors; b) instruct Comrade Molotov to ascertain from Comrade Semashko the actual condition of Comrade Frunze”⁴⁰. Frunze did not go abroad, but neither did he take part in the October Plenum of the Central Committee.

³⁹ Объединенный пленум ЦК ЦКК ВКП(б) 14–23 июля 1926 г. Документы и материалы. М.: Научно-политическая книга, 2023. С. 625.

⁴⁰ РГАСПИ. Ф. 17. Оп. 3. Д. 467. Л. 6.

Zinoviev did not raise the issue of the General Secretary at the October Plenum. He chose a more reliable path to secure support for his proposal. In his speech at the Plenum, he emphasized the slogan he had advanced in the summer of 1924 (*Face to the Countryside!*), hoping to gain the backing of those who supported improving relations with the peasantry, such as Politburo members Bukharin, Rykov, and Chairman of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee Kalinin. Behind the scenes, Stalin accused Zinoviev of a “peasant deviation”, but later changed tactics and himself became an advocate of such improvements. As a result, the principled basis for opposing Stalin narrowed, and personal relations came to the forefront.

After the October Plenum, an intense campaign of criticism against Trotsky for *Lessons of October* unfolded. In a draft resolution prepared for the Seven by Zinoviev and Kamenev, Trotsky was accused of “deliberate distortion of party history”⁴¹. Kamenev went even further. In a draft resolution of a meeting of the Moscow party organization sent to the Seven on November 17, he accused Trotsky’s article of being “in its ideological content an attempt to substitute Trotskyism for Leninism”⁴². On this draft, Stalin wrote “Correct”⁴³. On November 26, *Pravda* published speeches by Kamenev and Stalin sharply criticizing Trotsky. In November–December, many resolutions from local party committees were sent to the Central Committee demanding that Trotsky be removed from the post of Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council and expelled from the Politburo.

By the end of December, Trotsky’s removal from this post had already been decided within the party leadership, and his natural successor was to be Frunze, who had become Deputy Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council in March 1924. At this point, Zinoviev and Kamenev came up with the idea of nominating Stalin for the post of Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council, while proposing Frunze, who enjoyed great authority in the country, as General Secretary. Zinoviev discussed this reshuffling of leadership positions in December at a closed meeting with

⁴¹ Известия ЦК КПСС. № 7. 1991. С. 159.

⁴² Ibid. С. 165.

⁴³ Ibid. С. 166.



XIV партконференция, апрель 1925 г. (М.В. Фрунзе второй слева).
From open sources

several leading members of the Central Committee, including the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Ukraine, Emmanuel Kviring.

Stalin learned of this idea. On January 5, 1925, Kviring wrote Stalin a letter that essentially confirmed the information he already possessed about plans to remove him from the post of General Secretary. He reported that at meetings of provincial party secretaries with military officials in Ukraine, Stalin's or Dzerzhinsky's candidacy had been mentioned for the position of Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council⁴⁴. Dzerzhinsky's name was, of course, merely a diversion. Later, the chairman of the Central Control Commission of the Ukrainian Communist Party, Dmitry Lebed, sent Stalin a memorandum reporting that at a meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party, "Kviring admitted that he had attended a closed meeting where the question of various personnel combinations was discussed, and in particular the main one"⁴⁵. Indeed, the question of choosing the General Secretary was the main issue, while whether to retain Trotsky in the Politburo was secondary.

Stalin drew conclusions from the information he had received. On January 3, the Politburo, in Frunze's presence and on the basis of a med-

⁴⁴ Известия ЦК КПСС. № 8. 1991. С. 180.

⁴⁵ РГАСПИ. Ф. 17. Оп. 171. Д. 48. Л. 15.

ical opinion, resolved: “To oblige Comrade Frunze to remain in bed from January 5 to 12, 1925, at Arkhangelskoye”⁴⁶. It was precisely during that week that a meeting of the Seven was scheduled to discuss candidates for the post of Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council, in which Frunze was thus deprived of the opportunity to participate.

