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## Review Article

# Debates over the 1949 ‘Leningrad Affair’ in the Contemporary Russian Popular Press

ALISA AMOSOVA & DAVID BRANDENBERGER

Sergei Kremlev, *Zachem ubili Stalina? Prestuplenie veka*. Moscow: Yauza, Eskmo, 2008, 480pp., 237 rubles.

V. D. Kuznechevskii, *‘Leningradskoe delo’: Naivnaya popytka sozdat’ etnicheski chistoe russkoe pravitel’svo byla utoplена v krovi*. Moscow: Rossiiskii institut strategicheskikh issledovani, 2013, 84pp., 207 rubles.

Sigizmund Mironin, *Stalinskii poryadok*. Moscow: Algoritm, 2007, 272pp., 126 rubles.

Elena Prudnikova, *1953—Rokovoi god sovetskoi istorii*. Moscow: Yauza, Eksimo, 2008, 416pp.

Svyatoslav Rybas, *Moskovskie protiv piterskikh: Leningradskoe delo Stalina*. Moscow: Algoritm, 2013, 256pp., 231 rubles.

ON 30 SEPTEMBER 1950, A HEARING WAS HELD AT THE OFFICERS’ HOUSE on Liteinyi Prospect in Leningrad that decided the fate of nine members of the Stalin-era political elite. In the dock stood associates of the late A. A. Zhdanov, most of them drawn from the Leningrad party organisation. Toward midnight, the Military College of the USSR Supreme Court condemned six of them to death—A. A. Kuznetsov, N. A. Voznesenskii, M. I. Rodionov, P. S. Popkov, Ya. F. Kapustin and P. G. Lazutin. Three others—I. M. Turko, T. V. Zakrzhevskaya and F. E. Mikheev—were sentenced to long prison terms.<sup>1</sup> The last major political purge of the Stalin era,

<sup>1</sup>Prigovor Voennoi kollegii Verkhovnogo suda SSSR tsentral’noi gruppe obvinyaemykh po “Leningradskomu delu” (30 sentyabrya 1950 g.), in Kulegin (2009, pp. 59–61). A. A. Kuznetsov was a former Central Committee party secretary; N. A. Voznesenskii had headed Gosplan; M. I. Rodionov had headed the RSFSR government; P. S. Popkov and Ya. F. Kapustin had been first and second secretaries of the Leningrad party organisation; P. G. Lazutin had headed the Leningrad city executive committee; I. M. Turko had been first secretary of the Yaroslavl’ regional party organisation; T. V. Zakrzhevskaya had headed the Leningrad party organisation’s department of party, trade union and *komsomol* organs; and F. E. Mikheev had been the party organisation’s chief of staff.

the ‘Leningrad Affair’ affected not only the Leningrad party organisation, but other regional elites from Novgorod to Crimea. It also resulted in a major witch hunt within Gosplan and the governing structures of the Russian Federation. Ultimately, the effects of this purge were wide-ranging, destroying scores of lives, careers and families and undermining the special status that Leningrad and its party organisation had enjoyed since 1917.<sup>2</sup>

Despite widespread awareness of the impact that the Leningrad Affair had on Soviet society, the purge itself has long been shrouded in mystery. Until the last years of the communist period, Soviet inquiries into the Leningrad Affair were frustrated by an unacknowledged official taboo on the subject. For this reason, much of the earliest research on this purge was pioneered by Sovietologists working in the West. Indeed, by the time that the first local studies of the Leningrad Affair were allowed into print in the USSR in the late 1980s,<sup>3</sup> two generations of research in the West had established a number of interpretive positions on the subject. Perhaps the earliest work treated the Leningrad Affair as fallout from broader internal party disagreements over ideology, economics and the post-Stalin succession within the party leadership. Many of the authors writing in this vein tended to downplay Leningrad’s specific role in provoking the purge and identify its victims as former allies of Zhdanov who had lost out in a power struggle with G. M. Malenkov and L. P. Beriia.<sup>4</sup>

Other commentators argued that the purge was precipitated by I. V. Stalin’s perception that the Leningrad party organisation had grown too independent during the war. According to this argument, the Leningrad Affair was triggered by allegations fomented by Malenkov accusing the Leningrad party organisation of falsifying election results at a December 1948 party conference and holding an unauthorised January 1949 all-union trade fair.<sup>5</sup> Some added rumours of widespread corruption and clientelism to the Leningraders’ supposed sins.<sup>6</sup>

Still others ask whether the Leningrad party organisation might itself have provoked the purge. Had it developed a distinctive leadership style during the war that now proved incompatible with postwar Stalinism?<sup>7</sup> Were the allegations of corruption true and did they testify to levels of abuse that were incommensurate with that found in other regional party organisations after the war?<sup>8</sup> Were Kuznetsov, Voznesenskii and their comrades trying to

<sup>2</sup> Although F. R. Kozlov, the Khrushchev-era first secretary of the Leningrad party organisation, announced in 1957 that ‘tens of thousands of people’ had been affected by the purge, V. A. Kutuzov has corrected this figure downward: compare Plenum (1958, p. 91) and Kutuzov (1999, pp. 378–80). For recent work on the victims of the purge, see Mikheev (2012, 2013, 2015) and Smirnov (2014).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Kutuzov (1988a, 1988b); Afanas’ev (1988); Zimarina (1988); and Sidorovskii (1988a, 1988b).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Conquest (1961, pp. 101–11); Salisbury (1969, pp. 571–83); McCagg (1978, pp. 134–42); and Hahn (1982). Perhaps the most recent adherents of this line are Harris (2008); Pyzhikov (1999, 2001, pp. 92–96); Vakser (2005, p. 122); Khevnyuk and Gorlitskii (2011, pp. 99–100); and Kelly (2011, pp. 103–22).

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, McCagg (1978, pp. 126–31, 135–36); ‘O tak nazyvaiemom “Leningradskom dele”’, *Izvestiya TsK KPSS*, 2, 1988, p. 128; Zimarina (1988, p. 6); Demidov (1989, pp. 145–46); Kutuzov (1989, pp. 55–56); Demidov and Kutuzov (1990, pp. 63–64); Zhukov (1995, p. 34); Fedoseev (1996, p. 24); Pikhoya (1998, pp. 65–66); Parrish (1996, p. 216); Mikoyan (1999, p. 567); Zubkova (1999, p. 104); Konstantinov (2000, p. 6); Granin (2002, p. 164); Voznesenskii (2009, pp. 26–27); Shul’gina (2009, pp. 281–89); Bidlack and Lomagin (2012, pp. 70, 76); Amosova (2014, pp. 178–80); and Boldovskii (2014, pp. 212, 214–19).

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Demidov (1989, p. 162); Kutuzov (1989, p. 62); and Zubkova (1999, p. 106).

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Kutuzov (2009, p. 49); Amosova (2014, pp. 170–71); and Boldovskii (2014).

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Starkov (2002, p. 87); Tromly (2004, pp. 707–29); and Shul’gina (2009, pp. 281–89).

transform the Leningrad party organisation into a more powerful republican or all-union institution?<sup>9</sup> Is there any substance to the rumours that Kuznetsov, Popkov and the others aspired to found either a Russian Communist Party or a Central Committee Bureau to support Russian republican autonomy?<sup>10</sup>

Resolving this interpretive controversy has long been complicated by the halting declassification of postwar archival documentation on high-level decision making. Today, access restrictions on materials associated with the 1949–1952 purge continue to impede research, despite the fact that inquiries into other bouts of state violence such as the 1937–1938 Great Terror have become routine. This in turn has led to a peculiar situation in which popular mass-market authors have come to occupy an unusually prominent place in contemporary debates over the Leningrad Affair. This review article subjects the most recent contributions of this genre to special scrutiny and evaluation.