Another conclusion was reflected in Stalin’s sudden and sharp change of position regarding the removal of Trotsky from the Politburo, which Zinoviev had proposed in his draft resolution of the Seven sent to Stalin on January 4. On January 5, Stalin, together with Bukharin, introduced an amendment to Zinoviev’s draft proposing that “Comrade Trotsky be relieved of the post of Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council and remain a member of the Politburo”⁴⁷. The justification for retaining Trotsky in the Politburo was unconvincing: “It is more advantageous for the Party to have Comrade Trotsky inside the Politburo as the seventh member than outside it”.

What was the real reason for Stalin’s suddenly displayed tolerance? Bukharin had indeed initially opposed removing Trotsky from the Politburo, as he advocated overcoming the split in the leadership. By aligning himself with Bukharin, Stalin gained an ally in discussions of his opponents’ proposals to remove him from the post of General Secretary. Another member of the Seven, Tomsy, also opposed Trotsky’s expulsion, as he wrote to Stalin on the eve of the January 6 meeting⁴⁸.

The question of Trotsky’s removal and the choice of a successor was discussed at the Seven meeting on January 6. In the memoirs of Alexander Boyarchikov, a supporter of the Trotskyist opposition, who recounts Kameney’s words, it is stated that at this meeting Zinoviev proposed Frunze for the post of General Secretary⁴⁹. At the same meeting, Kamenev proposed nominating Stalin for the position of Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council, as Molotov later recounted at the 14th Party Congress in December 1925⁵⁰. However, Kamenev lacked the determination to insist on his proposal once it became clear that the majority of the Seven did not

⁴⁶ РГАСПИ. Ф. 17. Оп. 3. Д. 483. Л. 5.

⁴⁷ Известия ЦК КПСС. № 8. 1991. С. 180.

⁴⁸ Ibid. С. 181.

⁴⁹ *Боярчиков А.* Воспоминания. М.: АСТ, 2003. С. 107.

⁵⁰ XIV съезд ВКП (б). Стенографический отчет. М.-Л.ГИЗ, 1926. С. 484.

support it. Molotov, in the same speech, said: “When Comrade Kamenev was asked why he did not raise the question of Comrade Stalin for direct discussion in the Central Committee, he replied that he had put forward this proposal only in a preliminary, exploratory manner”. Boyarchikov writes that Stalin spoke sharply at the meeting against his transfer from the post of General Secretary, declaring that “such a reshuffling would benefit only the enemies of the Party and would lead the Party to a split”⁵¹.

The Seven, by a majority vote, decided to nominate Frunze for the post of Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council while retaining Trotsky in the Politburo, as Stalin wrote in a telegram to Kvirring on January 11⁵². It is possible that if Frunze had been present at that meeting, then, alongside debates about Stalin’s conflict with Zinoviev and Kamenev, more attention would have been devoted to choosing the best candidate for General Secretary between Stalin and Frunze. In that case, the outcome of the vote might have been different.

Nevertheless, until the decision of the Seven was approved by the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Stalin’s opponents still hoped to achieve Trotsky’s removal from the Politburo there, since the Seven had taken as a basis Zinoviev’s draft resolution on Trotsky’s article. In it, Trotsky was accused of attempting to substitute Trotskyism for Leninism, and if such an accusation were accepted, it seemed strange to retain him in the highest party body.

It is indicative that even after receiving Stalin’s telegram, Kvirring answered with a coded message on January 12 with the results of a vote by participants in the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine on Trotsky’s removal from the Politburo: “I informed the Central Committee Plenum in a closed session of your telegram. By a majority of 27 to 2, the Plenum resolved to consider it necessary also to remove him from the Politburo”⁵³. This did not mean that members of the Ukrainian Central Committee sided with Zinoviev on the main issue of replacing Stalin as General Secretary. A Ukrainian party worker close to Stalin, A. Zaslavsky, reported to him: “There were two long

⁵¹ *Боярчиков А.* Воспоминания. М.: АСТ, 2003. С. 108.