S. S. Mironin is the *nom de plume* of a contemporary author best known for his books on the nature of the Stalinist system. In these works, he focuses frequently on the Leningrad Affair, most notably in his best-seller *Stalinskii poryadok* (pp. 108–32).<sup>11</sup> According to Mironin, the execution of the Leningraders was a direct result of their systematic abuse of power. First, Mironin accuses Kuznetsov, Popkov and Kapustin of falsifying the results of elections held at a joint regional and city party conference on 25 December 1948, in order to retain control over the local party organisation (pp. 112–13). Second, Mironin indicts the Leningrad leadership for convening an all-union trade fair in January 1949 ‘without the special agreement of the central organs’ (pp. 113–15). Third, Mironin argues that Kapustin and perhaps other Leningraders were engaged in international espionage (pp. 116–17). Fourth, Mironin alleges that Kuznetsov, Popkov and their comrades in arms aspired to expand the influence of their party organisation, ‘make the Russian Federation more independent within the context of the USSR and raise the role of Leningrad ... transferring some of the central government’s functions to the “northern capital”’ (p. 123). Such delusions of grandeur also apparently led the Leningraders to violate the postwar Five-Year Plan by appropriating more than they were officially allotted by Gosplan. Voznesenskii, the head of the latter state planning agency, apparently aided the Leningraders in their economic machinations (pp. 124–27).

Mironin’s argument about the Leningraders’ self-interest and hunger for power reflects aspects of the existing literature on the Leningrad Affair. But although Mironin claims to base his account on a variety of authoritative sources, his footnotes privilege an odd mix of largely irrelevant memoirs, dated newspaper articles and tendentious, internet-based publications. This leads him to make some predictably peculiar claims. For instance, Mironin contends that in December 1948, ‘Popkov, Kapustin and Kuznetsov rigged the party election protocols for executives at the joint elections to the city and regional conference’ in order to retain their

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Pikhoya (1998, p. 66); Zubkova (1999, pp. 102–10); Zhirnov (2000, pp. 55–56); and Pyzhikov (2001, pp. 89–104).

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Sulzberger (1956, pp. 47–48); Khrushchev (1999, pp. 2, 21, 23–29); Avtorkhanov (1992, p. 760); Afanas’ev (1988, p. 2); ‘O tak nazyvaemom “Leningradskom dele”’, *Izvestiya TsK KPSS*, 2, 1988, pp. 127–28; Demidov (1989, pp. 146–47); Zimarina (1988, p. 7); Kutuzov (1989, p. 56); Fedoseev (1996, p. 25); Pikhoya (1998, p. 66); Mikoyan (1999, p. 567); Konstantinov (2000, p. 6); Sobchak (1999, p. 91); Kostyrchenko (2001, p. 288; 2000, p. 89); Brandenberger (2004, pp. 241–55); Baigushev (2005, pp. 172–78); and Shul’gina (2009, pp. 281–89).

<sup>11</sup> This chapter was republished without footnotes in Martirosyan (2007, pp. 82–166) and Mironin (2008, pp. 254–85).

grip on power (p. 113). This accusation against Kuznetsov makes little sense, as he had been promoted to the post of Central Committee secretary some two years earlier and no longer stood for election in Leningrad. What's more, there is some question as to whether Popkov and Kapustin actually 'rigged' the election in the first place. It is true, of course, that during the party conference vote, 23 ballots were left uncounted—four votes cast against Popkov, 15 against Kapustin, two against Lazutin and two more against G. F. Badaev. That said, these ballots should be seen in the context of more than 1,000 votes cast in favour of Popkov's team. In other words, the fact that the Leningraders were re-elected to their posts has never been in doubt. What's more, several scholars argue that in such cases of overwhelming electoral victory, it was common party practice to report the vote tally as having been unanimous. So it is not entirely clear that the December 1948 tally was as scandalous as Mironin claims (Demidov & Kutuzov 1990, p. 65).

Determined to demonstrate the Leningraders' abuse of authority, Mironin then turns to the controversial January 1949 trade fair. Here he writes: 'Kuznetsov, Rodionov and Popkov not only did not receive permission to hold a trade fair, but they did not even inform the Central Committee and Politburo of their plans in this regard' (p. 114). This deception, according to Mironin, was motivated in part by the need to conceal the 'embezzlement of state stockpiles and unjustified expenses' (p. 115). Both of these claims turn out to be questionable, however. First, the trade fair was officially authorised by an 11 November 1948 decision of the Bureau of the USSR Council of Ministers. Second, the fair resulted in the sale of 500 million rubles' worth of industrial goods and the conclusion of cooperative enterprise contracts worth over 650 million rubles.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, in Mironin's haste to identify concrete instances of malfeasance on the part of the Leningrad party leadership, he misses the opportunity to make a more sophisticated argument regarding these 'irregularities'. It was probably not so much actual illegal activity on the part of the Leningraders that provoked Stalin's wrath as it was allegations of such wrongdoing, aggravated behind the scenes by rivals such as Malenkov.

Equally unproven is Mironin's treatment of the accusation of espionage levelled at Kapustin. According to what Mironin describes as 'verifiable information received by USSR State Security during the summer of 1949' (p. 116), Kapustin had been recruited by British intelligence in 1935 or 1936 while enrolled in a training course at the Metropolitan Vickers plant in Manchester. According to Mironin, Kapustin readily confessed to spying for Great Britain after his arrest in mid-1949 (p. 117). There are reasons, however, to question the reliability of such testimony. First, according to Kapustin's son (who was given access to his father's classified case file), the charge of espionage was based on the fact that Kapustin had spent time abroad, rather than any concrete evidence of spying.<sup>13</sup> Second, the fact that Kapustin confessed to the charges proves very little, inasmuch as such confessions were routinely extracted by means of coercion and torture.<sup>14</sup>

Returning to his claims of corruption, Mironin contends that 'as the Leningraders acquired powerful positions, they brought with them acquaintances, co-workers and

<sup>12</sup> 'Zakrylas' Vserossiiskaya optovaya yarmarka', *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 21 January 1949, p. 4. The central press reported that the total value of all contracts signed surpassed a billion rubles after only four days of trading (Vel'mintskii 1949, p. 2).

<sup>13</sup> Interview conducted by A. A. Amosova with A. Ya. Kapustin and G. F. Mikheev, 15 November 2013, St Petersburg.

<sup>14</sup> Interview conducted by D. Brandenberger with L. A. Voznesenskii, 3 June 2015, Moscow.

friends from home and placed them in key government and party posts' (p. 120). The end result of this, according to Mironin, was the construction of a powerful patron–client network in clear violation of party rules. But such clientelism was common practice within the Soviet establishment and the Leningraders made little attempt to hide their actions in this regard. Indeed, Popkov boasted at the above-mentioned party conference on 22 December 1948 that his organisation had promoted some 12,000 people to executive posts 'including 800 outside the region'.<sup>15</sup> What is more, Stalin looked favourably upon the Leningrad party organisation during the early postwar years and encouraged the promotion of its cadres; according to A. I. Mikoyan, Stalin depended on Kuznetsov and Voznesenskii to such an extent that he even dubbed them his likely successors (Mikoyan 1999, p. 565). So what Mironin interprets as mafia-like patronage and influence peddling is probably better characterised as part of the normative everyday governing practices of the postwar Soviet elite.

Like Mironin, E. A. Prudnikova is a contemporary author known for her sympathetic treatment of the Stalin period. And much like her colleague, in her book *1953—Rokovoi god sovetskoi istorii*, Prudnikova defends the purge of the Leningrad party organisation and denies that the case was based on trumped-up charges (pp. 254–85).<sup>16</sup> Instead, she alleges that claims of the Leningraders' innocence date back to 1954, when N. S. Khrushchev had them exonerated in order to conceal his own complicity in the affair. According to Prudnikova, not only did Khrushchev engineer the Leningraders' rehabilitation, but he then had the purge's paper trail destroyed to cover their tracks (pp. 254–55).

What, according to Prudnikova, lay at the heart of this conspiracy? Beginning in the late 1930s, Kuznetsov apparently built the Leningrad party organisation into a political machine that he ran with an iron hand (pp. 259–61). According to Prudnikova, many of his initiatives, from the election fraud and illegal trade fair to his plans with Rodionov to form a Russian communist party, should be seen as a clear challenge to Stalin and the central party leadership (pp. 255–63). After all, not only did the Leningraders publicly profess their political ambitions, but they systematically violated party rules in order to advance their agenda. Prudnikova ultimately claims that had the Leningraders not caused their own downfall in 1949, they would have followed through with their plans to form a Russian communist party and challenged the central party apparatus in much the same way that B. N. Yel'tsin did between 1990 and 1991 (pp. 256–63). In a related television programme in 2011, Prudnikova drew a similar analogy between the Leningraders' ostensibly separatist plans and the December 1991 Belovezhsk accords that dissolved the USSR.<sup>17</sup>