⁵² *Известия ЦК КПСС.* № 8. 1991. С. 183.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

night sessions of the Central Committee here. They discussed the situation and whom to support. There were accusations against Kvirning that he had gone to Zinoviev and did not call on Stalin. Everyone agreed that Stalin should be supported”⁵⁴. Supporting Stalin did not contradict the vote to remove Trotsky from the Politburo, since the General Secretary criticized *Lessons of October* no less sharply than Zinoviev.

The hopes of Stalin’s opponents to secure Trotsky’s removal from the Politburo at the meeting of the Leninist faction on the eve of the joint Plenum of the Central Committee and the Central Control Commission, held from January 17 to 20, were not realized. As Zinoviev later wrote in his article *The History of the Creation of the Factional Center*, “at the faction meeting, Stalin proposed cautiously preparing Trotsky’s removal from the Politburo”⁵⁵, and this proposal was adopted by the faction. Zinoviev added that “Trotsky had already been removed from party leadership in August 1924, and his presence in the Politburo was regarded by the majority solely as a demonstration to the masses of a desire to involve Comrade Trotsky in work, although in reality no such desire existed”⁵⁶. The joint Plenum approved in full the resolution adopted by the faction, condemning Trotsky’s position, relieving him of his duties as Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council, but retaining him in the Politburo. In accordance with factional discipline, Zinoviev and Kamenev did not raise the proposal to expel Trotsky from the Politburo at the Central Committee Plenum. Frunze was confirmed as Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council, but it was not possible to include him in the Politburo while the previously established number of seven members remained in force.

After the Plenum decision, Zinoviev and Kamenev put forward a proposal to expand the Politburo. This would have made it possible to include Frunze in it even while keeping Trotsky in the top governing body. The proposal was rejected. The motives for the rejection, citing reports from Moscow, were described by members of the Central Committee and the Central Control Commission of the Communist Party of Ukraine in mid-February 1925 in a letter to the members of the

⁵⁴ РГАСПИ. Ф. 17. Оп. 171. Д. 48. Л. 29.

⁵⁵ РГАСПИ. Ф. 324. Оп. 1. Д. 324. Л. 11.

⁵⁶ Ibid. Л. 13.



Похороны М.В. Фрунзе.
From open sources

Seven. In it they wrote: “We do not consider it expedient at the present time to carry out the proposed expansion of the Politburo, since such an expansion threatens to turn the Politburo into a less efficient body than it needs to be, and, on the other hand, a broad composition of the Politburo will inevitably weaken the significance of the Central Committee Plenum, which cannot be allowed... We see no reasons that would prompt comrades Kamenev and Zinoviev to agitate against Stalin and the other members of the leading group. We consider especially harmful the talk about switching responsibilities”⁵⁷.

The essence lay in these last words: the replacement of Stalin by Frunze as General Secretary must not be allowed. Stalin did not want to permit Frunze’s transition from candidate to full member of the Politburo, which would have become possible with its expansion. Apparently, he believed that since Frunze had agreed to Zinoviev’s proposal to nominate him for the post of General Secretary — and such a nomination would have been impossible without his consent — then, as a Politburo member, he would support Stalin’s opponents.

Later, at the 14th Party Congress in December 1925, Tomsky recalled how Zinoviev and Kamenev had proposed changing the composition of the Politburo: “This Politburo does not follow them, so it is necessary to

⁵⁷ Известия ЦК КПСС. № 8 1991. С. 189, 190.

create another Politburo. Of course, not simply re-elect it, but expand it, i.e., supplement it... How did we react? We rejected it — that's all"⁵⁸.