As forcefully argued as Prudnikova's case is, virtually all of it is based on a rather fanciful reading of the historical sources. Indeed, at times, Prudnikova's conspiratorial assumptions and her claims about the destruction of the historical record seem self-serving, designed

<sup>15</sup> 'Otchet Leningradskikh oblastnogo i gorodskogo komitetov VKP(b): Doklad sekretarya Leningradskikh oblastnogo i gorodskogo komitetov VKP(b) tov. P.S. Popkova na X oblastnoi i VIII gorodskoi konferentsii VKP(b)', *Propaganda i agitatsiya*, 24, 1948, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> This chapter also appears in Prudnikova (2011, pp. 260–92).

<sup>17</sup> 'Sekretnye materialy: Istoriya odnogo zagovora ("Leningradskoe delo")', directed by A. Deryugina, MIR TV, broadcast 28 July 2011.



to allow her to ‘spin’ the story in any direction she chooses.<sup>18</sup> This opportunism is clearly visible in her discussion of Kuznetsov’s plans to form a Russian communist party, which she bases on a single ambiguous passage from a February 1949 speech (by Popkov) and its passing similarity to the role that the Russian communist party played in the Soviet collapse in 1990–1991 (pp. 262–63). Prudnikova’s inflated claims are also visible in her treatment of the 1948 elections, the 1949 trade fair and Kapustin’s and Voznesenskii’s supposed involvement in international espionage.

Even more hyperbolic than Prudnikova is S. Kremlev (the pen name of the author S. T. Brezkun), who has written a number of books that all touch upon the Leningrad Affair in their broader defence of Stalin and Beriia.<sup>19</sup> According to Kremlev, in his book, *Zachem ubili Stalina? Prestuplenie veka*, there is little doubt that Kuznetsov, Voznesenskii and their comrades-in-arms were planning to take power in the USSR, either by challenging Stalin or waiting until after his death. Like Prudnikova, Kremlev sees evidence of this intent within the Leningraders’ supposed designs for a Russian communist party (pp. 99–110). He also connects the Leningraders’ other ‘crimes’ to this central plot—the all-Russian trade fair, for instance, was apparently a ploy dreamed up by Kuznetsov to allow party officials from all over the Russian Federation to gather together without setting off alarm bells in Moscow (p. 108).

Although Kremlev quotes at length from several published archival documents linked to the Leningrad Affair, these sources do not support his larger claims about the emergence of a separatist faction in the northern capital. Like Prudnikova, Kremlev bolsters his specific case for a Russian nationalist conspiracy in Leningrad by means of analogy, although his reference point is to the equally murky circumstances surrounding the 1930 Syrtsov–Lominadze Affair (pp. 105–7). But as with Prudnikova’s tenuous link to Yel’tsin’s Russian communist party during *glasnost*, Kremlev’s historical analogy proves little aside from a fleeting resemblance between otherwise unconnected events.

Although Mironin, Prudnikova and Kremlev dominated discussion of the Leningrad Affair in the popular press for much of the past decade, they have recently been challenged by S. Yu. Rybas, who attempts to offer a fresh point of view on the postwar purge. The author of historical novels during the Soviet period, Rybas turned during the 1990s to historical biography and earned considerable notoriety for publishing a volume on Stalin within a famous series on the ‘Lives of Notable People’.<sup>20</sup> More recently, he has written the book reviewed here, *Moskovskie protiv peterskikh: Leningradskoe delo Stalina*, the first major single-author monograph on the Leningrad Affair. Despite the book’s narrow title and Rybas’s connection of the affair to a power struggle within Stalin’s entourage, the book surveys a surprisingly broad set of explanations for the purge, ranging from state building and international affairs ‘to

<sup>18</sup> Prudnikova exaggerates the destruction of archival material and misattributes it to Khrushchev. Instead, evidence suggests that it was Malenkov who succeeded in destroying a limited amount of material in the mid-1950s. See ‘O tak nazyvaemom “Leningradskom dele”’, *Izvestiya TsK KPSS*, 2, 1988, pp. 133–34. Much of the rest of the purge’s paper trail survives to the present day at repositories such as the Archive of the President of the Russian Federation (Russian acronym: APRF), the Central Archive of the Federal Security Service (TsA FSB), the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI), the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), the Central State Archive of Historico-Political Records of St Petersburg (TsGAIPD SPb) and the Archive of the Administration of the Federal Security Service for St Petersburg and Leningrad Oblast’ (Arkhiv UFSB SPb), where key documents still await declassification.