Trotsky writes in his book on Stalin that “Zinoviev and Kamenev later assured me that Frunze was inclined in their favor against Stalin”⁵⁹. It seems more likely, however, that he would have tried to prevent the conflict from escalating and to achieve a compromise. But it was precisely compromise that Stalin did not want. The decisive role in rejecting the proposal to appoint Frunze as General Secretary was played by Bukharin, Rykov, and Tomsky, who were part of the Seven. Their personal relations with the General Secretary were better than with Zinoviev and Kamenev, and the choice of Frunze would have been perceived as a victory for Stalin's opponents.

Frunze successfully carried out his duties as People's Commissar and candidate member of the Politburo, and no decisions about his treatment were made. However, by August 1925, relations between Stalin and his opponents began to deteriorate again. Around this time, there was a mysterious car accident involving Frunze, and in early September Stalin insisted that Frunze come to Mukhalatka. Initially, Frunze had planned to go to Yalta, where his wife was being treated for tuberculosis. But the General Secretary, who was vacationing in Mukhalatka, sent Molotov a coded message on September 5 stating: “Persuade Frunze to vacation in Mukhalatka. It is better here”⁶⁰.

Stalin wanted to make it more difficult for Zinoviev and Kamenev to maintain contact with the People's Commissar, and at the same time to speak with Frunze in a calm setting in order to convince him not to support them. For Stalin, it was important that Frunze not repeat his consent to be nominated for the post of General Secretary at the upcoming Party Congress scheduled for December 1925, where Stalin planned to secure a final victory over his opponents.

The conversations with Frunze in Mukhalatka apparently convinced Stalin that he was inclined toward compromise in the ongoing intra-party struggle. Therefore, it was necessary to continue using doc-

⁵⁸ XIV съезд ВКП(б). Стенографический отчет. М.-Л.ГИЗ, 1926. С. 283.

⁵⁹ Троицкий Л. Сталин. Книга вторая. М.: Эксмо, 2011. С. 261.

⁶⁰ РГАСПИ. Ф. 82. Оп. 2. Д. 1420. Л. 68.

tors. The Politburo decision of September 17, 1925, mentioned above, was adopted by four members: in addition to Stalin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Trotsky were present. These were his opponents, who seriously believed that Stalin's proposal was motivated solely by concern for Frunze's health. They failed to take into account that Stalin might give instructions to doctors not for medical reasons but for political ones. As a result, the Politburo resolution paved the way for an operation, although it only prescribed following doctors' recommendations, and there was **no mention at that time of the possibility of a risky surgery.**

The subsequent course of the struggle for power showed that Stalin was right to fear Frunze's participation in the upcoming Central Committee Plenum. Stalin and the majority of the Seven that supported him intensified their efforts to limit Kamenev's influence, banning on September 30 the publication of an article he had written for exaggerating the kulak threat. The next day, Zinoviev, Kamenev, People's Commissar of Finance Sokolnikov, and Lenin's widow Nadezhda Krupskaya ("the Four") sent a secret letter to the Politburo. Among other things, it criticized the Politburo majority for supporting Bukharin, who, in the authors' view, underestimated the political consequences of his slogan about the kulaks growing into socialism and his appeal to them with the call "enrich yourselves".

Immediately afterward, Bukharin proposed that Krupskaya meet with representatives of the majority, and she agreed. However, a few hours later, members and candidate members of the Politburo, including Frunze, sent her a short letter dated October 1 refusing the meeting. In it they wrote: "Dear Comrade, in view of the fact that you have presented us with a fait accompli and signed a factional platform attacking the Central Committee without making the slightest attempt to first speak with the supporters of the Central Committee majority, we regret to state that the meeting you arranged with Comrade Bukharin has thereby been rendered unnecessary at the present time"⁶¹.

Frunze signed this generally polite and restrained letter because he supported preliminary compromise agreements. However, just two days later, he did not sign the detailed response of nine members and candidate members of the Politburo to the declaration of the Four, which

⁶¹ РГАСПИ. Ф. 17. Оп. 171. Д. 55. Л. 30.

contained sharp attacks against it. In that response, their document was described as “thoroughly hypocritical and false”, the meaning of which amounted to “a disguised demand for a regrouping of forces within the Central Committee, with the threat of appealing to the entire party through an open discussion”⁶².

Thus, the majority embarked on a path of confrontation. It was not about the substance of the disagreements. The Four were wrong on the important issue of their attitude toward the well-to-do (kulak) peasantry. But Stalin’s views did not differ greatly from theirs. What mattered most to him was the opportunity to use their mistakes to weaken his opponents’ influence, and this was confirmed by the meetings of the Leninist faction that began on October 5. As is often the case in political struggle, both sides made inaccuracies and exaggerations. During the faction meeting, a very sharp debate unfolded, and on the night of October 6, Dzerzhinsky wrote a letter to Stalin with harsh attacks on Zinoviev and Kamenev, accusing them of the desire to split the party. On October 6, Rykov, who chaired the faction meeting, read this letter aloud with Stalin’s approval. After that, Zinoviev and his supporters left the meeting hall.

Mikoyan, recalling this faction meeting, wrote: “For all those members of the Central Committee who wanted to preserve unity, their departure had the effect of a shock. The most sensitive and emotional, Sergo Ordzhonikidze, even burst into tears. He spoke out against Rykov and, with the words ‘What are you doing?’ rushed out of the hall into another room. I followed him to calm him down”⁶³. Members of the Central Committee demanded that a group be sent to Zinoviev inviting him to return; Mikoyan was among those sent. Those who had left agreed to come back.

Stalin, sensing the mood of the majority, proposed the following resolution on the matter: “1. The faction considers Comrade Dzerzhinsky’s letter incorrect in substance and unacceptable in tone. 2. The faction considers that Comrade Stalin acted incorrectly in not first presenting Comrade Dzerzhinsky’s letter to the Seven. 3. The faction establishes a Presidium of three, including a representative from the comrades who left”⁶⁴.

⁶² Ibid. А. 117.

⁶³ Микоян А. Так было. М.: Вагриус, 1999. С. 267.

⁶⁴ РГАСПИ. Ф. 17. Оп. 171. Д. 56. Л. 63.



Сборник памяти М.В. Фрунзе. 1938 г.
From open sources

As a result of discussions of disagreements within the Seven, on October 8 the faction adopted a compromise resolution. Stalin had no intention of implementing this resolution and deliberately continued, during the preparations for the Congress and at the Congress itself, a line aimed at removing Zinoviev and Kamenev, as well as their associates, from the leadership. Their defeat was recorded in the resolutions of the Congress. Yet only a few months after the Congress ended, Stalin effectively began to move away from the course implied by those resolutions, seeking a gradual curtailment of the NEP and the attainment of unchecked power.

This story shows that among the members of the Central Committee there were many who wanted to preserve unity and were prepared to resist Stalin's efforts to remove from leadership those who did not owe their positions to him. But this group within the Central Committee lacked an informal leader with the firm will necessary to ensure the implementation of adopted decisions. Such a leader could have been Frunze. Many who worked with him noted his gentleness and tact, but these qualities were combined with a strong and resolute character. His long-time adjutant and assistant Sergei Sirotinsky noted: "Frunze, who outwardly gave many the impression of a mild man, concealed an iron will within"⁶⁵. Around

⁶⁵ О Михаиле Фрунзе: Воспоминания, очерки, статьи современников. М.: Политиздат, 1985. С. 199.

this highly authoritative figure, all those in the party leadership who disagreed with Stalin's ambition to unchecked power could have united.

Frunze believed it necessary to observe party discipline; therefore, he followed the Politburo's decision to comply with doctors' prescriptions. But when it came to discussing decisions not yet adopted, he took a principled position. This was the case, for example, at the session of the 12th Congress of the Party section on the national question in April 1923, where he argued with Stalin.