<sup>19</sup> Kremlev lays out the same thesis in a number of other books, often reprinting the same stretches of text, for example, Kremlev (2008, pp. 619–26; 2011, pp. 240–47) as well as the book reviewed here.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Rybas (1984, 1988, 2000, 2003b, 2011, 2014).

the rivalry between central and regional powers, including the national elites and particularly the Russian leadership' (p. 4).

Rybas contends that the standoff between Zhdanov and Malenkov was fundamentally ideological—it was, he claims, a clash between Zhdanov's 'Russian' agenda (pp. 46–47, 104–8) and Malenkov's more traditional defence of the Soviet establishment (pp. 48–49, 132–33). Disappointingly, however, Rybas fails to develop this striking thesis and instead muddies the water by spending a lot of time on other explanations for the purge. Did Zhdanov owe his ascendancy to his defence of 'Russianness' or to Malenkov's involvement in other major postwar scandals? Were the Leningraders eventually undermined by Kuznetsov's and Voznesenskii's shortcomings as leaders, or were they brought down by rivals such as Malenkov and V. S. Abakumov?

But it is not only on the macro level that Rybas fails to resolve important contradictions in his account. Rybas is likewise inconsistent on the level of more basic argumentation. He struggles, for instance, to make sense of the Leningrad cadres whom he anachronistically refers to as 'Petersburgers' (*Piterskie*). Initially, Rybas characterises Zhdanov's former team in flattering terms, contending that it was composed of dynamic, idealistic true believers. 'They were socialist modernisation's best cadres', he writes, 'highly educated, patriotic and battle-tested in the war' (p. 11). Later, however, the same individuals are inexplicably reclassified as corrupt and complicit in a lawless system of patronage and protection rackets—a mafia rather than a meritocracy (pp. 139, 171–73).

Rybas likewise struggles to resolve the degree to which he believes that the Leningraders contributed to their own demise. For instance, after describing them as thoroughly criminalised, Rybas declares confidently that their abuse of power—'vote rigging, corruption, unilateralism in all-union economic issues and a bid to chop the state up according to nationality'—qualified them for the firing squad (p. 174). Seventy pages later, however, Rybas appears less convinced of the Leningraders' guilt and refers to the affair as having been 'fabricated by Abakumov and his accomplices' (p. 230).

Part of the reason for such inconsistencies stems from Rybas's writing style, which relies heavily on summaries of other people's work. Indeed, he sometimes descends into little more than a thematically-organised slurry of quotations, running for paragraphs at a time. Archival sources, academic studies and more popular accounts are used indiscriminately, without rhyme or reason. Such an approach interferes with Rybas's attempt to convey a consistent analytical perspective and distinguish his own authorial point of view from that of the other authors he cites. The end result is an inconsistent, inconclusive book that adds little to the existing literature.

If Rybas fails to offer a clear counterpoint to Mironin, Prudnikova and Kremlev, his interest in the 'Russian question' finds more systematic reflection in the work of another recent commentator on the Leningrad Affair—V. D. Kuznechevskii. Kuznechevskii makes his thesis quite clear in the long, overwrought subtitle of his otherwise short book reviewed here: *'Leningradskoe delo': Naivnaya popytka sozdat' etnicheski chistoe russkoe pravitel'stvo byla utoplena v krovi*. Adopting a revisionist position in regard to Mironin, Prudnikova and Kremlev, Kuznechevskii asserts that many of the factors that have traditionally been held to have precipitated the purge did not actually contribute to the bloodletting. The falsification of local party elections was minor; the trade fair was not actually illegal; the problems at Gosplan were largely the result of a misunderstanding over bookkeeping practices; and so



on. Kuznechevskii observes that even the term ‘Leningraders’ is something of a misnomer, as Zhdanov’s faction actually comprised people hailing from a variety of different regions (pp. 39–44).

What, then, united this group and ultimately decided its tragic fate? According to Kuznechevskii, Zhdanov’s group was composed exclusively of ethnic Russians. And while Kuznechevskii goes to considerable length to clarify that Kuznetsov, Voznesenskii, Rodionov, Popkov and their comrades-in-arms were loyal Soviets and true-believing communists, he contends that they felt that Russian interests were not being adequately represented in the USSR during the early postwar period. Perhaps encouraged by the ubiquity of official russocentrism during the late 1940s, they came to believe that the advancement of Russian ethnic interests was completely compatible with the party leadership’s agenda (pp. 69–83). For Kuznechevskii, the group’s advocacy of Russian particularism was most visible in the economic policies that its members advanced during these years, especially their calls for the redirection of resources to the civilian economy. This distinguished them from their rivals in Moscow, who were more interested in defending the Soviet establishment (pp. 45–57). According to Kuznechevskii, it is impossible to exaggerate the significance of the group’s defeat in 1949, as it apparently condemned the Russian republic to another 42 years of exploitation in the name of the USSR (pp. 73–83).

Although Kuznechevskii’s understanding of postwar economic debates is simplistic, his argument is somewhat more subtle. He contends that the policies promoted by Kuznetsov, Voznesenskii and their allies represented a sincere, naïve attempt to promote Russianness within the context of the USSR. Fundamentally pro-Soviet, these initiatives nevertheless unnerved Stalin, who misunderstood their goal of administrative autonomy as a nationalist bid for ethnic self-determination. Here, Kuznechevskii vividly quotes Stalin’s 7 November 1937 toast in which the dictator denounced separatism and proclaimed that anyone advocating such a position would be treated as an enemy of the state and the Soviet people. ‘We will destroy every such enemy, even if he turns out to be an Old Bolshevik, and we will destroy all his kith and kin as well. ... I propose that we drink to the destruction of all our enemies—of both them and their families’ (pp. 67–68). For Kuznechevskii, this evidence is sufficient to explain the scale and ruthlessness of the campaign that would destroy the Leningrad group some 12 years later.

Ultimately, if Mironin, Prudnikova and Kremlev struggle to prove their condemnation of the Leningraders as Russian nationalists, Kuznechevskii does little better in his rehabilitation of them as Russo–Soviet patriots. Indeed, Kuznechevskii advances his tenuous claims in much the same way as his rivals, citing the same smatterings of inconclusive evidence before turning to analogies and historical parallels in order to demonstrate cause and effect. Most disappointingly, Kuznechevskii shares with Mironin, Prudnikova and Kremlev a strikingly instrumental approach to the Leningrad Affair itself, apparently being much more interested in contemporary politics than the history of the early postwar period.

As is clear from this review, recent work in the popular press on the Leningrad Affair is united by three systemic shortcomings. First, many authors have taken an opportunistic approach to the analysis of this postwar purge in order to advance Stalinist or nationalist agendas.<sup>21</sup> Second, these authors prove all-too-willing to make hyperbolic and conspiratological

<sup>21</sup> This instrumental approach to understanding the Leningrad Affair is similar to the way in which St Petersburg authors have tended to mythologise the purge (see Kelly 2011).

claims on the basis of thin, inconclusive evidence and misleading historical analogies. Third, and perhaps most curiously, all of them turn out to depend on the same narrow set of sources, accounts and inferences, recycling them again and again to serve their various political agendas.

Ultimately, these authors' failure to engage in original research undermines their work almost as quickly as their politicisation and tentativeness.<sup>22</sup> They are hardly alone in this regard, of course, insofar as this tendency to reuse the same material over and over has become a hallmark of popular commentary on the purge since the mid-1990s.<sup>23</sup> Be that as it may, it is this lack of new research that must be resolved if future investigations of the Leningrad Affair are to substantially improve upon accounts like those authored by Mironin, Prudnikova, Kremlev, Rybas and Kuznechevskii.

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<sup>22</sup> Other technical problems characteristic of mass-market books mar these authors' works as well, including plagiarism, cherry-picking, and improper or incomplete use of sources and citations.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Kunyaev (1995, pp. 184–98); Platonov (1996, pp. 304–11); Shafarevich (1999, p. 158); Mukhin (2003, p. 736); and Mitrofanov (2005, p. 312).

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