Stalin understood people well and knew about Frunze's firm character, which manifested itself both in discussions of fundamental issues and in his aspiration to find compromise solutions. As we have seen, he tried, with the help of doctors, to prevent Frunze from attending those meetings where his clearly expressed position could influence wavering participants in the event of disagreements between the General Secretary and his opponents. Of course, one might say that in all these cases there were flare-ups of his illness on the eve of meetings, but it is difficult to believe in repeated coincidences.

Perhaps replacing Stalin as General Secretary at the first organizational Plenum of the Central Committee after the 14th Congress would not have been possible, even if there had been no operation and Frunze had taken part in the Congress and the subsequent Plenum. But as People's Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs and chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council, he would almost certainly have been included in the Politburo, especially since its membership had been expanded to nine people and included Voroshilov, a loyal associate of Stalin who replaced him as chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council.

Stalin sought to prevent the emergence of an independent and strong politician within the Politburo during the expansion of this highest body, and for this it was necessary to deprive Frunze of his positions. He knew from doctors that an operation was associated with the risk of worsening the patient's health. In the previously cited conclusion of the medical council of October 24, 1925, it was stated that relapses were possible even after the operation and that further treatment would be required. With such a likely outcome, the operation could help convince other members of the Politburo of the need to remove Frunze from active political activity on health grounds.

Ivan Grekov, a member of the medical council who assisted Rozanov during the operation, gave an interview to newspapers two days after the People's Commissar's death. In it, contrary to the facts, he claimed that "Frunze himself wished to undergo the operation, as he considered his condition to deprive him of the ability to continue responsible work"⁶⁶. This fabrication corresponded to Stalin's line, which had been communicated to the members of the medical council.

The implementation of Stalin's plan was facilitated by the system of power that had taken shape by that time. Although the Politburo did not issue a decision to carry out Frunze's operation, the strong-willed General Secretary, directing all organizational work, had the ability, on the one hand, to oblige doctors to give the desired recommendations and, on the other hand, by referring to those recommendations, to persuade other members of the Politburo not to oppose the risky operation.

Stalin likely feared that the inclusion of the People's Commissar in the Politburo might hinder the realization of his plans to defeat his opponents within the party leadership and to achieve effectively unchecked power by ensuring the presence in the Central Committee and the Politburo of party figures dependent on him. The election of Frunze would have altered the balance of forces within the Politburo. A strong-willed politician would have been capable of uniting those who disagreed with Stalin's course toward the gradual curtailment of the NEP — a course he had been pursuing since mid-1926. As subsequent developments without Frunze showed, Stalin's opponents within the Politburo, who lacked firmness of character and the ability to work with people of differing views, were unable to secure a majority in the Central Committee or to oppose his course.

Frunze's views on broader economic issues can be judged from his speech at the literary commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in March 1925. At that time, he spoke about the contradictions between the working class and the peasantry, which, in his opinion, were "better not sharpened, but softened". Developing this idea, Frunze stated: "The line of administrative pressure and coercion can and should give way to the economic influence of the state, embod-

⁶⁶ Izvestiya. 3 November 1925.

ied in our state economy and cooperation (cooperative businesses). We can now, in all areas, exert far less pressure than we did before”⁶⁷.

It is worth noting that Stalin expressed deep regret over Frunze’s death, seemingly sincere. However, the presence of such human qualities did not prevent him from insisting on the operation, knowing the risks associated with it, since considerations of the struggle for power were more important to him.

It is the task of medical specialists to determine what errors were made during the operation. What is indisputable is that Frunze was in a working condition on the eve of it, as evidenced by his business meetings. Consequently, there was no need for the urgent operation insisted upon by Stalin. It would have been possible to carry out earlier Politburo decisions to send him abroad for treatment or to invite renowned foreign specialists for consultation. With Frunze’s death, the possibility was lost of uniting around a strong and charismatic figure all supporters of an alternative to Stalin’s course.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests.



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